

# Building a Virtual Research

## Environment for the Humanities

BVREH is a project supported by the Humanities Division at Oxford, hosted by the Oxford e-Research Centre, and funded by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC), which promotes the innovative use of information and communications technology in academic teaching and research in the UK.

An initial survey defined the range of services that a humanities VRE should offer (illustrated in the scenarios below). As part of a number of focused projects, providing tools for specific user communities, the team is currently creating a VRE for the Study of Documents and Manuscripts.

### Scenarios...

#### What is a Virtual Research Environment?

“A set of online tools, systems and processes interoperating to facilitate or enhance the research process within and without institutional boundaries.”

*Dr Michael Fraser*

*Oxford University Computing Service*

A Virtual Research Environment is best viewed as a framework into which tools, services and resources can be plugged. It should be capable of supporting the full lifecycle of research, covering:

- Research administration
- Resource discovery & access management
- Data creation, use and analysis
- Collaboration and communication
- Research publication, curation and preservation

#### BVREH projects include:

- The BVREH User Survey
- A Virtual Workspace for the Study of Ancient Documents
- A VRE for the Study of Documents and Manuscripts
- User Requirements Gathering for the Humanities Workshop series
- Digital Pen and Paper Technologies

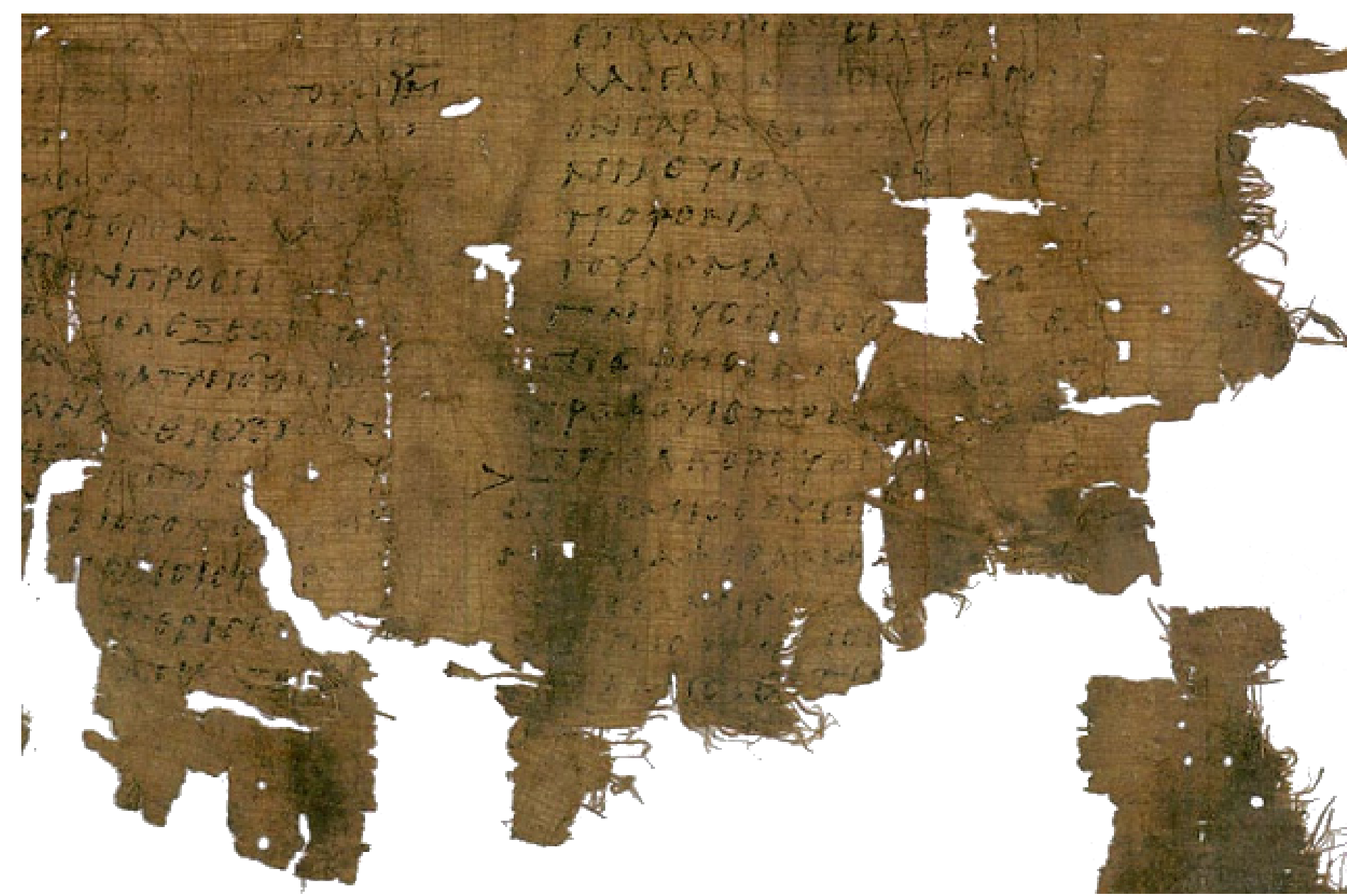


#### Principal Investigators

Prof. Alan Bowman  
Dr Charles Crowther  
Dr Michael Fraser

#### Requirements Consultant

Dr Marina Jirotko



#### 18th Century Workspace

Professor Y is compiling a critical print edition of the surviving manuscript texts of a major Eighteenth Century English author.

As she develops comparisons between versions of the manuscripts, she uses a workspace within the VRE to search across an integrated view of several well-known online resources.

#### Physical Tools

By using a 'PIG' portable video conferencing system Dr W is able to attend an international symposium linked via the AccessGrid, while remaining in his University study, surrounded by his research notes, with reference works filling the shelves around him.

As he has made his handwritten notes using a digital pen and paper system, he is later able to upload a digital version of them to the VRE, where they are securely held and can be referred to from any site or shared with a colleague.



**The VRE for the Study of Documents and Manuscripts** is designed to complement research into damaged and illegible documents, funded by a major e-Science grant, at the Classics Faculty's Centre for the Study of Ancient Documents. The pilot VRE allows researchers access to image collections, supported by annotation tools and reference and support resources from around the world. The new project will incorporate communication and collaboration tools to allow researchers like Dr X to work with his widely dispersed colleagues with access to advanced imaging tools.

After testing the pilot within epigraphical and papyrological communities the context of the VRE will be extended to address the wider needs of documentary and manuscript scholars working within the humanities. By deploying the VRE for use by other interested researchers (such as Professor Y) the project will test the degree to which VRE tools can be re-used by other disciplines.

The project will link to a related VRE at the University of Reading supporting research in archaeology at the Silchester Roman Town. By treating documents as artefacts with an original archaeological or physical context, the two projects will demonstrate the benefit of Virtual Research Environments in providing seamless access to a richer range of research data and tools.

To find out more look at our website:

<http://bvreh.humanities.ox.ac.uk>

Alternatively contact Ruth Kirkham (Project Manager - [ruth.kirkham@humanities.ox.ac.uk](mailto:ruth.kirkham@humanities.ox.ac.uk)) or John Pybus (Technical Manager - [john.pybus@humanities.ox.ac.uk](mailto:john.pybus@humanities.ox.ac.uk))

#### Research Discovery Service

Prof. Z has an idea for a new avenue of research and is keen to find out about sources of funding available to her and any other researchers at Oxford working in related fields.

At her computer, the professor accesses the Research Discovery Service integrated in the VRE, and refines her search to the humanities division at Oxford. The database of research interests across the institution puts her in touch with a potential collaborator whose valuable input assists Prof. Z in making a successful grant application.

#### A Virtual Workspace for the Study of Ancient Documents

Dr X is collaborating with colleagues, widely dispersed around the world, to make readings of the digitised image of a highly degraded ancient papyrus.

Using the VRE, he prepares for a virtual meeting by storing a copy of the digitized document within his personal workspace. He notes down his thoughts and readings as annotations to the image, cross referencing these ideas with earlier research work.

Accessing communication facilities through the VRE, Dr X and his collaborators share a common view of the image, exchanging their personal annotations and highlighting sections of the image as they discuss an indistinct mark.

The VRE enables a group of experts, still sat at their own desks, in separate countries to decipher the text as if assembled together around the original document.