

Distance Learning in Palaeography: The test case of Scripta project

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Introduction

This paper introduces Scripta project, a working prototype of distance learning system to teach palaeography using interactive applications delivered over the World Wide Web. Scripta is a joint effort of Library Affairs at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale and the Dept. of Italian Studies of the University of Trieste, Italy.

What is Palaeography?

Palaeography means, in the strict sense, the study of ancient handwriting, and its basic objects are these: first, to read the ancient texts with accuracy; secondly, to date and localize their handwriting. As such it is a major component of two other more complex disciplines: of diplomatic, which studies all aspects of documents and records, and of palaeography in the wider sense, which studies all aspects of books produced by hand (manuscripts).

The questions that palaeographers try to answer about a book are these. How, when, where, by whom and for whom was it first made? How has it been altered since? Who have owned it and used it?

Aim of Scripta is to introduce the user to a more interactive approach to the analysis of five of the most important scripts, and precisely:

- Square Capitals (I b.C. - I a.C.)
- Rustic Capitals (II b.C. - III a.C.)
- Uncial (IV a.C. - VIII a.C.)
- Caroline (IX a.C. - XII a.C.)
- Gothic (XII a.C. - XV a.C.)

The software

Scripta software has been developed using Asymetrix Multimedia Toolbook for Microsoft Windows. Each of the five scripts corresponds to an interactive application that includes general information about the script and a sample image of a manuscript.

Clicking with the mouse directly on the manuscript picture, the user can get detailed information about characters and abbreviations, and compare the transcript with the original text written by the calligrapher (see figure 1).

ANALISI INTERATTIVA DI UN ESEMPIO

et in episcopis. Patriarcha greca lingua pater principum sive summus patrum interpretatur, quia primum idem apostolicum retinet locum, et ideo quod summo honore fungitur tali nomine censetur, sicut Romanus, Antiochenus atque Alexandrinus antistes. Archiepiscopus greco vocabulo dicitur quod sit summus vel princeps episcoporum; tenet enim vicem apostolicam et presidet episcopis ceteris; singulis enim prout preminet

Il segno sovrastante la "m" e' un segno generico di abbreviazione che in questo caso sta ad indicare la soppressione della lettera "m".

Scegli con il mouse direttamente sul manoscritto i caratteri che desideri esaminare

Mostra i caratteri analizzabili

Figure 1: Details can be easily retrieved by clicking directly on abbreviations and characters.

Scripta software is designed to be easily deliverable over the Internet, too. With a simple configuration of the Web browser and installing the Toolbook runtime on the local hard disk, it is possible to download and launch the software with a single mouse click on the Web page (see figure 2).

This mechanism may represent an interesting solution to distribute interactive applications on the network, provided the connection speed between the local computer and the remote host is acceptable.

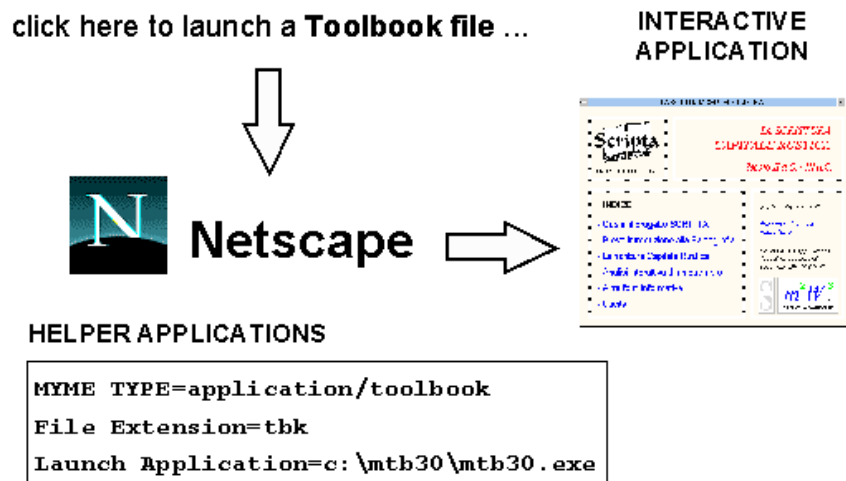


Figure 2: Publishing Toolbook applications on the Web is possible by configuring Toolbook runtime as a Netscape helper application

Future directions and conclusions

The experience we acquired developing Scripta suggests us to continue the exploration of the Internet as a carrier of interactive applications for distance learning purposes. Using additional features that give Toolbook the ability to easily interact with the Web, it is possible to design the software structuring it in several small modules that can be remotely retrieved by each other.

By these means the Internet assumes a role similar to a local hard drive and there is no need to get on the local computer a whole application to accomplish a task such as the cross referencing of different ancient scripts.

Moreover, with an eye to cross platform technologies, it is our intention to verify the suitability of Adobe Acrobat software to create effective tools to improve the study of paleography.

Software on line

Scripta is available at the following addresses:

<http://www.univ.trieste.it/scripta/scripta.html>

European site

<http://www.lib.siu.edu/scripta/scripta.html>

USA site

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