

A Case Study of Digital Humanities: David Oppenheim's Printed Texts and the History of Jewish Books

Hannah Shumsky, COL 2026 hshumsky@sas.upenn.edu | Isaiah Weir, COL 2026 iweir@sas.upenn.edu

Mentor: Joshua Teplitsky, History & Jewish Studies Departments | Funding: PURM

Introduction

- We investigated the possible benefits of applying Digital Humanities methods to a historical research project
 - Digital Humanities is relatively new
 - Digital tools: spreadsheets, visualization software, data-cleaning, digital communication (Zoom, Slack, email, etc.)
- Studied the library of David Oppenheim (1664-1736) – Chief Rabbi of Prague (1703-1736)
 - One of the most important and representative collections of early modern Jewish book history
- Our source was a comprehensive catalog of this collection that the Bodleian Library in Oxford owns. It was a static PDF (cannot be sorted, cleaned, or used in other computer programs)

Results

- Digitization was a step beyond the PDFs of previous catalogs (Cowley and Steinschneider)
 - Static vs. relational, dynamic data
- Digitization (entering and cleaning data) took an extremely long time – we still are not done!
- Dozens of visual displays of the data
- We observed patterns across countless variables, including where and when books were published, who published them, their language, their size, and their content by re-sorting the spreadsheet and studying the visualizations
- Virtual setting facilitated collaboration
 - Especially when a variety of communication methods were used

Conclusions

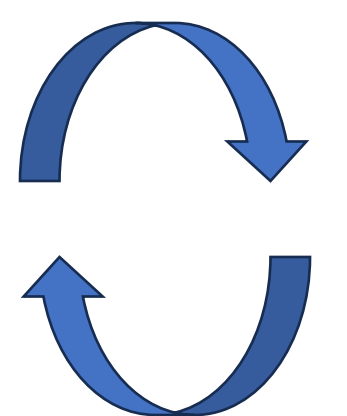
- Digital Humanities is a useful and important next step for the humanities
- Quantitative analysis, rather than just qualitative, is facilitated by these digital methods
- What often felt like busy work is a necessary foundation to being able to ask substantive research questions
- Especially for a large dataset, data was more accessible, searchable, and manipulable for analysis
- Huge volume of information in digestible chunks
- Easy to manipulate data organization and to add rows and columns
- Plug and chug – often you only need make decisions once, then you can repeat for the rest of your data
- Digital humanities allows you to see otherwise hidden patterns in the data
- Critical for collaboration
 - Easy to share, upload, and send
 - People can work on it from any location (we were all virtual), at any time, and use sources in any location (ours are in Oxford)
 - Thus, a more continuous process
- After more cleaning, we plan to upload the dataset into Footprints, a public database

Methods

(1) Manually input data from Cowley's catalog into spreadsheet

(2) Discuss data organization, with respect to inconsistencies, unique shelfmarks, naming the works, and what information to include

(6) Revisit spreadsheet and add additional columns as needed

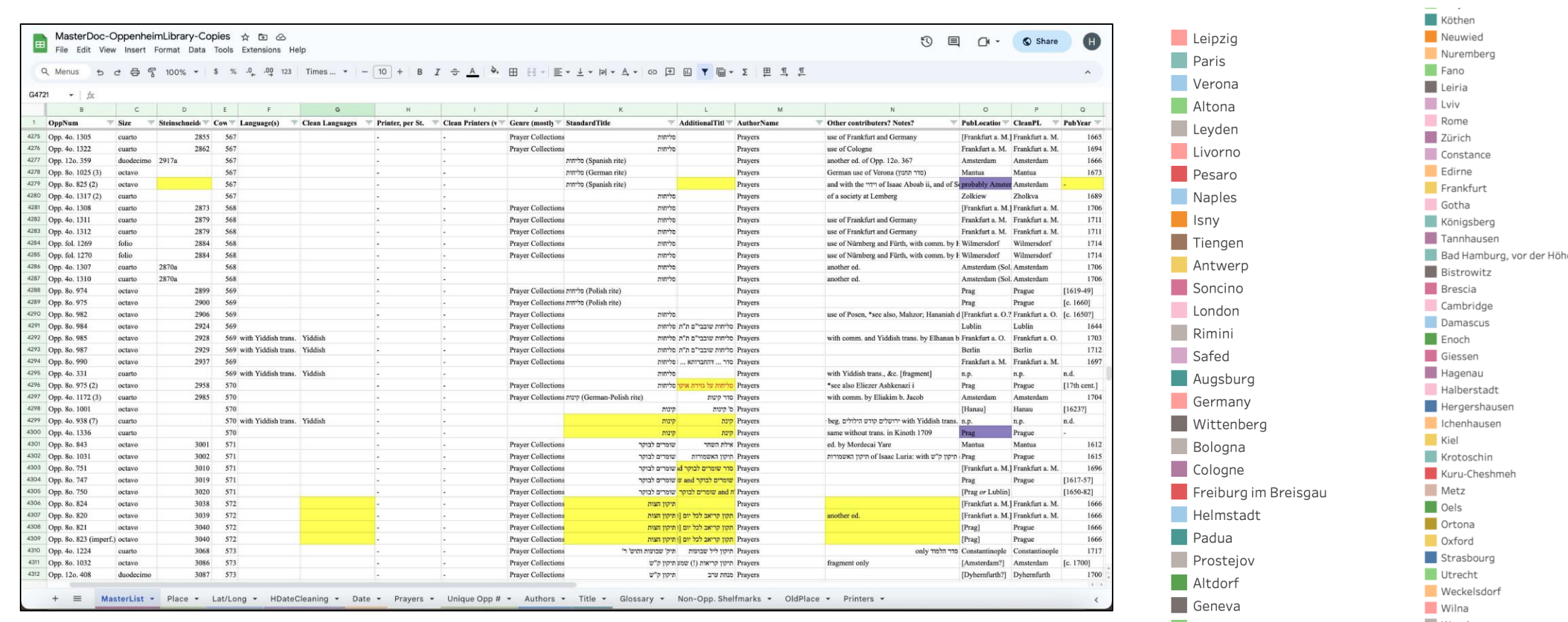
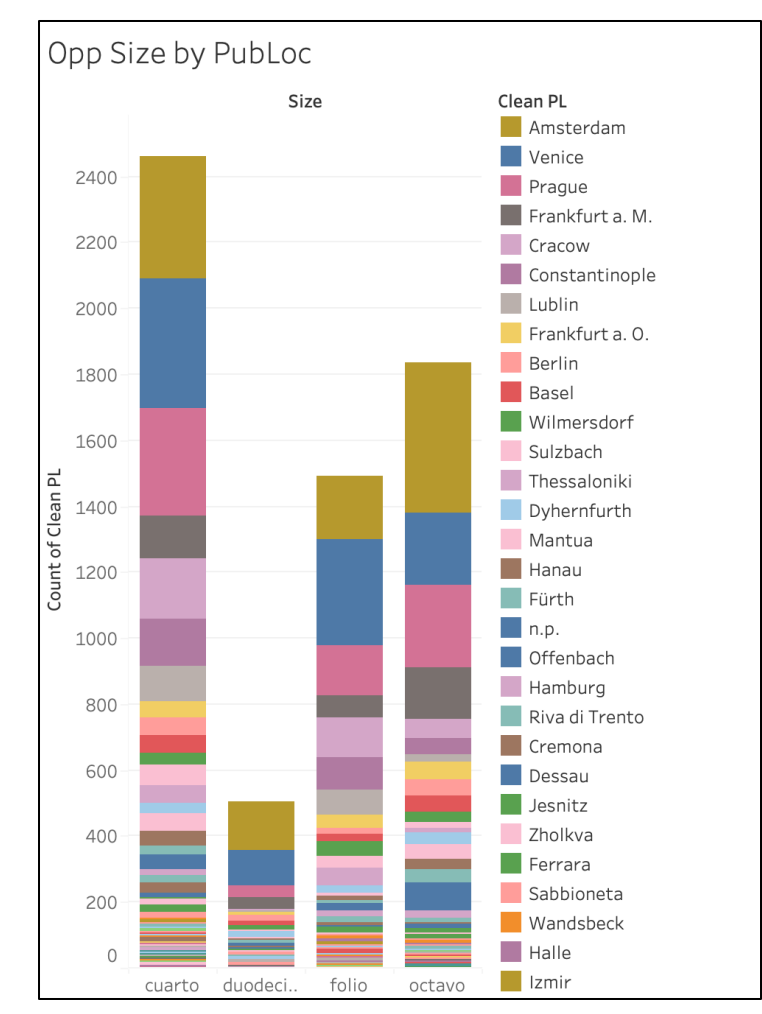
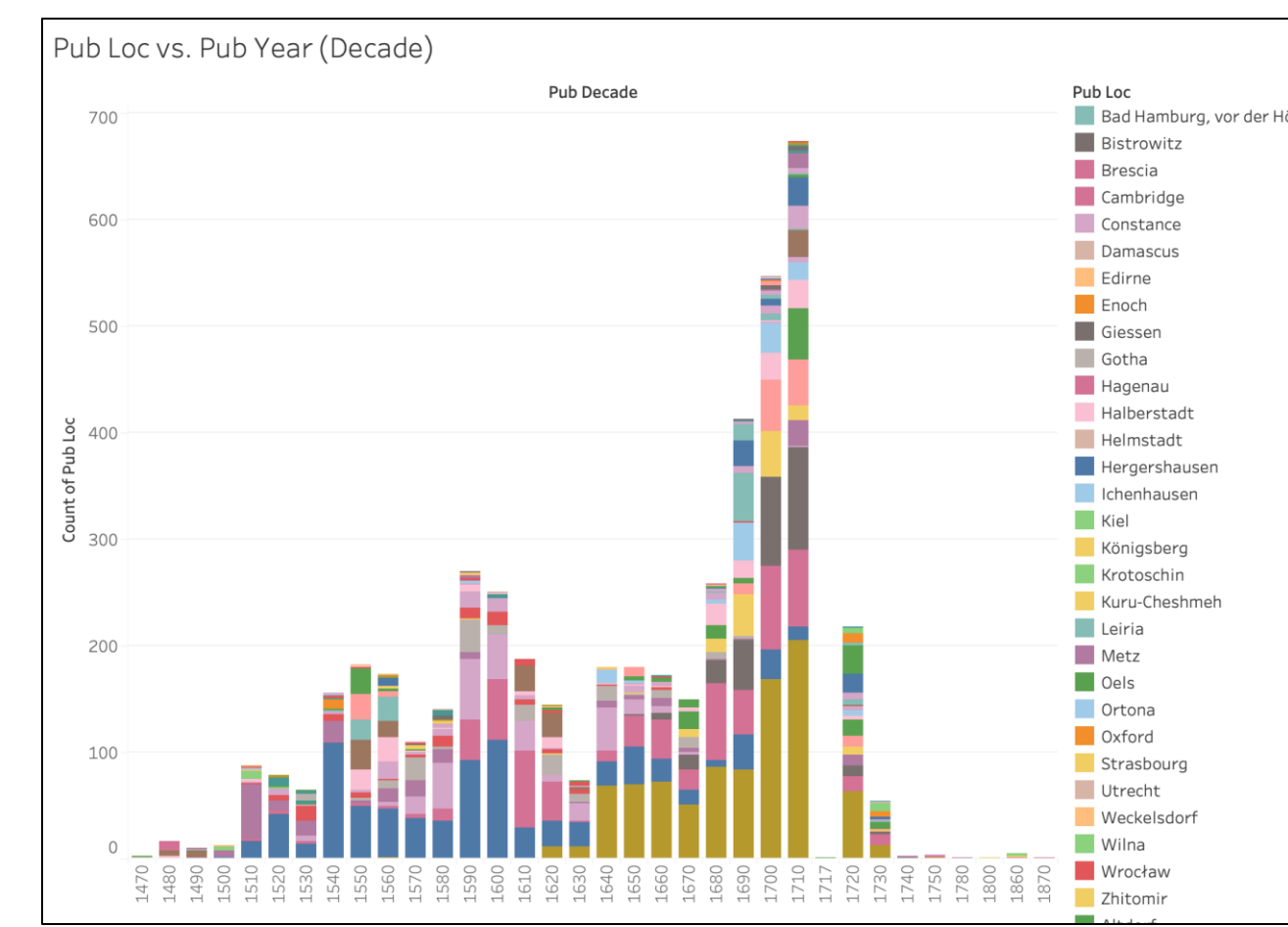


(3) Clean data

- Uncertainty ((), ?, [])
- Repeated shelfmarks
- Not enough information

(5) Tableau visualizations

(4) Write observations, ask questions, and discuss patterns



Acknowledgements, References, and Funding

