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Towards a Premodern Manuscript Application Profile

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Abstract

Individuals who wish to develop digital scholarly works and libraries that wish to provide access to their precious and fragile holdings have an interest in digitizing premodern manuscripts. These handmade objects are often beautiful and each one is unique. The features of zooming and light alteration available through digital photography and manipulation are assets to medieval scholars, because these methods can reveal more information for teaching and research. Digital collections of medieval manuscripts can be hard to find or remain unpublished, in part because the description of these works is difficult. Involvement in the International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo, Michigan has made it clear to librarians at WMU that both smaller institutions (which may hold only one or two items) and individual scholars wish to provide appropriate metadata for digitized manuscripts, but do not have the combination of technical and subject skills needed. Even with a good description of material from a bookseller or printed catalog, those unfamiliar with metadata schema and language may find it daunting, while libraries may lack a specialist in the terminology and skills of paleography and codicology. In addition, most existing large digital collections use TEI, which has a steep learning curve.

The goal of this project is to develop a standardized and user-friendly Dublin Core application profile (Heery & Patel, 2000; Coyle & Baker, 2009) which uses elements from the European Networking Resources and Information Concerning Cultural Heritage (ENRICH) Specification (Burnard, 2008) and Dublin Core (DCMI, 2008) to create a metadata profile which works well with the long-standing conventions of premodern manuscript descriptive codicology and paleography (Ricci, 1935-1940; Ker, 1969). The ENRICH Specification includes elements standardizing traditional manuscript description with the goal of creating "seamless access to information about the vast collections of manuscripts and incunables distributed across major European libraries (Cummings & Burnard, 2009)." However, the size of the specification can be formidable, and requires knowledge of TEI and XML (a steep learning curve in itself), a searchable XML platform, and the expertise to set it up and sustain it.

A Dublin Core application profile developed specifically for premodern manuscript description would allow for the creation of standardized, shareable metadata and Web-accessible digital images within easy-to-use digital collection management software such as CONTENTdm. Inclusion of defined ENRICH elements in the profile provides a "fill-in-the-blank" template informing non-specialists of descriptive metadata useful to medieval scholars. This, combined with suggested content standards and a simple glossary, should allow catalogers with limited subject expertise to provide some access to their materials in a way which conforms to the expectations of the target users, specialists in the interdisciplinary study of the premodern world. In addition, if the collection attracts scholars, the descriptive metadata can be easily updated and modified from their research.

This poster will illustrate how digital images of manuscripts and traditional print catalog descriptions translate easily into the Premodern Manuscript Application Profile (PMAP), which is in development.

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TABLE 1: List of Element Names.

PMAP Elements	
Title	Collation
Incipit	Foliation
Creator	Binding
Origin Date	Decoration Description
Origin Location	Description of Hands
Language	Musical Notation
Manuscript Identifier	Additions and Marginalia
Description	Relation-Is Part Of
Provenance	Publisher
Manuscript Parts	Date-Issued
Explicit	Type
Secundo Folio	Format
Extent	Format-Extent
Subject	Identifier
Coverage - Spatial	Source
Coverage - Temporal	Relation-Is Referenced By
Dimensions	Rights
Material	

The authors are currently developing a limited, non-scientific survey of potential users to help evaluate the application profile with respect to the elements included and their order.

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