The Byzantine Scholar's Digital Portfolio

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A.L. McMICHAEL

Assistant Director, Lab for the Education and Advancement in Digital Research (LEADR), Departments of History and Anthropology, Michigan State University

In Byzantine Anatolia, a tent was designed to be a large and beautiful object, one that might even be "embroidered with gold and decorated with multiform shapes of animals," and held together with silk ropes and silver poles.[2] This description, taken from a ninth-century epic poem about a military border guard, represents the protagonist's tent as mutable, portable architecture that could be adapted to a variety of situations such as administrative strategy sessions or entertainment.[3] The tent's inhabitants, then, were witnesses to a cacophony of sounds and experiences underneath. Incidentally, digital humanities (DH) scholars have used a similar metaphor to unify a disparate group of practitioners whose projects point to commonalities in method. They coined the phrase "big-tent DH" as a reference to evangelical tent revivals of nineteenth-century American

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[1] This paper is adapted from a workshop I led at the 43rd Annual Byzantine Studies Conference, which was held in Minneapolis at the University of Minnesota on October 6, 2017. It was part of the Mary Jaharis Center for Byzantine Art and Culture Graduate Student Workshop on The Digital Humanities: Research, the Job Market, and Teaching. I geared these remarks toward scholars who work in Byzantine studies, but most of these observations apply to the much larger cohort of Medieval Studies scholars as well. http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0130-8915

[2] *Digenis Akritis*, lines 908-910, in Elizabeth Jeffreys, trans., *Digenis Akritis: The Grottaferrata and Escorial Versions*, Cambridge Medieval Classics 7 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 120–21.

[3] Margaret Mullett, "Experiencing the Byzantine Text, Experiencing the Byzantine Tent," in *Experiencing Byzantium: Papers from the 44th Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies Newcastle and Durham April 2011*, ed. Claire Nesbitt and Mark Jackson, Publications of the Society for the Promotion of Byzantine Studies 18 (Farnham, GB: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2013), pp. 269–92.

church culture, with a hopeful nod toward inclusivity.[4] All of these historical metaphors call to mind images of a multiplicity of voices and opinions gathered into a common space. Here I reflect on ways that Byzantine studies scholars have much to offer to others underneath the proverbial big tent.

Figure 1 Lab for the Education and Advancement in Digital Research (LEADR) which is focused on student research, Michigan State University. Photo: author.

As Lauren Klein and Matthew Gold edited a new edition to a volume dedicated to scholarly debates around digital scholarship, they noted that digital humanities is increasingly multifaceted. Their inquiries into digital humanities practice revealed

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[4] Patrik Svensson, "Beyond the Big Tent," in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), http://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/debates/text/22. Svensson offers critique of the phrase and the inclusivity of the field.

tensions between introspective DH as an expanding field and digital work that more clearly stems from a particular discipline:

> Along with the digital archives, quantitative analyses, and tool-building projects that once characterized the field, DH now encompasses a wide range of methods and practices: visualizations of large image sets, 3D modeling of historical artifacts, "born digital" dissertations, hashtag activism and the analysis thereof, alternate reality games, mobile makerspaces, and more. In what has been called "big tent" DH, it can at times be difficult to determine with any specificity what, precisely, digital humanities work entails.… The challenges currently associated with the digital humanities involve a shift from congregating in the big tent to practicing DH at a field-specific level, where DH work confronts disciplinary habits of mind.[5]

They point to DH as a loosely defined set of far-reaching practices that fall under a large canopy. Their goal is to celebrate disciplinary differences alongside commonalities for the purpose of critical engagement with technology in the study of history, culture, or the arts.

What Byzantinists have to offer to these larger conversations in digital humanities is that we have been negotiating disciplinary boundaries and collaborating across institutions and among departments for decades. Because our materials and kinds of evidence vary widely based on period and region, we have long been able to think about ways to creatively visualize data, monuments, and concepts. We bring to the table interpretative knowledge of the continuity and change between ancient and medieval periods. We navigate the cultural and national boundaries of the vast Byzantine *oecumene*, along with knowledge of its languages, as a matter of practice. So, to turn a critical eye on the technology we use and a self-reflexive gaze toward our relationships with these tools and methods and pedagogical stances is a natural next step for Byzantinists. In other

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[5] Lauren F. Klein, Matthew K. Gold, "Digital Humanities: The Expanded Field," in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), http://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/debates/text/51.

42

words, Byzantine studies scholars work in a sphere that is already multidisciplinary, and I argue that digital work in the scholarly portfolio (a researcher's projects and interests) should be intrinsic to graduate training in the field.

The Byzantines themselves communicated multimodally, using various media simultaneously to make arguments through the design of spaces or objects. The centralized architectural plans of Middle Byzantine churches reflect the post-Iconoclastic liturgy, for instance, arguing for the orthodoxy of the ritual's evolution toward static worship.[6] The construction of projects *about* Byzantium can make arguments using a variety of media as well. These arguments play out in a variety of ways, from traditional publications that rely on digital methods to make historical arguments, to the inherent arguments made when building the digital work itself. This might include decisions that create accessibility and ADA compliance, for instance, or the use of open source tools that are freely available and developed by and for a community of users. Building and creating is a long-acknowledged "way of knowing," and archaeologist Ethan Watrall points to the experiential components of doing digital work that make it a useful springboard for teaching.[7] In that sense, digital pedagogy offers new ways to teach argumentation and research inquiry through hands-on experience.

Getting Started in DH

When people ask how to get started working in digital humanities, the concern that they often express is one of skills training. Below I respond with a couple of observations

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[6] Thomas F. Mathews, *The Early Churches of Constantinople: Architecture and Liturgy* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1971).

[7] Ethan Watrall, "Archaeology, the Digital Humanities, and the 'Big Tent,'" in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), http://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/debates/text/79. Watrall was writing within the context of the relationship between digital humanities and digital archaeology, noting that the two developed separately, but share a number of priorities such as innovation and public engagement.

43

that I share with colleagues and students. These are based on the work I do at Michigan State University in an interdisciplinary history and anthropology space called the Lab for the Education and Advancement in Digital Research (LEADR) that is focused on student research.[8] The lab's Director, Brandon Locke, and I collaborate with faculty members to scaffold digital assignments into undergraduate and graduate courses, a process that is facilitated by a team of graduate assistants.[9] We also consult with individual students who are creating digital projects. My own research, which is on spatial relationships in Cappadocian rock-cut architecture, aligns with the lab's mission because I create 3D models and experiment with digital publication for public outreach in art history and digital archaeology. From these experiences I offer some project-based advice regarding data and methods, as these lessons from LEADR can be applied broadly.

Research is Data

To digital scholarship, the idea of data collection is fundamental. Data literacy is often neglected in the humanities (where I was trained), but taken for granted in the social sciences (where I am currently based). It requires cognizance of the underlying processes that occur when information is gathered, "cleaned" for consistent presentation, and visualized for analysis and interpretation. Datasets are often collected in tabular

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[8] The Lab for the Education and Advancement in Digital Research (LEADR) at Michigan State University is a collaboration between History, Anthropology, and Matrix, leadr.msu.edu. I would also like to acknowledge the GC Digital Initiatives at the City University of New York where I gained experience in digital humanities work as a GC Digital Fellow and member of the New Media Lab, https://gcdi.commons.gc.cuny.edu/.

[9] Brandon T. Locke, "Digital Humanities Pedagogy as Essential Liberal Education: A Framework for Curriculum Development," *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 11/ 3 (2017), http://digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/11/3/000303/000303.html.

44

Figure 2 Students learning photogrammetry at Lab for the Education and Advancement in Digital Research (LEADR), Michigan State University. Photo: author.

spreadsheets, though they could consist of any kind of reusable information.[10] To gain data literacy and be able to envision research as data, historian Shawn Graham suggests to researchers, "separate your content from your tool, and your analytical processes separate from your data."[11] He notes, for example, that a word processing document

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[10] Thomas Padilla, "Humanities Data in the Library: Integrity, Form, Access," *D-Lib Magazine* 22/ 3, 4 (March/April 2016), http://www.dlib.org/dlib/march16/padilla/03padilla.html. Padilla addresses the complexities of Humanities data and makes suggestions toward wider adoption and availability of it via libraries.

(such as .docx) conflates formatting with content, but a text file (.txt) or tabular file (.csv spreadsheet), can create machine-readable data.

To illustrate with an example from archaeology, a handwritten field notebook or notes from an archive are useful to the researcher, who can pore over the information and write her analysis from it. But if that information is published by an archaeological data repository, such as Open Context, it will be edited into tabular, reproducible blocks of information and peer-reviewed.[12] The notebook and dataset might convey the same information, but the Open Context entry is machine readable, reusable, and consistently formatted using controlled vocabularies so that it is compatible with other datasets within a larger system of networked projects.

Emphasize Methods Over Tools

As with any kind of research, the kind(s) of historical evidence available should determine the methods used in a digital project. I start by asking students to discern the kinds of data that can be extracted from their research. From there, they consider methods of data analysis that might provide answers to their research questions, and *then* they investigate which tools and software are available and appropriate. Because tools and software change rapidly, learning methods is a better investment of time.

Hands-on methods training with historical evidence is the impetus for Doing Digital History, an undergraduate seminar I teach with Brandon Locke using a variety of tutorials and discussions. The course runs annually, and this spring it will focus on special topics in late antique and medieval history. One unit, for example, is on

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[11] Shawn Graham, "What is Digital Archaeology? Going Digital," *Electric Archaeology* (blog) (March 14, 2017), https://electricarchaeology.ca/2017/03/14/what-is-digital-archaeology/.

[12] A number of organizations have compiled guidelines for peer review of digital work. Alex Gil has collected these into a list available via GitHub:
https://github.com/dh-notes/dhnotes/blob/master/pages/evaluating-digital-work.md.

46

numismatics, and students will have the opportunity to examine coins as material objects. They will then explore digitized coin collections and metadata using data visualization tools to map find spots or ask questions about provenance. They may even do network analysis of Byzantine emperors represented on coins to discern familial relationships. Another unit will examine the making and dissemination of medieval manuscripts and their present-day use as digitized texts. Students may choose to extract place names from the *Life of Theodore of Sykeon*, for instance, to map the saint's habitat. For the final class project, students will be expected to take agency over their own learning by choosing historical sources and datasets and determining which methods can best answer research questions about them. They will build websites to present these findings publicly.

This pedagogical strategy can benefit scholarship at any level. Ideally, a researcher should design a digital project's workflow the way they begin a lesson plan: reverse engineer it to start with learning outcomes, and then think through the "why" so that the "how" becomes clearer. Effective research design involves carefully constructed workflow and project management.

Portfolio and Identity

Technology mediates every aspect of how we study the past, and it is essential that, as scholars, we engage critically with that technology and not take its use for granted. Collaborative projects provide an impetus to build and share, both as individuals and as a cohort of scholars, to build an ethos of generosity and inclusion. Crafting a digital portfolio (or a digitally-inflected portfolio, in many cases) is an exercise in identity construction. As part of that identity, Byzantine studies emphasizes broad, critical, interdisciplinary thinking across geographies and time periods. Engaging critically with technology equips us to be more effective in many roles — as scholars and students within academia, and as educators, writers, curators, and communicators outside the big tent. ❧

47