Elizabeth P. Archibald
Proposal, "Networks of Manuscripts, Networks of Texts"

Medieval Library Catalogues and Intellectual Networks

The utility of network analysis and visualization tools for historical research, including in premodern fields, has by now been amply demonstrated. While the bulk of established projects approach network analysis as a means of elucidating relationships between individuals or communities – correspondents exchanging letters, members of societies – the same techniques can be harnessed to elucidate other types of data, providing a new means of entry into some difficult historical problems. When it comes to medieval manuscripts, there is ample material, but research is often hampered by lack of information about the provenance and use of the material – that is, the individuals associated with the books. If we expand our understanding of networks to include relationships between texts and manuscripts rather than individuals and communities, network analysis can help to fill in certain kinds of background information about manuscripts and their affinities.

This project adopts early medieval library catalogues as a data set from which to explore the possibilities of research into intellectual networks of medieval Europe, drawing on these sources to examine both the affinities between intellectual materials held in specific medieval collections (e.g., the frequency with which certain texts coexist) and the relationships between the institutions themselves, which assembled collections through elaborate systems of borrowing, copying, and otherwise obtaining their books. Visualizing these collections as networks (of books, connected within institutions, and of institutions, connected by the holdings they shared) provides a different way of understanding intellectual priorities in specific times and places (such as ninth-century St. Gallen) and of identifying new areas of fruitful research about manuscript circulation, collecting practices, institutional relationships, and intellectual preoccupations in early medieval Europe. The presentation will also deal with some challenges of network analysis approaches to medieval manuscripts, including issues of categorization and identification: How do we identify a discrete "text" for the purposes of assigning it to a network? What codicological assumptions do these techniques rest upon? And in the case of library catalogues, when we lack the books themselves, how certain can we be in identifying a text?