Epigraphy in a Digital World: the Example of *I.Sicily*

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Epigraphers have been assembling corpora of inscribed texts since the 15th century.[1] The limitations of hard-copy publication resulted in an excessive focus on text, at the expense of the material support. In the 20th century epigraphers increasingly emphasised the material aspects of inscriptions in the study of epigraphic culture. However, the creation of major text databases since the 1980s, while transforming basic text-searching tasks has coincidentally restored the emphasis upon text.[2] The development in the last decade of new standards for digital text encoding (EpiDoc, a TEI XML schema), as well as the framework and vocabularies for linked data, offer new possibilities for the creation of true digital corpora, rather than simple databases.[3] Such corpora can combine rich metadata with a critical edition, and offer new opportunities for wider dissemination and public engagement.

The *I.Sicily* project is developing such a corpus in order to study and make freely available the complete epigraphic culture of Sicily between the 7th century BC and the 7th century AD, across all languages.[4] Texts and metadata are encoded in EpiDoc, and the XML is held in an eXist database for xQuery access. URIs are maintained for the individual inscriptions (and museums), which are manipulated through a RESTful API; the bibliography is published as linked open data and edited directly in Zotero. The records can be queried and viewed through a web interface built with AngularJS and jQuery javascript components. Mapping is provided in the browser by the Google Maps API. Zoom, Pan, Rotate image-viewing is provided by the IIP image server, which enables the generation of IIIF metadata, and the OpenSeadragon javascript library. All data is made freely available under a CC-BY licence with a clear indication of the current status of each edition (unchecked, draft, edited). To reduce overheads and facilitate sustainability, a lightweight and distributed framework has been employed, using multiple existing open-source resources, such as GitHub for editorial workflow and Zotero for bibliographic management.[5] The use wherever possible of existing data ontologies, such as Pleiades and the EAGLE vocabularies,[6] facilitates standardisation and linked data (fig. 1).

Beyond the actual study of the individual inscriptions, the project has two primary aims. Firstly, to make as much information as possible freely available to researchers in as flexible a format as possible, to overcome the existing landscape of dispersed and uneven publication and to enable new research. Secondly, to work with museums and archaeologists on the island to catalogue and make available the epigraphic culture of the island. In order to achieve the latter ambition, we have created URIs for individual collections and the referencing of these in the individual editions enables the dynamic generation of open access catalogues for individual museums, which meets a key need of our primary content providers.
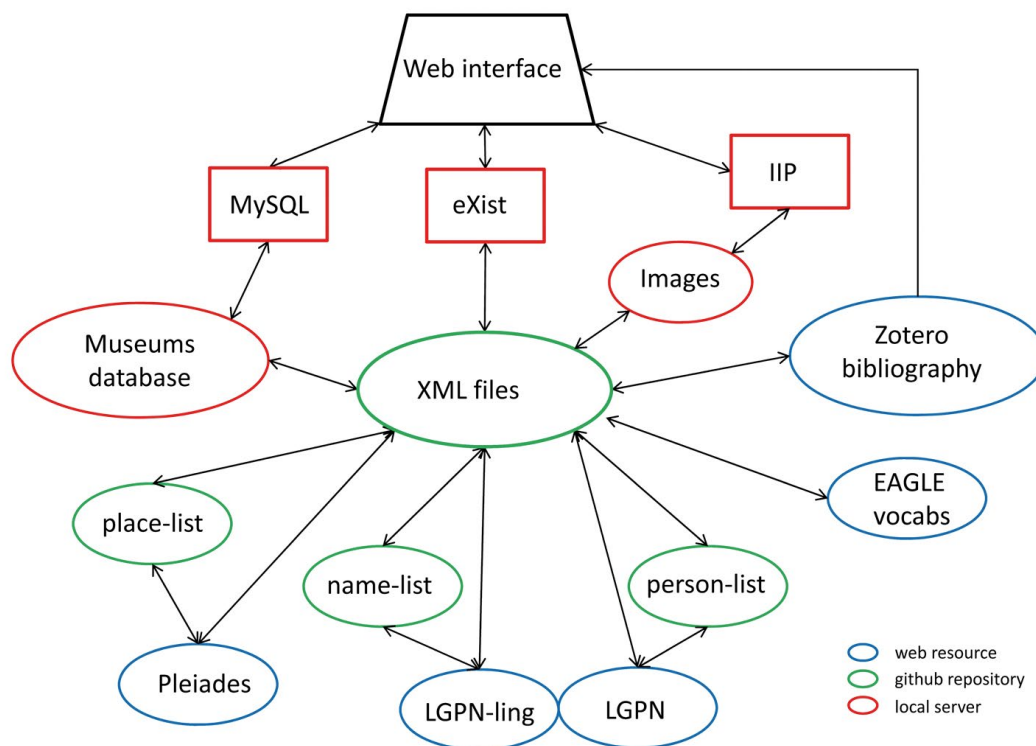
Fig. 1: Graphic representation of the data organisation of *I.Sicily*.

The continuous work of autopsy and editing provides major challenges and requires multiple collaborators, but also creates opportunities both for outreach and training. EpiDoc files are currently edited by a growing team of student volunteers, for whom training in EpiDoc is provided; workflow is managed through GitHub. Individual collections offer more specific opportunities: the collection of the Museo Civico of Catania was catalogued and presented in a new exhibition through a multi-partner collaboration between the museum, the Liceo Artistico Statale M.M. Lazzaro, the CNR Istituto di Scienze e Tecnologie della Cognizione, and the University of Oxford.[7] The initiative has inspired further projects on the island.

In the short term, the project's primary challenges lie in the availability of human resource for data curation, for which training and collaboration provide partial solutions. In the longer term the project faces similar challenges to many other digital projects, such as the establishment of Linked Open Data standards within the epigraphic community, the broader acceptance and standardisation within and beyond the academic community of modes of publishing digital editions which are subject to ongoing editing and change, and the more universal challenges of sustainability of such digital corpora so that they might ultimately replace the paper corpora that have been curated by libraries over the last centuries.

Notes

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[1] De Vido 1999 for the history of Sicilian *corpora*.

[2] E.g. <https://inscriptions.packhum.org/> and <http://www.manfredclauss.de/>.

[3] Bodard 2010; Elliott 2014; <http://epidoc.sf.net>. See <http://insaph.kcl.ac.uk/iaph2007/> for an early example.

[4] Prag – Chartrand 2018; <http://sicily.classics.ox.ac.uk>; <https://isicily.wordpress.com/>; <https://isicily.org>.

[5] <https://github.com/JonPrag/ISicily>; <https://www.zotero.org/groups/382445/isicily/items>.

[6] <https://pleiades.stoa.org/>; <https://www.eagle-network.eu/resources/vocabularies/>.

[7] Agodi et al. 2018.

Image Credits

Fig. 1: by the author.

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