

The Future of the Southampton Psalter

Video transcript

So far, we have been looking at the past lives of the Southampton Psalter. In the course of its long and fascinating history, it has been a display book in Ireland, a scholar's textbook and a prized object of antiquity in England. But the Southampton Psalter's journey is far from over. To find out what the future of manuscript studies looks like, I'm joined by Orietta Da Rold, who is an expert on English manuscripts and a Fellow here at St John's College, Cambridge. Orietta, thank you for joining me.

Orietta: Thank you for having me.

Alice: Now when most people think of manuscripts, they tend to think of books and libraries. How is the digital era changing the way in which we use manuscripts?

Orietta: One of the most important technological evolutions in photography has been the possibility of taking pictures of books and manuscripts and then transform them into digital artefacts. This has really transformed, then, the way in which we can access the material but, of course, then one of the greatest additions to this evolution has been the web that actually enables us to put those digital images on the internet so that they can become accessible to everybody.

Alice: And is digitisation changing the way in which scholars go about research?

Orietta: Yes, absolutely, and these changes are on two, really, elements. So, the first one is access and the second one is awareness. If you think about it, scholars from all over the world can actually access material from any library if that material is online. That is, in itself, a fantastic way of answering your initial research questions and also a way of answering those questions quickly. So, it's there, it's available and we can all use it so that is amazing. And the other important aspect is awareness – so, for example, making the world of manuscripts available to people around the world. So, for example, you know, in your project, you will have the Southampton Psalter available either via CUDL – so, the Cambridge University Digital Library – or via ISOS – the Irish Script on Screen. It opens up all sorts of possibilities for students and scholars who want to look up those manuscripts and become more aware of, for example, what an Irish psalter might look like.

Alice: We have seen in this project that the Southampton Psalter contains some really fascinating images and there are many other manuscripts which are equally as wonderful. How much interest is there in freely available manuscript images from the general public?

Orietta: Well, there has really been almost an explosion of interest from the public of these digitised images, in particular illuminated and decorated manuscripts, so we have all sorts of images now circulating on Twitter, on Instagram, on Pinterest. And that is just amazing – it's really, really wonderful to see how the medieval manuscript captures the imagination of

everybody. However, it is also important to think a little bit more carefully about what is the function of those images and those decorations in manuscripts. So, a while back there was a fighting snail circulating on Twitter and it was just such a lovely little snail, but the question there is, what did that snail do in a psalter? Who were the readers of that book that might have enjoyed looking at that fighting snail in a psalter and what is the reason why it was there and who decorated it? So, really we shouldn't take manuscripts at face value. We should always think a little bit more about the how, the why and the who that were involved in the production and then also in their consumption of that image.

Alice: So, will digital skills ultimately replace the need for book-based skills in research?

Orietta: I don't think so. I think this is very unlikely. I think what digital enables us to do is to access the information but then there will always be need for hands-on work with the manuscripts because it's only the combination of the two that really enables us to answer some of the most ambitious research questions. At the same time, however, a resource like yours, it's really showing and helping a student to then go through that rigorous type of research that we all do when we look at manuscripts so we can start thinking about research questions, thinking about the evidence that we need to look at, you know, to answer these questions and then we can think about how to put the evidence together and then answer those questions, which is very much traditional research but it is enabled by the digital medium as a starting point. And then, of course, as more and more material will become available online and maybe being free and open access to everybody, that will also benefit all sorts of scholars, so not just the seasoned researcher but people like yourself – early career researcher, students in school and pupils who want to understand a little bit more what medieval book culture was all about.

Alice: Thank you, Orietta. In this project, we have moved from 10th-century Ireland to 21st-century Cambridge. We have seen one manuscript, one single piece of history, evolve over a thousand years and move from a monastic book collection to an online digital library. Such a small object provides a wealth of information on the past and, thanks to a combination of cutting-edge technology and traditional research skills, manuscripts will continue to reveal their secrets to us in the future.