I came to DH2019 with the question: surely this is not my tribe, is it? I had the advantage, incentive even, of having this large international conference right at my home institution. This made it a lot cheaper (though far from free) to attend. On Tuesday, technically one day before the conference, I organized a full-day workshop together with people from the Eep Talstra Center of Bible and Computing (VU, Amsterdam), the Qumran Institute (RUG, Groningen), and the Faculty of  Theology and Religious Studies of KU Leuven. For more information see <https://github.com/ancient-data/dh2019/wiki> With 30 people in attendance from the West Coast of the US to Japan and many places in between this was an early success; now all I had to do was enjoy the conference itself.

From my perspective the conference had some unique features. I tend to go to small events so the size of 1,100 was very large for me. It was also the most technological conference I had attended as an academic (though I had attended developer conferences like TechEd in the past).

The opening keynote was refreshingly light on tech. Professor Francis Nyamnjoh made a case for resisting the urge of seeing academia only from a career perspective as a zero-sum game, and instead allowing some moments of amazement and incompleteness into our work. At the reception, I quickly engaged with a German scholar who was also new to DH conferences. However, where I thought the talks were all quite technical in nature, she thought this was the most ‘humanistic’ conference she had ever attended, coming as she did with a computer science background.

This is actually true. Both in scope, technical depth, and general atmosphere, it was decidedly a conference of the humanities. For example, there were only a handful of companies present who gave virtually no swag – this would be different if it was a technologically oriented conference. Additionally, only a portion of the papers were by people only interested in the programming aspect, who had no knowledge of the humanities problem at hand and only presented the technological implementation they were asked to build.

The quality of the papers was very uneven. Some were technologically or scientifically sophisticated and others were conceptually or theoretically serious (especially in proposing models for the representation of humanities data in a digital format). Then there were those who simply, yet prudently, applied existing technologies and methods and showed what the results were. But there were also too many low-level papers that did not present any results or had obvious flaws or holes in the proposed solution to a problem.

As may be expected, topics like linguistics, English literature, and modern history were most prominent. This was not a problem for me, because as long as they talk about the actual methods and tech they used, we in Oriental fields can figure out if something similar can be applied to our own research problems. Indeed, papers that specified the workflow and technology were the most engaging to me. I remember a [cool workflow for premodern musical notation OCR](https://eventpilotadmin.com/web/page.php?page=Session&project=DH19&id=445-287) (disappointingly, presented by someone without knowledge of the study of premodern music) and [an impressive workflow for digitizing cadaster maps (including 3D visualization) of Venice](https://eventpilotadmin.com/web/page.php?page=Session&project=DH19&id=504-691).

**Out of all things, noticeable was the promise of machine learning for humanities research, especially deploying a convolutional neural network. Don’t worry if you have no idea what that means, neither do I, but finding out shouldn’t be too hard. The other lesson to be drawn from this conference is how incredibly hard and time-consuming the data entry and data cleaning part of a DH research project is. To get your sources in just the right digital shape is the lion’s part of your work and is perhaps the biggest factor in deciding whether it’s worth your time to invest in a digital approach at all.**

Watching the twitter feed for the hashtag #DH2019 showed to me that there are definitely people for whom this is their field, their tribe, their life. So I raised the point of ‘tribe’ a few times in conversation. Most people who I talked to said that it doesn’t work that way. Instead, people come here to get a “whiff of fresh air”. Finally, you can geek out on encoding, parsers, preprocessing, feature extraction, and all those terms that sound utterly strange to colleagues in your own subject discipline. Finally, you can get the gasps of amazement that your application deserves.

Meanwhile, I noticed that I recognized way too many people to call this a foreign field. Each time I engaged in conversation I was reminded of the particular instance in which I met that person previously, and I realized that I was already gently and generously allowed to be part of this extraordinary group of humanities scholars. That’s just what writing for The Digital Orientalist for a few years does for you.