Manuscripts and Digital Humanities: A Colloquium

Time: 22 April 2015, 1-5:30 pm
Location: Klein Auditorium, Academiegebouw, Rapenburg 73 Leiden
Organizer: Dr. Erik Kwakkel
Sponsor: Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek

Abstracts

Sarah Fiddyment (University of York)
Biomolecular codicology: How non-invasive techniques can uncover the secrets hidden in parchment

Parchment is the medium of medieval Europe. Beyond the message its carries in the text, the animal skin itself provides historic insight into economic, technical and ideological factors influencing manuscript production and early printing. Until now animal species identification of parchment has only been possible by morphological analysis of follicle patterns which is often inconclusive, leading to speculation and unresolved debate. In this paper I will present an innovative non-invasive method for parchment analysis, through mass spectrometry of minute quantities of collagen, that provides both confident species identifications as well as invaluable data on parchment 'quality' and methods of production.

Erik Kwakkel (Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society)
The Art and Science of Dating Medieval Script: The Case of the Long Twelfth Century

"Age is not important, unless you are a cheese." Historians know this expression not to be true: the age of a piece of writing matters a great deal. The key to determining when a given medieval manuscript was written is to assess the age of its script. The handwriting of scribes developed continuously, meaning that their products can be placed in time if the right reference points are available. This paper deals with such reference points: it shows that developing letterforms provide evidence for dating the book in which they appear, and how we may retrieve this information with a more 'scientific' approach to script. The main focus will be on what is arguably the most dramatic development in medieval handwriting: the shift from Caroline to Gothic script, which occurred during a period known as The Long Twelfth Century (1075-1225).

Melissa Terras (University College London)
Handwritten Text Recognition meets the Crowd: Transcribe Bentham and tranScriptorium

The challenges for the automated reading of handwritten scripts, and for the computational recognition and transcription of archival material, are enormous. In this lecture, an example of hopeful advances in Pattern Recognition, Computer Vision, Document Image Analysis, Language Modelling, Digital Humanities, and Archival Research which are coming together to develop Handwritten Text Recognition (HTR) will be presented: The European FP7 Funded tranScriptorium project. Central to its development has been the reuse of crowdsourced transcriptions from Transcribe Bentham: over 5 million of words transcribed by volunteer labour provide a "ground truth" with which we can train computers to read handwriting. The lecture will cover the aims and development of the tranScriptorium project, and

ask: what next for HTR as applied to archival manuscripts?

Jacob Thaisen (University of Stavanger)
"Two or more ways of writing the same thing": The linguistic variable in palaeography

A linguistic variable in its most basic definition is "two or more ways of saying the same thing" (Labov 1972). A given variant is selected from among its semantic equivalents based on language-internal and language-external (social) factors. Which variants are selected, when, and by who is then the focus of investigation. Although the resemblance of palaeography with linguistics is merely superficial, the selection of one allograph rather than another is likewise conditioned by internal and external factors which may be established by the same means. This paper extends the linguistic variable into palaeography. It reports on multivariate statistical analyses of a corpus of c. 400 Middle English texts undertaken to establish the contexts which favour one allograph or another. The texts are dated and localised, and they are annotated for cursiveness and other features. The end-goal is to develop a model that will generalise to other texts from the same period.