



# Digital Humanities Case Study

Eljas Oksanen

Interviewed by Dawn Kanter (Digital Humanities Officer)

## What is the subject of your research?

I take an interdisciplinary approach to researching the past. I was trained as a historian but I've now moved also into computational Archaeology and digital cultural heritage, and that's the kind of research which I'm doing for the **Medieval Ritual Landscape project** (MeRit).

I'm interested in how archaeological material and historical records act within the sphere of cultural heritage. In my previous post in Finland, I led a research project to develop a **Linked Open Data service** for numismatic data which was collected by the National Museum of Finland. One of the primary target audiences is metal detectorists who generated the data, but we wanted to create it in a way which is useful for lots of demographics, including researchers and heritage professionals.

I try to keep myself rooted in historical and archaeological research. But it's important to think about 'What is information?' and 'How do we represent data?', which are more epistemological or ontological questions that are relevant everywhere. Digital Humanities is where I get my tools for tackling these kinds of questions.

## How and why did you get involved with Digital Humanities?

In my PhD, one of the things that I wanted to look at was how landowners from Flanders had ended up in England after the Norman Conquest. We have the Domesday Book of 1086, which is this huge and wonderful collection of tenurial information. There's so much in it that you do need some kind of computational means of parsing it. I have an article from earlier in the twentieth century where the author had worked out complex landowning patterns using a hand-drawn map. It must have taken them absolutely ages to collect the data whereas we can just load up the Domesday dataset in a GIS program and within a couple of search queries, it's there.

So that's how I got into Digital Humanities. These kinds of digital resources haven't really become popular among historians until quite recently. And archaeologists, who had been working with GIS for a couple of decades at this point, already had the kinds of training and tools to start parsing the data I was becoming interested in. So I started talking more with archaeologists, learned how to use GIS software, and then expanded my repertoire into code-based statistical tools like R.

To summarise - response to a need. I've always been interested in large-scale and long-term patterns, and I felt that the kinds of tools that I had received from my 'classical historical training' were unsatisfactory. Also there were themes in Digital Humanities which I'd always been interested in, like mapping and thinking visually about space. It just seemed to come together.

## Are there any other benefits of using Digital Humanities?

Networking, increased funding opportunities... Digital Humanities is quite fashionable right now. It seems to touch on so many different aspects of research life, as well as having a very outward-facing aspect of 'How do you reach people?', 'How do you communicate?'. It's a wonderful way of connecting with people and I think I'm the kind of scholar who draws strength from that. It motivates me.

## Are there any challenges?

Digital Humanities is, for me, a portal to interdisciplinary research. Disciplinary identities are important, but for me it's about researching the past by whatever means and materials available. The **project** that I led, which produced the **CoinSampo data service demonstrator**, was with computer scientists. We work together really well now and have several collaborations under our belts, but at the start it wasn't always very straightforward because the cultural differences are significant, and there were concrete challenges to address like how you publish and how you organise together as a team when you are located in different departments or institutions. You're forced to move outside of your comfort zone, which is, I think, where all true learning happens. It's not always easy but I am really proud of what we have achieved.

## Where can we learn more about your research?

There is our page for the **Medieval Ritual Landscape project**. I also have a **profile on ORCID**, a **ResearchGate page** and the University of Helsinki has a **database** where I've put a lot of my recent research. And if you are interested in cutting-edge semantic solutions for linking and visualising data, google 'CoinSampo', which will take you to the **data service** that was published earlier this year in collaboration with the National Museum of Finland.

### Find out more

- **Eljas Oksanen** (ORCID profile)
- **Eljas Oksanen** (ResearchGate profile)
- **Publications** (University of Helsinki portal)
- **Medieval Ritual Landscape** (project website)
- **CoinSampo** (data service demonstrator)