

RECONSTRUCTION AND EXPLORATION. ON THE USE OF DIGITAL METHODS IN COLLECTION BASED HEURISTICS (in German)

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Ever since the 15th century, if not earlier, scholars have devised methods to deal with incomplete source materials. This led to an increasing formalisation of the historical method which Johann Gustav Droysen described as the ›historical three-step‹ in the 19th century, effectively positioning it between heuristics, criticism and hermeneutics.

At each of these three points, digital methods can be used today to help researchers cope with problems of incompleteness. This also applies to collection research which attempts to study earlier material and knowledge contexts and must inevitably deal with loss and incompleteness. In this paper, we wish to focus on the first step of the process – heuristics. How can we arrive at probable assertions based on limited knowledge? On one hand, digital methods help us formulate research questions by exploring existing source material. On the other, gaps in the source material – also those resulting from the ›injustice of transmission‹ (*Überlieferungsungerechtigkeit*, Esch) – can now be made systematically visible more than ever thanks to digital media, and consequently, made available for productive use. We wish to focus on techniques of reconstruction and exploration that can compensate for identified gaps in the literature, for example, by virtually bringing various sources materials together.

Thanks to their ability to systematically gather all available data on a certain object and provide a theoretically methodical foundation for it, digital methods offer an intersubjectively understandable and reproducible alternative to the often excessively intuitive (or shall we say, divinatory) hermeneutic approach. Especially with regard to the frequently raised accusation of feigned facticity, the possibility of making losses in source material visible is a great advantage of the digital approach and allows researchers to deal productively with losses.

Based on two case studies from the areas of library reconstruction and the collections of scholarly correspondence, we aim to discuss the proposed theoretical considerations and thereby contribute to a critical examination of the inherent opportunities and limitations of digital methods.