



FONTES

FOstering iNnovative Training
in the use of European legal Sources

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PROJECT DESCRIPTION

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FOstering iNnovative Training in the use of European legal Sources

The last few decades have witnessed a veritable booming of interdisciplinary studies in the social sciences. In historically-oriented studies, it is nowadays increasingly common – often, a sheer necessity – to integrate a variety of sources coming from different academic subjects. This great wealth of legal documents, attested across medieval and early-modern Europe, is of unique importance to the understanding and the preservation of our cultural heritage. In laying out the rules followed within a society, and the rationale for such rules, legal documents are vital for the study of the development of a society and its functioning. Ancient written legal sources are thus an invaluable source of information for any student of the middle ages in Europe, no matter their specific interest (be it social, institutional, economic, legal, etc.) and their background (coming from History, Economics, Law, or other faculties). It is small wonder that they have soon attracted the attention of interdisciplinary studies: there is little – if anything at all – that is not affected by the rules governing the functioning of a society. This way, those old legal sources, previously the nearly-exclusive remit of legal historians, have now become a treasure-trove of information for any kind of historical analysis (social, economic, institutional, cultural, etc.). The digitisation of many thousands of manuscripts has made those sources available to anyone, anywhere.

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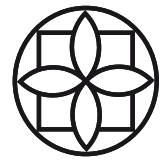


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Software are currently being programmed to recognise and transcribe medieval characters, thereby widening even further the number of users of those legal sources. Despite the growing demand for medieval legal texts and the fast-developing technologies to make them easily accessible, however, there is a very significant problem: the number of people able to understand those sources is dwindling, and works still currently in use to understand ancient legal sources have been written around a century ago or even more, thereby skipping altogether all progress made with the digital humanities. Specific training is indeed required to access these legal sources, a training on several levels, from the specific writing style used to the structure of the sources, as well as to their specific context. This training is currently nowhere to be found, unless a specific student has the luck of having a mentor who is a specialist in the field. But the ability of untapping the great wealth of documentary evidence preserved across Europe should not be the product of sheer chance. Rather, it should be encouraged and fostered with a specific training curriculum: this is exactly what FONTES aims to do. With the training curriculum developed in this programme, any humanities student with some historical interest will be able to access, understand and, therefore, make the most of ancient legal documents, whatever the purpose of the research. At the same time, not enough educators, teachers and researchers are able to make the most of what the digital humanities can offer today to improve the learning experience of their students. This is another reason why the study of ancient sources tends to be marginalised in higher education curricula, even at higher levels (Master's etc.) within history-related disciplines. FONTES's training curriculum seeks to fill also this gap by integrating the digital humanities into its teaching programme, exploiting the intuitive nature of many digital solutions, so as to simplify the learning process and therefore make it easier the task of both teachers and learners alike.

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The implementation of FONTES will achieve a series of important objectives:

- ♦ training new generations of researchers across Europe in the use of medieval and early-modern legal sources;
- ♦ exposing students in humanistic disciplines to advanced uses of the digital humanities, giving them a hands-on, practical experience as to the huge potential of the new technologies for innovative learning and path-breaking research;
- ♦ fostering interdisciplinarity by providing specific cross- subject training;
- ♦ bridging the all too frequent gap between theory and practice (especially in the humanities) by adopting a "learning by doing" method, transforming the theoretical knowledge acquired into practical skills in using ancient documents,



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and so improving the students' learning experience;

- ◆ realising the first modern handbook on medieval and early-modern legal sources (we are still using manuals written 100 years ago or more!), which combines digital humanities with an interdisciplinary focus;

- ◆ Providing a complex and highly refined self-learning tool such as a virtual platform to allow students and any interested learner to approach, understand and use ancient legal sources;

- ◆ creating a collaborative virtual environment specifically designed to bring together scholars and professionals (such as archivists and palaeographers);

- ◆ sharing good practices in the digital humanities among scholars, so as to inform both their research and their teaching, and promoting best practices across institutions and subjects;

- ◆ promoting an interdisciplinary approach in the historical studies, fostering dialogue and co-operation among students and scholars of the social, economic, institutional and legal dimensions of the historical studies;

- ◆ encouraging the development and dissemination of an innovative training curriculum on the use of legal sources that may be shared and adopted across the whole EU, and thereby inverting the usual trend where national traditions determine – and defend – their own approach to higher education.

This result is divided in three complementary parts. More specifically:

The first result will be the realisation of a detailed training curriculum on old legal sources, articulated in three training formats:

- (i) Intensive Study Program (ISP);
- (ii) a Master's course;
- (iii) an E-learning course.

The combination of these courses will meet the variegated learning needs of different student cohorts, both in terms of level (from Master's to post-Doctoral) and of interests (ranging from acquiring a general knowledge on how to approach legal historical sources to becoming a specialist on their use and understanding).

The second result will consist of a comprehensive and 'hands-on' handbook, enriched with specific audio podcasts for each chapter, specifically designed to access, read and understand medieval legal sources. This handbook will be vital to the project, as the current 'tools' available to students date back to a full century (often even more), presuppose a series of skills which are not necessarily shared by all humanities students, and which are hardly compatible with digital resources. Much on the contrary, the new handbook will be specifically designed for students in the humanities (striving to be as inclusive and user-friendly as possible), embedded within a multidisciplinary context (where knowledge of the

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legal sources is a means to a different end, not an end to itself), and structured with constant reference to digital resources.



Finally, the third result of the project will be the first comprehensive online platform for the study of legal historical materials across Europe. This platform will greatly enhance the learning experience of the students, and provide invaluable support to the teachers. This platform will contain:

1. all the project materials;
2. an online-version of the course, together with its own specifically-designed syllabus, integrated with a set of ad hoc tutorials for each teaching module, specific exercises for each video-lecture, as well as a broad series of additional exercises on various subjects and of growing difficulty;
3. a list of websites with legal history resources, including digitised manuscripts and early-printed books, online catalogues and other resources needed to facilitate both the digital research and the study of legal historical material;
4. a permanent hub for knowledge exchange for teachers to learn new teaching methodologies and use digital humanities as a teaching tool, and for professionals (such as archivists, palaeographers, independent scholars and educators) to train in the digital humanities. This hub, also supported by a LinkedIn group to engage cross-sectoral audiences, will promote discussion on digital humanities and sharing of best practice, thereby creating a “community of practice” between academia and high-qualified professions.

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