Panel 21: The Future of Digital Epigraphic Corpora: Opportunities and Challenges

Chairs: Gabriel Bodard, Irene Polinskaya

The last 20 years have witnessed a steady increase in the number of regional and thematic collections of ancient inscriptions published in digital format (from half a dozen in 2005 to hundreds in 2025, many but by no means all based on EpiDoc XML). This growth testifies to the appreciation of digital format as an effective mode for structuring and publication of large epigraphic data and as a versatile tool for research. We trace three stages in the development of this practice:

1. **Pioneering work** in this area exemplified by projects including Inscriptions of Aphrodisias, US Epigraphy and Vindolanda Tablets Online
2. **Formative period** where the experience and example of the first projects and tools were applied to new bodies of inscriptions from different geographic regions and in several languages, such as the Northern Black Sea, Greek Cyrenaica, Roman Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, iSicily, and non-Mediterranean corpora including Og(h)am and DHARMA.
3. **Mature phase**, where the epigraphic discipline (and the digital humanities community, more widely) is now reflecting on big questions around digital methods including open data and standards; findability, accessibility, interoperability and reusability (FAIR); collective benefit, authority, responsibility and ethics (CARE); sustainability of digital resources and tools; affordability of labour and hosting.

The digital epigraphic community today is also concerned with the relationship between individual digital epigraphic publications and the large, discipline-wide corpora (EDCS, PHI), with work led by EAGLE, IDEA, Epigraphy.info, etc. Discussions of intersections between digital and print cultures are ongoing, sometimes fed by scepticism about digital philology and epigraphy, as well as by concerns about the impact of machine learning. Recent cybersecurity issues have exacerbated stability of online provision, at the same time as some of the older corpora suffer from aging infrastructure or expiring institutional support contracts. At the same time, moves toward standardisation of metadata, vocabularies and references form a lively tension with a diversifying field of publication tools and formats.

Now is an apposite moment to take stock of developments in this area of digital epigraphy and consider future opportunities and challenges. We would like to invite creators and curators of digital epigraphic corpora of Greek and Latin (and related) inscriptions to share their experiences, insights, and advice to others currently working on

or planning digital epigraphic corpora. Reflections are invited on the OPPORTUNITIES and CHALLENGES of digital presentation for epigraphic corpora, including but not limited to:

Findability and accessibility

- Freedom of access, open standards, formats and licenses.
- Multiple tables of contents, indexes, search options and views of the content.
- Multiple images and other media (e.g. RTI, 3D models, geo-visualisation), and other novel technologies for capturing and analysing material and textual facets of inscriptions.
- Explicit recording of context, transmission, issues with provenance and the antiquities market.
- Costs, both financial and labour, of development, hosting and other stages of digital publication.
- Sustainability of publication: while fragile, preservation of online publication is ensured by multiple copies, use of repositories, open licensed and reused content, treating underlying data and code as publication, as much as specific rendered content.

Interoperability and reusability

- via adoption of EpiDoc Guidelines, Schema and code (Stylesheets, EFES).
- Consistency of format between publications (with wide customisation).
- Simple implementation with supported tools and widely available expertise.
- Integration with Linked Open Data – ontologies, multilingual vocabularies (EAGLE, EpiVoc, FAIR Epigraphy) or Wikidata properties.
- Issues with citation and versioning of subsequent editions, republications of *lemmata* or collections, or archiving.
- Impact of machine learning and other advanced computational methods.

We welcome presentations from both veterans and beginners and encourage discussions equally of difficulties and of promising innovations in the field of digital epigraphy.

ALMA MATER STUDIORUM
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA | DEPARTMENT
OF HISTORY AND CULTURES