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A Digital Window on the Medieval World

Thousands of medieval manuscripts have been digitized by libraries around the world. The trick has been finding them. Matthew Fisher, an assistant professor of English at the University of California at Los Angeles, thought up a solution: the Catalogue of Digitized Medieval Manuscripts [<http://manuscripts.cmrs.ucla.edu>], a centralized online archive of holdings around the world. For decades, even centuries, scholars have had to find their way around library holdings using shelfmarks, unique identifying numbers assigned to each document -- a kind of Dewey Decimal System without a unifying organizational principle, according to Mr. Fisher. The catalog will pull many of those records into one spot, so that researchers who cannot hop on a plane to faraway libraries can still get their hands, virtually, on manuscripts they want to work with. Mr. Fisher and his team have found 5,000 digitized manuscripts they want to include. As of February 9, 1,024 of those had been entered in the catalog. Two grad students help vet each entry and figure out what categories it belongs in. Mr. Fisher acknowledges that the archive so far focuses mostly on Western European and North American holdings, but he hopes to marshal the scholarly expertise to bring in more records from other parts of the world. Eventually, the site will have a collaborative layer of some sort, so that scholars can share their expertise with other researchers and with libraries, which do not always have the most accurate information for each manuscript, according to Mr. Fisher. He'd like the catalog to provide a general set of digital tools, too, so that similar databases can be built in other fields. But how many people really want to know where they can get a peek at, say, the Gospel of John presented to Charlemagne around 800 and now lodged in the monastery of St. Gall, in Switzerland? Quite a few. Since the site went live in December, it has gotten more than 5,000 hits a month. It even scored a mention on the Web site of the Society for Creative Anachronism. --*Jennifer Howard*