Visualizing medieval book production:
Data visualization in medieval manuscript studies

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Data concerning medieval manuscripts (i.e. place of origin, date of creation, etc.) has been generated thanks to the efforts of many researchers, and it is available, mostly, in printed form. Many of these books have been digitized, but the data, the numbers, contained in them are still difficult to retrieve. The objective of our project is to show and discuss how research results in manuscript studies can be visualized, lead to new and interesting insights, and render data more accessible. We want to argue that approaching this field from the side of digital humanities can be enlightening.

Some of this data is already available from important institutions (Europeana, CERL, Archive.org), but it is often difficult to retrieve for non-computer experts. Furthermore it often overlooks important information from secondary sources (i.e. who dated a manuscript? Where can we find reference material? Who attributed this manuscript to the scribe?). This information is available in printed form, and thanks to OCR technology, it is relatively fast to digitize this data and create datasets. This process transforms "solid data" (data present only in print) into "liquid data" (data available digitally), which is easier to retrieve and mix, while being properly referenced and linked to the original source. Ideally, a visualization would include all primary and secondary information that is available, so that with one click a researcher may have a complete overview of sources. Additionally, incorporating information from other fields of studies such as social studies and history can help contextualizing the information and lead to new insights.

Our example will focus on data concerning a manuscript collection at Leiden University Library. We will create quickly consultable and linked datasets, generate interactive digital maps and infographics, and create a publicly available template to develop comparable end-products with one's own data.

The example that will be presented will help showcase the possibilities that are available by data visualization in manuscript studies and related fields. The possibilities in this area have yet to be more fully explored, but they are quite promising.