The object of my reflection is a book:

![Image of the Mynas Codex]

There are probably a lot of books among the “transformative works” you find here, but this book, known as the “Mynas Codex,” is a very different kind of object from most of them. When I say “book,” you probably think of a text that can be read in many different places at once, each reader experiencing a more or less identical object, like this one:

![Image of a manuscript]

The Mynas Codex is a completely different kind of thing. Like many other medieval codices, it is a unique artifact that binds together many different texts by different authors, which
were recopied by different scribes at many different places and times. So one part of the book looks like this, for example:

And another part looks like this:

The individual components of a medieval book could be repeatedly split up and recombined over their lifetimes, before finding themselves in the association they have today, which in the case of this book happened in the tenth century. The Mynas Codex in its current form weaves together historical texts (ranging from assorted works of the Greek historian Thucydides to the Jewish historian Josephus’s account of the siege of Yodfat), technical works on conducting sieges and on the ballistic weaponry used in siege warfare, medical texts, and more. All this is to say that the Mynas Codex is a community of texts, each with its own topical emphasis and explanatory style that adds to the polyvocal, multidisciplinary richness of the book as a whole. Perhaps it is, in that sense, something
like the multidisciplinary community of scholars the “New Century for the Humanities” means to celebrate.

So that is some of the Mynas Codex’s history. My own history with this book began about a decade ago, when I started my graduate-school research. Back then, it was known to me only as “M.” Those letters are clues to how a modern edition of a text (which is the kind of book that exists in multiple places and looks the same to everyone who opens it) is put together from the variant voices in the medieval codices. When my research turned to the history of images in the technical texts I was studying, the modern editions were of no use to me, because their illustrations were made to look like modern technical diagrams:

[From Wilhelm Schmidt’s 1899 edition of Hero’s Pneumática]

So I went to the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), which is where the Mynas codex resides now:
There I filled up notebooks with my notes, drawings, and measurements taken from the Mynas Codex and other “book-communities” where the texts I was studying had found residence. I gained a deep familiarity with those books, not just as spaces where text and pictures could be collected (like this website), but as artifacts created slowly, step by step, by many different people with different areas of expertise. By peering very closely at the images on the page, I could see how layers of pencil, pen, and paint created a vivid picture of a flamethrowing siege engine breaking through the wall of a fortress, or how the tiny indentations of a compass-point swiveling around the page indicate the painstaking steps of constructing an intricate geometrical diagram. I reproduced those steps in my own notebooks, and that manual work cemented those diagrams in my understanding in a way I could never have apprehended simply by gazing at a digital image of the page, even a very good one.

This is not to say I don’t use those digital images. The BnF has an excellent digitization program for its manuscripts, so many of them are fully available online. You can go have a look at the Mynas Codex right now if you like. I use the images from these “digital surrogates” often for teaching, and to refresh my memory of the book itself. Digital images are wonderful tools for bringing manuscripts to a broader audience (as we are doing right here); they can be manipulated, recopied, and sent anywhere in the world immediately. They are also invaluable for preserving the manuscripts; the images can be viewed by any number of people while the manuscript remains safe in its dark, climate-controlled box back at the BnF.
Digitization projects like this that make high-quality images freely available to everyone are a transformative epistemological tool in their own right. At the same time, the wide availability of digital versions of this manuscript (and thousands of other books) makes it more important than ever that we respect their material incarnations as well. First and foremost, this means responsible stewardship and reproduction of the metadata that should accompany digital images of books from the moment of their creation. It also demands care during the imaging process itself, which is not always afforded in the scanning of materials for Google Books:


Finally, it means reminding ourselves that books are far more than vectors for information: they are crafted objects with a life history of their own. They bind together authors and readers, teachers and students, in a vast spectrum of transitory connections whose
irreproducible idiosyncrasies themselves form the core value of books and the communities that gather around them. This polyvocality is indeed something to celebrate – thanks to the "Transformative Humanities" program for providing us an occasion to do so.