

‘Digitizing’ Ancient Greek and Latin Manuscripts in Illinois in the Early 20th Century:  
The Photostatic Facsimiles Projects at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

During the first half of the 20th century, the Classics Department at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign undertook the monumental task of preparing editions of classical and medieval works. Notable among these were Kenneth McKenzie and William A. Oldfather's 1919 publication *Ysopet-Avionnet: The Latin and French Texts* and the 1943 *Studies in the Text Tradition of St. Jerome's Vitae Patrum*, authored by various UIUC Classics graduate students. In preparing these works, the contributors consulted over 400 medieval manuscripts in various classical languages from collections around the world. The methods and resources they used, considering the practical limitations of their time, have remained largely unknown—until now.

Recently, during an inventory of the Classics Library Collection in the Main Stacks at the University of Illinois Library, Urbana-Champaign, a corpus of photostatic facsimiles of medieval manuscripts with classical texts was discovered. These facsimiles can be identified as copies of manuscripts that were used in the aforementioned projects. The majority were created using the "photostatic method," a cutting-edge technology for document reproduction in the early 20th century. From Sinai to Paris, and from the Escorial to the monasteries of Mount Athos, photostatic facsimiles were prepared and sent to Illinois during a period when the world was reeling from the aftermath of the Great Depression and World War II.

This paper aims to present the initiative of the Classics Library Collection at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign to preserve this recently discovered treasure of medieval manuscript facsimiles and trace its historical journey. How were these copies made and safely transported to Illinois from places and libraries that remain difficult to access even today (e.g., the monasteries of Mount Athos)? What was the photostatic method, and how prevalent was it among European libraries? Which manuscript facsimiles are stored today in the UIUC Main Library, and what are the current procedures for their restoration and digitization? The presentation will include photographs

of the materials, as well as various relevant documents from those involved in the creation of these editions.

### Bibliography

K. McKenzie; W. A. Oldfather, *Ysopet-Avionnet: The Latin and French Texts* (Urbana: The University of Illinois, 1919).

J. F. Cherf, et al., *Studies in the Text Tradition of St. Jerome's Vitae Patrum* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1943).

J. Rozelle Parker, "Notes on Some Manuscripts of the *Mappae Clavicula*," *Speculum* 10.1 (1935), pp. 72-81.

---, "The *Compositiones ad tingenda*," *Technical Studies in the Field of Fine Arts* 3.4 (1935), pp. 220-236.

---, "Some Continental Manuscripts of the *Mappae Clavicula*," *Speculum* 12.1 (1937), pp. 84-103.

---, "The Manuscripts of the *Schedula* of Theophilus Presbyter," *Speculum* 13.1 (1938), pp. 86-103.