

# New Paths Through the Histories of Digital Humanities

## Uncovering Hidden Contributions to Busa's Index Thomisticus

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### **Abstract**

It is widely agreed that Digital Humanities (DH) has, of late, gone from strength to strength. New teaching programmes in DH have been set up in institutions across the world; a flurry of new publications on the topic have recently appeared; and the numbers attending its annual Conference of the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organisations grow year on year. It is also widely agreed that Digital Humanities has its finger on the pulse of the zeitgeist. By this I mean that its practitioners use a host of new – or at least newly applied – methods in order to carry out Humanities research that might otherwise be impossible, for example, text analysis, distant reading, 3D imaging and so on.

Why, then, should a discipline like DH, which is characterised so much by its present be aware of its past? The current dearth of literature on the history of Digital Humanities might indeed indicate that its practitioners are not convinced that it should. Indeed, until recently Digital Humanities has more or less ignored its disciplinary history. The application of computing to the Humanities can be traced back to 1949, at least, when Fr Roberto Busa S.J. (1913–2011), with funding from IBM began work on an index variorum of some 11 million words of Medieval Latin in the works of St Thomas Aqu-

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nas. It is astonishing to note that no comprehensive histories of DH and no book-length studies of such developments exist.

This talk will explore ongoing research into the history of Digital Humanities in order to argue that its rich histories are ones that should urgently be addressed. In particular, I will give a detailed overview of research that I undertook during a recent visit to the archive of Busa, who is often identified as a pioneer of what is now known as Digital Humanities. While there we interviewed a number of the female punch card operators who worked for Busa in the 1950s and 1960s and whose names had disappeared from the historical record. As well as revealing their otherwise hidden stories I will reflect on how the findings of this project resonate with modern-day Digital Humanities, especially in terms of our understandings of issues like collaboration, gender and knowledge transfer.