Of Consolidation and Canons in a Heterogeneous Field Called Digital and Public Humanities

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1 Shifting Plans and Unexpected Outcomes in a Consolidating Domain[1]

Back in the late days of 2019, when the possibility of a global pandemic was but an irrational thought, we had the privilege to ponder whether the little world of humanists needed a new scholarly journal. Caught up in drafting strategies to meet international standards which sometimes risk taking the heart out of any editorial project, our fears were that we might not intercept the true interests of researchers who were operating in the field of digital and public humanities for a decade or perhaps even more. Much to our surprise the first call for abstracts we launched in Spring 2020 on the topic "Fusions" received a warm welcome from the scholarly community, while the first COVID wave was raging across the world (Fischer, Mantoan, Tramelli 2020b). Indeed, many scholars seemed to be looking for a place that definitively merged digital and public concerns without taking the side of one single discipline in the humanities, but rath-

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[1]   This introduction paper was mutually agreed on by the Authors who acted as editors of *magazén*'s 2021 volume, divided in two issues, with the help of the journal's editorial board.

er spanning from philology to history, from art history to archaeology, from cultural heritage to the GLAM sector. We made it our mission to turn *magazén* into an open platform collecting theoretical debates, methodological reflections, and an analysis of case studies ranging from textual to visual, and from material to ephemeral topics in the humanities. Back then, we were convinced that digital and public humanities were still evolving through ongoing fusions and cross-pollinations of different disciplines, thus shaping the various research approaches in the field (Fischer, Mantoan, Tramelli 2020a).

Encouraged by the response to our first call – and probably a little overconfident about our organisational capabilities – we considered relaunching a second call on the same subject matter to cover another volume in due course. Upon receiving several dozen proposals, however, an extraordinary thing happened that shifted our perspective on the selection of the chosen topic. As a matter of fact, scholars responding to our second call showed an impressive awareness of and self-understanding in what they were doing in the field of digital and public humanities. Their research work was far beyond the concept of 'fusion', they were not necessarily searching for new categories or scientific vocabularies anymore, but had already adopted a range of resources and modes of research conduct as their own (Drucker 2003). Hence, while we set forth to close the first two issues of for our inaugural volume in 2020 reflecting on the struggles in the field to find a truly theorised version of digital and public humanities, we decided to shift our focus in 2021 towards the consolidated research models already circulating in the international scholarly context (De Groot 2018). Truly, the term 'consolidation' suddenly appeared as the perfect concept to describe what is happening today in this particular research domain. Interestingly enough, both in social sciences and business studies this definition is used to identify a specific kind of merger that occurs when two communities (for sociologists) or two enterprises (for business scholars) integrate into one another to form a new entity (Bennett 2020). Contrary to 'fusion', which recalls the artificial melting of different chemical substances, 'consolidation' speaks of the necessary interaction and negotiation between different interest groups, cultures or positions that are essentially human. In fact, what emerges from the latter kind of merger is a social, political or organisational construct that needs to find a new balance between the different forces or stakeholders involved (Svolik 2015). The result is not an entirely new substance with different chemical properties, but rather an entity that maintains some aspects of both subjects that participated in its inception.

'Consolidation' seemed the perfect term to describe the kind of scholarship that we were experiencing in the abstracts received and then in the papers selected for the present volume. In a sense, this discovery allowed us to see that the contributions gathered together in

the following pages were effectively centred on creating a canon for the given domain. It came as a natural consequence that we decided to open this issue – and all upcoming ones – with a guest article by a renowned scholar to help us to get rid of any disciplinary shyness and finally set an authoritative tone as a platform for self-conscious digital and public humanists. For this reason, we are particularly honoured and grateful to inaugurate this editorial novelty with an exclusive guest paper by Thomas Cauvin, a foundational essay translated into English for the first time. We hope this might be the sign that our journal is becoming a crucial player in establishing the field of digital and public humanities for good, thus contributing to the international debate with the kind of openness and curiosity that characterised the varied humanity hanging out at the public house during the Venetian Republic (Tassini [1863] 1970, 364-5). The proverbial *magazén* is our aim, a place where everyone is invited to share, discuss, proclaim, and participate in a communal quest to outline the future of our daily research practice and consolidate a heterogeneous territory (Boerio [1856] 1971, 382).

2 Promising Perspectives, Unravelling Complexity, and Serious Games

The authors chosen for the first issue of the present volume address the concept of 'consolidations' from different perspectives and with different methodological approaches, presenting to the reader a varied and yet intertwined landscape.

The first contribution by Thomas Cauvin engages the reader in a compelling methodological discussion on what public history is, analysing challenges and perspectives of this 'new field made of old practices', and ultimately embracing the reality that although "not everybody can become a great historian, good public history can come from anywhere" (27). The second paper by James H. Brusuelas focuses on the process of editing texts that are 'true-born virtual' and on how to document the role of artificial intelligence in a critical edition of a virtually unwrapped papyrus scroll. He advocates a new philological approach which combines methodologies from the humanities and the sciences to ensure transparency and reproducibility in the study of machine predicted texts from hidden layers of cultural heritage objects.

Julia Elicker and Pavol Hnila, in the third contribution of this issue, analyse Digital Elevation Models (DEMs), which are widely employed in landscape archaeology, sharing their extraordinary work on Mount Aragat in Armenia. They effectively underline the constraints and challenges which they face using this technology, and they stress the need for a constant quality check of topographic visualisations.

In the fourth paper, Christian Wachter discusses the central topic of digital publishing, stating at the beginning that open access papers, books, and blogging have become rooted in the DH and reflect "a self-confident culture of open science" (103). He argues that DH need publishing media that go beyond classic texts, which could be able to encompass the complex nature of DH research by their own medial appearances. He therefore vigorously advocates the need for new publishing designs, in order to overcome the static order of texts and to offer explorable media for the visualisation of data-driven research.

Coming towards the two final contributions, Samanta Mariotti in her article talks about the immersive experience of serious games, explaining the usefulness of these user-friendly tools in order to learn cultural content (especially related to archaeological heritage) in an active and engaging way. She argues that, to benefit from these instruments, the research requires different multidisciplinary cooperations, and she proposes different hypotheses for the development of these interactive games. Finally, in their contribution, Milena Corbellini, Paola Italia, Valentina Pasqual and Roberta Priore present the interdisciplinary digital edition of the *Storia Fiorentina* by Benedetto Varchi, in the context of the project *VaSto*. It constitutes an example of a cooperative digital edition which benefited from the work of specialists in various fields. The result is a platform that aims at being a knowledge-site, supporting various interactive functionalities and tools to contextualise the text itself.

We truly hope that these six contributions will help readers to gain an overall orientation about the advancements in a complex academic landscape, where data-driven and public-related research is gaining traction within the context of Digital and Public Humanities as a transdisciplinary field in its own right. We hope that they will find practical examples and useful methodological discussions which will help consolidate their own research in an open and yet well-established theoretical framework.

Finally, as customary, we wish to express our acknowledgment to all scholars and experts involved in the making of this volume: the contributors, the many peer reviewers, all members of the editorial board and the advisory board, as well as our publisher's team. We are glad this issue arrives at a time of relaxing boundaries in social life and hope to be able soon to continue the discussions about the issues raised in this volume in a physical environment and to restart making digital and public humanities both on and offline.

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