



# Archaeology and Epigraphy in the Digital Era

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## Abstract

Archaeologists and epigraphers have long worked in concert across methodological and theoretical differences to study past writing. Ongoing integration of digital technologies into both fields is extending this collaboration's scope by facilitating rapid information exchange, integration of multiple datasets in digital formats, and accumulation and analysis of large datasets. Recent research by the Maya Hieroglyphic Database Project, for example, has deployed social network analysis to correlate ritual practice, discourse, and material culture with political interactions. Similarly, epigraphers and archaeologists of pre-Angkorian and Angkorian Southeast Asia have conducted spatial analysis to illuminate the relationship between economy, human mobility, and land use. Collectively, these examples illustrate how scholars are already using digital technologies for research at larger scales and with more diverse datasets than was previously possible. Moreover, they point to further directions for articulating text, material, and context in future studies of the human past.

**Keywords** Archaeology · Epigraphy · Digital documentation · Social network analysis · Spatial analysis

## Introduction

Research on past writing has traditionally been distributed between epigraphy, archaeology, and other disciplines whose practitioners differentiate themselves by the methods they deploy, the theories they cite, and the questions they pursue about written records from the past. Even regionally based epigraphic traditions demonstrate subtle, yet significant distinctions in both theory and practice, for which reason I refer to these sub-manifestations as individual “epigraphies.” But actual and perceived differences between archaeology and epigraphy can obscure their fundamental, shared concerns

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with material and visual qualities of historical text-bearing objects, including sociocultural context, viewer reception, scale, text-image relations, or materiality.

The dynamic between archaeology and epigraphy promises to continue evolving as both disciplines advance into the digital age. As specialists integrate new technologies into their research on textual and material culture, they are opening interfaces between archaeology and epigraphy in documentation and analysis methods, broadening potential sites of collaboration. In this article, I profile key digital techniques that epigraphers and archaeologists are successfully employing and highlight burgeoning areas of digitally based collaboration that have not yet been clearly articulated. I begin with brief background on epigraphy—long the formal nexus of scholarship on ancient writing—and its historical relationship with archaeology, both generally and in regional epigraphies. I then address current trends in digital methods for studying texts in archaeology and epigraphy, focusing especially on documentation, editing, and analysis.

I propose on the basis of recent, digitally based studies that evolving technologies and changing dynamics of expertise are opening a still largely unexplored space to pursue new research questions that integrate data from both archaeology and epigraphy. In making my case, I highlight two sets of recent studies that illustrate how collaboration between digital epigraphy and archaeology is already forging new paths for inquiry into the human past. Social network analyses conducted by members of the Maya Hieroglyphic Database Project, for instance, shed light on local diversity in ritual practice and monumental rhetoric in the Classic Maya lowlands and the degree to which it was shaped by political affiliation. In pre-Angkorian and Angkorian studies, joint spatial analyses by archaeologists and epigraphers indicate that development of local economies and land use were entangled in the circulation of goods and people across the Khmer empire. Although many digital initiatives that bridge archaeology and epigraphy today still emphasize data from one field over the other, they already gesture toward the novel insights that future, more balanced digital collaborations can yield.

My goal is less to suggest new digital approaches for archaeologists and epigraphers to engage with texts than to highlight ones they are already using and their consequences for present and future collaboration. By shifting focus to commonalities in digital methods and analysis, I encourage scholars working within and between these disciplines to consider the opportunities that digital developments offer to articulate new research questions, address old questions from new perspectives, and open additional avenues for interdisciplinary work. More broadly, too, archaeologists and epigraphers would benefit greatly from cooperatively addressing the challenges that the digital era presents to all humanities researchers by establishing appropriate practices for sustainable and responsible scholarship.

## **Studying Past Writing: A Brief Disciplinary Overview**

### **History of Epigraphy**

Epigraphy has existed as a formalized discipline for studying ancient inscriptions for a millennium, reflecting longstanding and widespread fascination with past writing

(see Lurie 2018). From a global perspective, the discipline's history is most extensive in Europe and Asia (Buonocore 2014; Harrist 1995; McNair 1994). Asia's tradition of epigraphy is the longest, where it was first systematized as a field of study in 11th-century China (Wang 1927, cited in Moser 2014, p. 2; see Brown 2011). In South and Southeast Asia, early studies focused on Sanskrit inscriptions and have since expanded to texts in local scripts and the still-undeciphered Indus writing system (Perret 2018; Possehl 1996; Wells 2015). Epigraphy in East Asia in particular has been marked by reflexive engagement with cultural practices of individual calligraphers and sculptors, allowing scholars to trace histories of scribal metadiscourse, influence, imitation, and innovation with a level of nuance not possible in many other areas (Addiss 2006; Bai 2003; Harrist 2008; McNair 1995, 1998).

Within Europe, Roman and Greek epigraphies have been the most thoroughly investigated since the Renaissance (see Bodel 2001; Rhodes 2009; Stenhouse 2005). However, epigraphers have also conducted significant research on other European traditions, including Byzantine (Rhoby 2015a), Runic (Looijenga 2003; Morris 1988), Etruscan (Bonfante and Bonfante 1989), and Linear A and B (Chadwick 1990). Egypt and Mesopotamia, in turn, offer the most robust traditions of epigraphic scholarship in Africa or the Middle East (Carruthers 2015; Keenan 2011; Radner and Robson 2001). Nonetheless, epigraphers have studied Semitic languages with comparatively smaller corpora for several centuries as well (Jongeling and Kerr 2005; Lemaire 2015), including a recent surge in Arabian epigraphy (Al-Jallad 2018; DASI 2013; Rāgib 2011). In the Americas, most epigraphic scholarship concentrates on Mexico and Central America (Houston and Martin 2016; Urcid 2001; Zender 2008), although there has been relatively robust research on the still-undeciphered Rongorongo script in South America (Davletshin 2017; Fischer 1997).

In much of the world but especially in the Americas, the Middle East, and South and Southeast Asia, the discipline of epigraphy has developed in the context of a general fascination with the exotic that both drove and arose from European and United States colonialism (see Díaz-Andreu García 2007; MacDonell 1906; Miksic 1995). Reflective of this intellectual and cultural heritage is the fact that epigraphy in these regions remains largely populated by foreign (and, as in epigraphy globally, male) scholars (Benjamin 2013; Coe 2012). Short of individual or localized interventions (Griffiths 2017; Grube and Fahsen 2002; Salomon 1998, p. 224), this imbalance remains largely unaddressed in the field as a collective.

## Epigraphy's Scope and Interface with Archaeology

Epigraphy, broadly defined, is concerned with "writing or lettering engraved, carved, etched, incised, traced, stamped, or otherwise imprinted onto a durable surface" (Bodel 2001, p. 2). This material orientation reflects epigraphy's traditional co-existence with other fields focused on sub-corpora of historical texts, such as codicology (books or manuscripts), numismatics (currency), or papyrology (papyrus documents). However, these disciplinary boundaries reflect more scholarly custom than clear divisions in datasets or emic conceptions of writing, and some individual scholars or epigraphic traditions regularly integrate multiple media into their

research (Bodel 2001, pp. 2–3; e.g., Bülow-Jacobsen 2011; Rhoby 2015b). Mesoamerican epigraphers, for instance, study all forms of hieroglyphic writing, in part because corpora are relatively small (Houston and Lacadena 2004, p. 103; see Houston et al. 2001; Zender 2008). Likewise, scholars of Chinese and Japanese scripts engage their myriad textual forms and have long acknowledged the role of cross-media interaction in writing's local development and use (Harrist 2008; Lurie 2011; Wu Hung 2003).

A central development in contemporary epigraphy has been scholars' increasingly robust engagement with "nontraditional," often non-alphabetic writing cultures, including Arabian, Aztec, Khmer, Luwian, Classic Maya, and Rongorongo. In addition to facilitating broader, more critical cross-cultural comparison, this shift has called into question existing assumptions, paradigms, and tools for analyzing text-bearing objects. Studies of Mesoamerican hieroglyphs and Andean *khupus*, for instance, have challenged traditional definitions of glottic versus non-glottic "writing," the terms' applicability to non-European cultural contexts, and their sociopolitical implications (Boone and Mignolo 1994; Boone and Urton 2011). Early Japanese writing, in turn, offers evidence for characters shifting back and forth between logographic or phonetic functions, defying cross-cultural assumptions of graphemes' exclusive and stable membership in one category (Lurie 2011, pp. 339–341). As scholars continue working within and between more diverse regional epigraphies, they will further refine approaches that have long been based on writing traditions with deeper histories of scholarship.

In general, epigraphers' research concerns the content, form, and context of text-bearing objects, including sociocultural conditions of creation and use, historical significance, and links to other modes of representation. The most fundamental skill is facility in the target script and associated language(s), but how epigraphers develop this knowledge varies regionally. Despite shared interests in language structure, use, and history, they do not consistently receive formal training in linguistics, particularly outside of European academia (Bíró n.d., p. 4; Houston and Lacadena 2004, pp. 103–105). Similarly, philology, with its textual-critical approaches that tend to be more explicitly oriented toward linguistic analysis, remains an infrequent component of epigraphy among North American academics, particularly those studying non-alphabetic traditions (Bíró n.d.; Houston 2000, p. 125; see also, Greenwood 2014).

Archaeology, in contrast, has been a longstanding companion to epigraphy, in China since the Song dynasty (AD 960–1279) (Rudolph 1963) and globally since the 19th century. In Europe, epigraphers and archaeologists tend to be housed in different academic departments; disciplinary overlap is more institutionally visible in North America, where study of indigenous languages and cultures remains closely tied to anthropology (Bíró n.d., pp. 3–4; Houston 2000, pp. 125–127). Today, their mutual interests find expression in distribution studies of epigraphic and archaeological data to elucidate landscape use and mobility (Hall 2010; Jackson 2013; Leube 2016), for instance, or interaction between diverse media in transmitting cultural meaning (Helmke et al. 2018; Kurth 1999). Other topics of mutual concern that would benefit from more concerted dialog between archaeologists and epigraphers include materials and practices of production (Carò et al. 2012; Lambourn 2004),

identity formation (Sitz 2019; Vázquez López 2017), ritual practices (Soutif 2009), and construction and circulation of value (Callaghan 2014). As I argue here, technological changes affecting the two fields provide opportunities for new modes of collaboration on these and other topics.

## **Writing in the New Millennium: Digital Technologies and Epigraphic Research**

Among many significant transformations that epigraphy has undergone in recent generations, adoption of digital technologies remains the most momentous and pervasive at present. I provide an overview of recent digital developments in epigraphy and archaeology, broadly following the workflow stages of documentation, description, and analysis. I conclude by addressing some implications of these changes for both disciplines into the near future. Nonetheless, their ongoing impacts on all levels of scholarship on writing are too complex to be presented in full here; for more detail, I refer the reader to the abundant, recent publications addressing significant consequences and challenges of digital archaeology, many of which equally apply to epigraphic research (see Altschul et al. 2017; Gattiglia 2015; Huggett 2015; Huvala 2018; VanValkenburgh and Dufton 2020).

Although I reference literature from various scholarly traditions to the extent possible, I especially attend to trends in research on Maya hieroglyphic writing. Besides drawing on my own background, this orientation affords the valuable opportunity to observe a regional epigraphy that is relatively young (see Coe 2012; Houston et al. 2001) and that has only recently begun to incorporate digital methods and equipment on a wide scale, following initial forays by epigraphers of other, mostly alphabetic systems. In addition, the Maya script has not yet been fully deciphered, injecting an element of uncertainty into this epigraphy's digital transition. Highlighting the ongoing development of a digital Maya epigraphy allows us to consider the promises and difficulties of incorporating continually evolving approaches into a field that is still establishing itself. Moreover, collective engagement with non-alphabetic writing systems is itself catalyzing technological innovation as epigraphers adapt existing digital approaches to scripts distinct from those for which they were originally developed.

### **Textual Representation: Documentation from Analog to Digital**

The early, widespread adoption of digital techniques for documenting artifacts in epigraphy and archaeology reflects both fields' fundamental concern with context. The potential repercussions of digitizing documentation procedures are more than methodological: this development can also facilitate studies of material production and representation beyond the scope of more traditional, two-dimensional methods. Critically, too, documentation of text-bearing objects in field and laboratory or museum settings offers the first and most comprehensive point of methodological convergence for archaeologists and epigraphers. As such, attention to common

concerns from the outset can yield precise, accurate documentation that is accessible to and insightful for scholars in both disciplines.

Although workflow and standards differ across regional traditions, archaeologists and epigraphers share a common approach when they engage with inscriptions. Following initial localization of a text-bearing object, the first analytical step is its visual documentation, ideally both by photograph and by hand (Bruun and Edmondson 2014a, pp. 3–7). The ultimate goal is an accurate, clear image of the object and its in-situ context; choice of documentation procedures and equipment should reflect this aim to the extent possible. Early in-field documentation of text-bearing objects and other archaeological artifacts was usually limited to sketches or drawings, often completed by field assistants whose work remains underacknowledged (Davies 2020; López Luján 2012; Strudwick 2012). Since the late 19th century, however, photographs have become ubiquitous as more efficient, detailed representations, particularly when coupled with raking light (Just 2012; Sellen 2012). The recent advent of digital photography has further reduced the logistical challenges of recording and development, as camera cards represent a smaller, more lightweight, and more environmentally resistant alternative to traditional film. The digital medium allows much faster viewing and broader dissemination, and digital manipulation to enhance features or stitch together images can be decisive for interpreting or reconstructing badly eroded texts (Revez 2020; Sundberg 2006; cf. Tarte et al. 2011).

Yet despite popular perception, photographs are far from an impartial gaze that remains morally unblemished by human interpretation (Daston and Galison 2010). Within recent Euro-American preferences for images over words in presenting “facts,” particularly in science, photographs present a deceptive aura or “image of objectivity” that belies the subjectivity underlying their composition and presentation (Daston and Galison 1992; see also Guha 2013). Moreover, they record an excess of unnecessary, potentially distracting detail, and they usually distort or omit features that are at odd angles to the camera lens (Porter 1981, p. 67). Consequently, when viewing photos of a text-bearing object, scholars must filter out extraneous features to distinguish insignificant marks from graphemic signs (compare Der Manuelian 1998, p. 97; Houston 2011, pp. 22–23).

The line drawing has traditionally represented the most significant interpretive product of both archaeological and epigraphic documentation. Ideally, it is based on direct observation of the text-bearing object with raking light and later refined by consulting photographs taken from multiple angles under diverse lighting conditions, to check for features not noticed in the field (Porter 1981, p. 72; Steiner 2005, p. 88). More recently, researchers have begun drawing from digital images, which integrates traditional interpretations entailed in drawing with cutting-edge documentation procedures (Beliaev and de León 2013; Gronemeyer et al. 2016). Nonetheless, any artifact drawing inherently records the illustrator’s interpretation. In archaeology as well as epigraphy, interpretive accessibility and comparability of drawings are further complicated when illustrators deploy different standards. A comprehensive drawing manual has yet to be written for Maya epigraphy, for instance (compare Kurth 2020). Although the practices outlined by Graham (1975, pp. 12–13) have been widely adopted as informal standards, many scholars have implemented their own conventions over the years, generating

noticeable diversity over generations of epigraphers (Gronemeyer et al. 2016; Jones and Satterthwaite 1982, pp. 3–4; Sharer and Coe 1979, pp. 18, 20).

In lieu of or in addition to line drawings, some epigraphers create rubbings of inscribed surfaces with pencil, ink, wax, or charcoal (Salomon 1998, p. 161; Steiner 2005, p. 87), following a practice that Chinese scholars and calligraphers were using by the sixth century AD (Starr 2008). Yet these images document only a monument’s “frontal or forward planes” and highlight the sides of a line rather than the line itself, whereby one line may appear in a rubbing as two (Porter 1981, p. 67). Another common documentation mode in some epigraphies, including classical and Indian, is the *estampage* or squeeze, a retrograde impression created by beating a sheet of damp paper or applying latex to the inscribed surface before letting it dry in place (Beck 1963; Cooley 2012, pp. 371–373; Salomon 1998, pp. 161–162). Plaster casts were another popular, reliable method of recording a text-bearing object in its three-dimensionality during the pre-digital age; nonetheless, this laborious process, like squeeze or rubbing production, can inflict irreparable damage on the text surface and has thus been discontinued in many areas (Fash and Tokovinine 2008, p. 17). Despite long-term investments in curation and storage required to maintain their contents, archives of rubbings, squeezes, and casts acquire increasing importance as the original inscriptions degrade or are lost (Papadaki et al. 2015; Starr 2008; Zehrt n.d.).

Increasingly, archaeologists and epigraphers use digital technologies to record text-bearing objects in three dimensions (Katz and Tokovinine 2017; Rick 2012), which render the actual volume and texture of epigraphic artifacts much more faithfully than two-dimensional approaches. Previously, flatbed scanners offered a portable, economical tool for 3D documentation in the field or laboratory (Schubert 1998, 2000). Since then, cultural heritage specialists have expanded to a wide range of relevant digital techniques (e.g., Barmpoutis et al. 2010; Gallen et al. 2015). Of these, the most common in archaeology and epigraphy to date are structure from motion (SfM), reflectance transformation imaging (RTI), and 3D scanning.

SfM or photogrammetry entails taking dozens of photos of a stationary object from different angles and stitching them into an orthophoto that is uniformly scaled by geometrical correction (Douglass et al. 2015; Mittica et al. 2015; see Cultural Heritage Imaging n.d.a). Because they are scaled, photogrammetric models can be used to take measurements or, with the addition of GPS coordinates, generate maps, making photogrammetry especially useful for documenting text-bearing objects in the field or for material analysis (Desmond 1994; Olson 2016). RTI and related techniques also entail taking a series of photos of a stationary object, but in contrast to SfM, in RTI the light source moves while the camera remains fixed (see Cultural Heritage Imaging n.d.b; Tweten et al. 2016). Through computer processing, the photos are combined into a synthesized image that is opened in a viewer (Earl et al. 2011; see Cultural Heritage Imaging n.d.b). A key benefit of RTI is that the resulting image can be manipulated in the viewer under a variety of artificial raking light conditions, including ones difficult or impossible to recreate in the field or a museum (Dana and Parker 2015; Tarte et al. 2011). 3D structured-light or laser scanning can generate high-resolution renderings, too, but requires greater investment in

equipment, time, and resources for data processing and curation than either SfM or RTI (Fash and Tokovinine 2008; Wachowiak and Karas 2009).

The advantages of these digital methods generally lie in their products' scalability, (relative) three-dimensionality, and ease of reproduction, as well as their non-invasive application. Through these granular, digital records, scholars can perceive texture and other superficial qualities of text-bearing objects outside the field at a level of detail not possible with traditional analog methods, in some cases with significant implications for the objects' interpretation (Jo and Lee 2012; Prager et al. 2019). Reproductions can become integral components of research, such as miniature 3D printouts that members of the Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions project are using to rearticulate the monumental Hieroglyphic Stairway at Copan, Honduras (Fash 2017), or cuneiform fragments that Mesopotamian epigraphers have reunited virtually (Lewis et al. 2015). Importantly, too, digital models can document and monitor the status of endangered inscriptions (Jo and Lee 2012; Schmidt et al. 2010). They can generate 3D models for public display, distribution, or repatriation as well—an application that will only become more relevant as collection, curation, and access to text-bearing objects become more contested (see Anderson and Christen 2013; Crouch 2010; Doyle 2015).

Yet digital documentation procedures also necessitate great human and financial investments in equipment and technical expertise, and rapid obsolescence of digital methods and formats mandates attentive curation (Rick 2012, p. 419). Additionally, Fash (2012, pp. 456–461) cautions against replacing traditional line drawings with digital images, because the latter do not elicit the same interpretive engagement from the illustrator (see also Der Manuelian 2020). At present, standard presentation of epigraphic documentation remains two-dimensional, a digital image accompanied by a line drawing to allow the discerning viewer to evaluate interpretations inherent in both (Cooley 2012, p. 373; Pitard 1992, pp. 261–264; Steiner 2005, p. 87). Optimal use of even the newest technologies, in epigraphy as in archaeology, still requires input from human experts (Fash 2012, p. 465). The incompleteness of any single mode of documentation highlights a general mandate: document early and thoroughly with a variety of methods and from multiple perspectives (Porter 1981, p. 69). Such diligence is particularly crucial for objects under active threat from natural or human effects.

## Digitizing Form, Function, and Meaning of Text-Bearing Objects

### Description and Classification

As in archaeology, the next step in epigraphic analysis is usually to describe the object, its text, the text's relationship to other significant features, and the context of recovery (Cooley 2012, pp. 376–383). Here, I focus on classification as a facet of description that is both specific to the study of text-bearing objects and directly comparable to similar concerns in archaeology. Terminology differs by regional specialty, but key interpretive parameters generally consider material, form, context, function, and content (Zell 1874, pp. 139–141). Analytical terms for text-bearing

objects have been subject to continual evolution in all regional epigraphies, however, as cultural influences and disciplinary orientations have changed (e.g., Moser 2014). Epigraphers have also become more cognizant of inscriptions' materiality, incorporating more insights from archaeology to treat texts as artifacts (Bodel 2001, p. 5; Houston 2004; Whitley 2017). New discoveries periodically challenge assumptions inherent in existing terminology; for example, classifications based on content may encounter difficulties with inscriptions that address multiple topics simultaneously (Lidzbarski 1898, pp. 137–172; Zell 1874, pp. 139–344). Similarly, artifact-oriented terminology must account for instances in which one text-bearing object does not correlate with one text; an object may feature multiple texts on different surfaces, for example, or a single text may span multiple artifacts (Morlock and Santin 2015).

In Mayanist scholarship, traditional classifications of text-bearing objects privilege the object as a whole and its form and presumed function, with little to no input from textual or iconographic content (though cf. Stuart 1996; Tokovinine 2006). The terms *stela* and *altar*, for example, are technically reserved for a “free-standing, upright stone monument” and “circular or rectangular stone that is wider or longer than it is tall,” respectively (compare Graham 1975, p. 25; Sharer and Sedat 1987, p. 359). But in practice, they encompass diverse objects that may vary in surface treatment, stone quality, size, or position, among other parameters, and they do not account for local differences in production (Stuart 1996, p. 149; Stuart et al. 2015, p. 1). Moreover, they are frequently applied based on physical form alone, even to text-bearing objects found in other positions or of unknown provenance. In some cases, later scholarship has revealed that artifacts were misclassified, and attempts to correct the errors result in multiple designations circulating in the literature (e.g., monuments from La Corona, Stuart et al. 2015; from Quirigua, Sharer and Coe 1979, pp. 19–20, table 12).

Lack of standardized epigraphic terminology also facilitates inconsistency between scholars. One particularly prominent Maya example is the various designations—“step,” “panel,” “miscellaneous stone,” “monument fragment”—applied to components of a single hieroglyphic staircase from Caracol, Belize, which had been looted in antiquity and was recovered by archaeologists at four separate sites (see Martin 2017 for the most comprehensive analysis). To avoid assumptions inherent in traditional classifications, some projects have adopted more neutral epigraphic terms, such as “element” at La Corona, El Petén, Guatemala (Stuart et al. 2015), or “monument” at Tonina, Chiapas, Mexico (Mathews 1983). Even so, we remain largely ignorant of the degree to which modern designations for inscribed Maya objects correspond to emic conceptions among ancient users. Existing records yield only a handful of Classic Mayan terms for text-bearing objects (e.g., upright-standing *lakam tuun* vs. stairway *ehb* vs. bench or throne *teem*) or hieroglyphs themselves (e.g., painted *tz'ihbaal* vs. quoted *cheheen/che'een* vs. carved, sculpted, incised, or modeled [undeciphered] vs. regionally restricted *wojool* or *wojil*) (Grube 1998; Houston 2016, pp. 392–393; Lacadena and Wichmann 2004, pp. 105, 116–118; Stuart 1996, pp. 151–154; Stuart 2016).

Terminology for text-bearing objects has been thrown into higher relief in epigraphers' more recent efforts to make their research more accessible and to facilitate comparison across cultures and time periods (Bodard and Romanello 2016).

If carefully executed, digital initiatives can minimize confusion in and between regional epigraphies by centralizing data, comparing terminology, and establishing concordances. Furthermore, by aggregating multiple types of information, they can facilitate multilayered classifications of text-bearing objects that accommodate archaeological and epigraphic interests at multiple scales of space and time. The Text Database and Dictionary of Classic Mayan (TWKM) at the University of Bonn is the largest-scale Mayanist project pursuing this strategy; its members are correlating designations in the literature with controlled vocabularies to clarify designations and make discussion of Maya text-bearing objects more accessible to nonspecialists (Grube et al. 2017). To this end, TWKM draws heavily on the Art and Architecture Thesaurus of the Getty Research Institute (2017), a controlled vocabulary whose definitions of objects with inscribed surfaces are based largely on European traditions but are intended to be regionally unspecific. Nonetheless, classification remains a dynamic and debated step in epigraphic analysis, as in archaeology (see Jones 2002). Indeed, the hierarchical, multilayered classificatory systems that archaeologists have long used (dividing artifacts into tiered categories according to material, form, function, color, etc.) may offer a productive model for categorizing text-bearing objects in future epigraphic description.

### Classifying Signs

After documenting and describing a text-bearing object, the epigrapher analyzes its graphic and linguistic content. The first step is to identify individual signs, correlating each graph with the meaning-bearing grapheme that it represents (see Daniels 1996, pp. 3–4; Meletis 2019) and determining its significance in context. Only after every graph has been classified can the epigrapher begin to understand their interrelationship and thereby the meaning of the broader text. Although digital tools and approaches have been introduced for all these analytical stages (e.g., Meyer et al. 2006), initiatives for sign classifications and lists remain the most numerous, in part because they are fundamental to subsequent steps.

The basic prerequisite for sign classification is a catalog based on as much of the extant corpus as possible. Ideally, sign catalogs should represent the complete variety of graphs in a writing system and their relationship to each other, including contextualized examples of each (Gardiner 1957, pp. 438–548; Mahadevan 1977). They provide a crucial basis for analysis by compiling the full range of meaningfully distinct graphemes in a writing system, including graphic variants that differ in form but not in linguistic value. If composed with attention to chronology, they also provide a basis for paleographic analysis of change over time in sign form and usage (e.g., for Classic Mayan, Grube 1990; for Sumerian, Labat 1995). Accounting for the provenance of source texts can also offer key insights into spatial distribution of writing system usage, for instance (Mahadevan 1977, pp. 746–752, 776–779; Rilly and de Voogt 2012, tables 2.2–2.5).

Because sign catalogs differentiate between meaning-bearing graphemes and substitutable graphic variants (Zimmermann 1956, p. 9), they are generally a prerequisite for successfully deciphering an unfamiliar writing system (Gates 1931; Macri 1993; Wells 2015). However, the compilations can mislead researchers by creating

artificial distinctions between graphs or conflating signs that in fact represent different graphemes (Polis 2020; Springer Bunk 2019; Zender 2014). Moreover, advancements in decipherment inevitably revise our knowledge of a writing system's structure and function. Consequently, sign catalogs—particularly those compiled in the wake of significant advancements in research—can provide valuable overviews of the history of decipherment and scholarly interpretation (e.g., Boud'hors 2020; Macri and Looper 2003; Moje 2020). Given the multiple layers of information that they contain, epigraphic catalogs could also benefit from a tiered structure along the lines of artifact catalogs in archaeology, a format that could be executed digitally with relative ease.

## Text Markup and Encoding

Text edition or markup has traditionally been the core component of epigraphic analysis and the cumulative step in which artifact and content are articulated to the greatest extent possible. Each regional epigraphy has its own procedures for text analysis and edition, but they commonly include transliteration, transcription, morphological analysis, and translation, reflecting deep-seated methodological ties with philology and linguistics (compare Bruun and Edmondson 2014b; Fox and Justeson 1984; Sironen 2015). One important markup standard is the Leiden Conventions (Dow 1969), although they are not widely used outside Europeanist scholarship. Generally, standards for edition of text-bearing objects should aim for maximally unambiguous representation of each step in the epigrapher's interpretation of all potentially meaning-bearing marks and their relationship with each other while filtering out nonmeaningful information.

As in documentation and description, the most significant recent developments in the markup and encoding of text-bearing objects have been propelled by digital technologies. Application of computerized approaches first took hold among epigraphers in European traditions, who continue to dominate the ever-expanding field even as more colleagues worldwide engage with the possibilities and difficulties that the new technologies present (Bodel 2012). Digital technologies have been overwhelmingly used in epigraphic analysis for two central, related purposes: data aggregation, usually in large and increasingly openly accessible databases, and text markup and encoding (Bodel 2012, pp. 285–292).

The dominant computer system to date for editing epigraphic sources has been EpiDoc, which classicists developed to encode Greek and Roman texts in Extensible Markup Language (XML), thus rendering them machine-readable (Bodel 2012, pp. 291–292; Elliott et al. 2006–2017). This collaborative product, based on the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) encoding language, uses the Leiden Conventions as its underlying markup framework (Elliott et al. 2006–2017). Since its initial development, researchers have adopted and adapted EpiDoc for other script traditions as well (see e.g., Avanzini et al. 2015 for pre-Islamic Arabian; Griffiths and Tournier 2017 for Āndhradeśa; Lepoutre et al. 2012 for Campā). Epigraphers often use it in tandem with the formal language CIDOC CRM, which was created to document and model cultural heritage information (DSWG 2006–2019; Felicetti et al. 2015; compare Pålsson 2020).

Some projects like TWKM have developed their own digital strategies and interfaces for marking up and encoding texts that are partially inspired by Epi-Doc but tailored to their own needs (Grube et al. 2017; Maier 2015). Other scholars have created automated, digital tools to recognize Maya hieroglyphs or perform visual pattern analysis, although they have yet to see widespread use (Gatica-Perez et al. 2014; Hu et al. 2015). Some regional epigraphies have even established their own fonts for transcription to streamline publication and digital dissemination by eliminating graphic variation in favor of accessibility (Der Manuelian 1988; Kalvesmaki 2015; Pallán Gayol 2018).

## Data Analysis

Advancement of digital technologies and their increasing popularity in archaeology and epigraphy are shaping interpretations applied to ancient textual data. Many recent applications of digital methods to text-bearing objects facilitate work with larger epigraphic corpora according to more regularized, often mathematical criteria. For instance, using techniques ranging from optical filters to morphological operations like thinning, scholars have manipulated images of texts and enabled automated recognition and parsing of individual signs, with varying levels of success (Alaql and Lu 2014; Sober and Levin 2017; Tracy et al. 2007). Others have statistically evaluated patterns in written form with optical character recognition (OCR) to reconstruct eroded text passages (Kavitha et al. 2016), quantify graphic changes over space or time (Karunaratne et al. 2017; Rajan 2016), or establish chronological schemas for dating inscriptions (Soumya and Kumar 2011). Such “corpus epigraphy” approaches to large-scale phenomena in the history of specific writing traditions are gaining traction as data become more abundant, more available, and easier to process with modern computing power (Kettunen 2014; see also Mullen 2007; Murugaiyan 2013).

Of the myriad digital techniques deployed to analyze text-bearing objects, one of the more contested has been phylogenetic analysis, a method that linguists adopted from the biological sciences to reconstruct historical relationships among languages and their correspondences with human populations (Pagel 2017; Platnick and Cameron 1977; Wichmann and Good 2014). The approach generates phylogenetic trees based on occurrences of characters or other variables that the researcher identifies (see Skelton 2008, pp. 164–174). Branches of the tree represent relationships between variables according to their length and distance (difference) from one another (Skelton 2008, pp. 172–174, fig. 4); in the case of paleographic data, for instance, they can situate scribes according to chronological and graphic affinity (Firth and Skelton 2016a, b; Skelton and Firth 2016). Although epigraphers have experimented with phylogenetic analysis over recent decades (see Heggarty 2006; Howe et al. 2001; Spencer et al. 2006), it remains relatively uncommon in writing systems research and has not gained widespread traction in archaeology (Mendoza Straffon 2016, 2019; O’Brien and Lyman 2005).

## Digital Developments in Archaeological and Epigraphic Collaboration

A notable advantage of digital approaches for archaeologists, epigraphers, and digital humanists generally is the capacity to accommodate multiple scales: they can evaluate large quantities of data for macrolevel processes or filter them to focus on microlevel phenomena. This development significantly enhances opportunities to articulate epigraphic sources with multiscalar archaeological research, as attested by recent, collaborative publications. Two thematic areas where digital technology-based collaboration between archaeology and epigraphy seems particularly promising are social network analysis and spatial analysis. Without any pretense to completeness, I highlight several compelling examples of how archaeologists and epigraphers across regional traditions have already seized on these approaches to advance understanding of text-bearing objects in social and material context. These scholars have already made substantive contributions by shifting their perspective; instead of treating digital approaches merely “as descriptive or exploratory tools,” they embed them in theoretical context by “more frequently and more directly addressing substantial questions about the past that cannot readily be approached using other methods and models” (Peeples 2019, p. 452). Their successful outcomes illustrate the potential of the digitally situated collaborations that I advocate here while simultaneously gesturing to directions of future development.

### Ancient Writing in Social Networks

Social network analysis is a graph theory-based approach that examines structured social relations by identifying nodes (actors) and the edges (relationships) linking them, as well as how they interact among each other (see recent overviews by Mills 2017; Pálsson 2020; Peeples 2019). Depending on research goals, nodes may represent individuals, communities, nonhuman actors, ideas, or objects; and edges may denote cultural, economic, political, ideological, or other relevant internode relationships. Key benefits of social network analysis for archaeology include insights into the interface between network structure and actor engagement, allowing scholars to contextualize interactions between individual agents within the larger social environment (Mills 2017; see also Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994). Archaeologists have deployed social network analysis to address longstanding themes in community interaction such as stylistic variation, settlement patterns, or trade (Claßen 2004; Golitko and Feinman 2015; Wernke 2012), as well as less well-represented interests like monumentality or religious practices (Glomb et al. 2020; Houten 2016). Modern capacity for large-scale digital analysis strengthens archaeology’s potential to address multiple scales of network structure, as well as a given network’s dynamism across time and space (Mills 2017; Terrell 2013; compare Golitko and Feinman 2015; Ruffini 2008).

Epigraphic data can further expand the sociocultural interactions accessible to scholars of the past, particularly phenomena like interpersonal exchange and cultural

transmission that leave scant material traces. As recent studies demonstrate, articulating epigraphic and archaeological data in social network analysis allows scholars to locate historical events in space and time while articulating them with artifact and other contextual information (Graham 2006, 2014; Terrell 2013). Scholars have already integrated such sources to examine issues including production and trade (Larson 2013; Mukai 2016), kinship (Chollier 2019), political status (Alexander and Danowski 1990; Tackett 2014), and cultural transmission (Amati et al. 2019; Yahwei 2018). Future collaborations could expand network analysis to other questions of archaeological and epigraphic interest, such as audience and reception or interactions between diverse forms of material or immaterial culture (compare Brughmans 2013, pp. 635–640; Mills 2017, pp. 387–389).

To date, members of the Maya Hieroglyphic Database Project have produced the most systematic research from the pre-colonial Americas that incorporates epigraphic sources into social network analysis. In an initial study, Munson and Macri (2009) applied the method to interactions among Maya polities, especially during the Late and Terminal Classic eras (AD 633–830), by contextualizing toponyms in hieroglyphic inscriptions with respect to where and when they were mentioned, as well as associated political titles or events. The authors observe declining centralization of political networks over time with the biggest dropoff coming in the late eighth century, when archaeological evidence indicates an uptick in warfare and gradual site abandonment. Significantly, too, local restorations of political centralization in the late eighth to early ninth centuries correlate with renewal of hierarchical alliances, not lineage ties. Consequently, the authors argue that relations of subordination and domination were essential for stabilizing Classic Maya political networks, in contrast to politically weaker ties of kinship (Munson and Macri 2009). Scholnick et al. (2013) subsequently examined rhetorical practices through which elites managed their position in political networks. Based on examination of toponyms in over 30 hieroglyphic contexts and a dataset slightly expanded from Munson and Macri (2009), they identify variations in monumental rhetoric between Classic Maya rulers and particularly between settlements according to selective emphasis on interactions with foreign representatives, victorious military campaigns, or alliances with superordinate polities.

The other main focus of social network analyses by members of the Maya Hieroglyphic Database Project has been Classic Maya ritual practices, particularly in the context of dynastic history. Munson et al. (2014) initially addressed autosacrificial bloodletting, a practice attested in hieroglyphic records and reflected in archaeological contexts most obviously by obsidian, blades, stingray spines, and other bloodletting tools. Although archaeological, epigraphic, and iconographic evidence attests to bloodletting across the Maya lowlands, the authors note significant regional (southeastern and western) and chronological (AD 593–613 and 692–712) concentrations in its monumental documentation. They also identify a meaningful correlation between hieroglyphic statements and expressions of political hostility, proposing that bloodletting rituals played a meaningful role in local responses to conflict (Munson et al. 2014).

Subsequently, Munson et al. (2016) conducted detailed social network analysis of over 80 distinct elite rituals recorded on Classic Maya stone monuments. They

propose that significant continuity in ritual practice over time and across space indicates a well-defined elite culture across the Maya area, a perspective supported by archaeological evidence for extensive stylistic and material exchange. Nonetheless, rhetorical discrepancies in how elites recorded rituals, as well as increased variation in ritual practice when settlements with medium-sized hieroglyphic corpora are included, attest to meaningful sociopolitical diversity within and between local communities (Munson et al. 2016). In a follow-up study, they argue that political relations were the primary motivation for Classic Maya political elites to record shared accession rituals, but that geographic proximity was more meaningful in determining the distribution of monumental records of ritual incense scattering (Amati et al. 2019).

Considered together, these studies represent the first large-scale attempt to apply social network analysis to Classic Maya inscriptions and compellingly illustrate the new perspectives that resultant temporal, regional, and semantic patterns can contribute to interpreting political and ceremonial practices. The authors' spatial correlation of toponymic references with political events over time complements archaeological and epigraphic evidence for increasing political fragmentation in the late eighth and ninth centuries (see recent synthesis in Martin 2020), and their analysis of elite Maya political rhetoric suggests nuances in local traditions of monumental discourse that would benefit from concerted linguistic study in the future. Additionally, their examination of references to bloodletting and accession rites in political context highlights the need to carefully tease out differences in ritual practice between communities and over time, including potential changes in practices themselves or their sociocultural meaning.

Yet the significance of the social network analyses by the Maya Hieroglyphic Database Project extends beyond specific conclusions. More importantly, it points to the ongoing need to articulate hieroglyphic records with archaeological and iconographic evidence. Their detailed methodological and epigraphic explanations leave little room for complementary discussion of archaeological materials. And as the authors readily note, Classic Maya hieroglyphic texts, particularly on stone monuments, are sharply skewed toward elite and especially royal perspectives (Munson and Macri 2009, p. 427; Munson et al. 2014, p. 2; Munson et al. 2016, p. 77). Future research could begin to counterbalance this bias by explicitly articulating rituals recorded in inscriptions with distributions of relevant archaeological artifacts used in their practice, for instance, or by examining (dis)similarities in material culture between settlements whose political relations differed in scale or nature.

## Writing in Space and Place

Another notable digital development in archaeology and epigraphy has been application of spatial analysis methods to sociocultural phenomena. Interpreting objects in context is nothing new for scholars in either discipline, particularly archaeologists who have been actively studying spatial distribution and variation for over a century (Childe 1929; Kidder 1924; see Hodder and Orton 1976; Trigger 2006). In the modern era, too, they have been among the earliest adopters of digital technologies

for spatial analysis in cultural studies (Allen et al. 1990). In fact, spatial analysis represents the one approach documented in this review for which archaeologists have spearheaded application to written sources, although scholars working within epigraphy proper are increasingly joining them. Epigraphers, although collectively slower to engage with the relevant digital tools, nonetheless demonstrate their own, long history of examining sociocultural phenomena through the positioning or movement of written sources or recorded objects (Lang 1955; Marcus 1976; Parmentier 1916), or of people producing or engaging with them (Harrist 2008; Premo 2004; Stone 1995). However, modern computer programs for digital recording, visualization, and analysis have significantly increased the amount of data and the range of interpretive parameters that scholars can consider in spatial analyses (McCoy 2017).

The wide variety of spatial analyses conducted on text-bearing objects can be broadly divided into two overlapping streams: applications of spatial analysis to the contents of written sources versus to text-bearing objects themselves. Both approaches have already facilitated significant collaboration between archaeological and epigraphic contexts. Joint studies between archaeology and epigraphy have integrated topographic and field survey data with written sources in examining built features of the ancient landscape such as roads (Lertlum and Mamoru 2009; Sheseña Hernández 2017), settlements (Anaya Hernández 2006; Gillespie et al. 2016), or entire polities (de Weerdt et al. 2016; Sidomulyo 2018), as well as movement between them (Anaya Hernández 2001; Carter et al. 2019). In other cases, scholars have mapped textual references to space and place to visualize past worldviews of the physical and social landscape (Petrulovich et al. 2019; Pottier 2003). Accounting for the chronology of text-bearing objects has allowed others to trace progression of large-scale sociocultural phenomena across time and space, such as political consolidation and collapse (Ebert et al. 2014; Neiman 1997), socioeconomic conditions (Mueller 2005; Streiter 2018), or religion (Estève 2018; Lorrillard 2006). By mapping spatial references from inscriptions in physical and cultural context, archaeologists and epigraphers can reconstruct places that were important enough to merit written mention and possible trajectories of movement between them. The rising frequency with which epigraphers incorporate geospatial information into their online databases both reflects a growing interest and facilitates future efforts in spatial analysis.

Analysis based on locations of text-bearing objects has proven equally promising in articulating spatial and referential information to better understand the ancient past. Archaeologists have been particularly eager to extend it to past inscriptions, a trend likely motivated by their early adoption of spatial analysis and the approach's inherently material orientation to textual sources. Although rock carvings, graffiti, architectural inscriptions, and other texts fixed in place are particularly conducive to this method, it can also be applied to map similarities and differences between editions of a single text (Stones 2017) or to reconstruct the original context of texts whose provenance has been lost (Anaya Hernández et al. 2003; Wilburn 2010). For instance, the spatiotemporal distribution of written sources can elucidate social relations between text producers (Cline and Cline 2015; Corbett 2012), landscape modification (Slawisch and Wilkinson 2018), or public representations of political

authority (Benefiel 2010; Smith et al. 2016). In addition, spatial analysis of inscriptions in situ can be insightful for considering issues such as physical scale and its implications for reception, intervisibility, and targeted placement of writing in the landscape (Gillespie et al. 2016; Rothe et al. 2008, pp. 396–406).

Movement of human and nonhuman actors, information, and objects constitutes a fundamental concern in many applications of spatial analysis in archaeology. A series of particularly insightful publications on pre-Angkorian (sixth–eighth century AD) and Angkorian (ninth–14th century AD) inscriptions from Southeast Asia showcases the meaningful results that can arise from integrating digitally based analyses of archaeological and epigraphic data at multiple scales. In an early landmark study, Lustig et al. (2007) addressed the development of temple and exchange economies in the Khmer empire by articulating epigraphic data on the circulation of goods and human labor, including the location of each inscription, with archaeological evidence for intensifying hydraulic management and urban construction. They argue that certain commodities like cloth circulated primarily through exchange, whereas other items, such as jewelry or musical instruments, were associated with temple economies, and that variable references to transactions involving land or imported goods reflect transitions in Khmer sociopolitical organization. Their results contextualize changes in objects and laborers mentioned in the inscriptions within developments in local economic practices and land utilization, as well as larger-scale infrastructure projects overseen by Khmer rulers (Lustig et al. 2007; compare also Lustig 2011; Lustig and Lustig 2019).

In a later study, Hendrickson (2010) undertook a more detailed examination of the Khmer road system, using toponyms and transport-related lexical items from inscriptions, settlement patterns, and archaeological evidence to investigate infrastructure associated with these roads. His argument for a longer and more layered history of road development than previously assumed adds further nuance to archaeological interpretations of Khmer empire building, population mobility, and construction of political landscapes. Significantly, it underscores the cumulative nature of the empire's territorial growth and political consolidation during the early second millennium, a process in which the role of king Jayavarman VII (reigned AD 1182–1218) was important but not as dominant as prior scholarship had asserted (Hendrickson 2010). Building on this research, Hendrickson (2012) contextualizes roads as conduits of communication between Khmer temples, and Lustig and Hendrickson (2012) argue based on road terminology from inscriptions that increasing lexical diversity and frequency reflects the formalization of road infrastructure over the course of Khmer territorial expansion.

Collectively, these contributions to pre-Angkorian and Angkorian studies highlight the entangled social, political, and cultural concerns implicated in Khmer engagement with the landscape—and the power of interdisciplinary datasets for interpreting them. The authors' scholarship is also noteworthy for its explicit and concerted consideration of architectural context, infrastructure, landscape management, and other archaeological data together with epigraphic sources. In particular, it illustrates the diverse roles that landscape, infrastructure, and economic exchange occupied in Khmer imperial management, including their impact on human mobility and material culture within the empire. More broadly, their work points to the

importance of addressing multiple lines of evidence for the movement of people, animals, goods, and ideas, as well as how digital technologies offer new support for such collaborative research.

## Concluding Thoughts

Digital methods and tools have significant advantages for studying text-bearing objects: they facilitate high-resolution documentation, permit access to and analysis of large datasets, and encourage centralized data aggregation, for example. Although practices vary by region and field, epigraphers and archaeologists already share many procedures and technologies, especially with respect to documentation. Acknowledgment of these similarities, coupled with accommodation of divergences, can further narrow the gap by promoting field and laboratory documentation that meets the needs of both disciplines. 3D digital documentation of written sources *in situ*, for instance, also facilitates comprehensive consideration of the archaeological context from which they originated (Revez 2020; Vavulin et al. 2019).

Despite differences in academic training, specialists in both fields share common interests in sociocultural phenomena ranging from craft production to mortuary practices to religion and beyond. If archaeological and epigraphic data are linked in a single database, aggregating them by region or period can reveal macrolevel patterns in identity formation, settlement patterns, or commodity exchange, for instance; conversely, filtering database results according to local parameters allows microlevel analyses (Hamidović et al. 2019; Liuzzo et al. 2017; see also Brunson et al. 2016). Existing digital research methods, many of which are already widespread in the social sciences and humanities, can thus broaden and deepen collaboration in the study of text-bearing objects by drawing on complementary, diverse datasets (compare Altschul et al. 2017). Additionally, as epigraphers and archaeologists continue to diversify their digital repertoires, other foci of joint, digitally based research will open in the future.

The digital movement further supports archaeological scholarship on text-bearing objects by making more data available in a centralized location and to a wider audience (compare Cooley 2012, pp. 327–346; Elliott 2014). Digital technologies provide an outlet for dissemination independent of the financial or logistical constraints associated with traditional publishing houses. Moreover, the communities developing many of these technologies are generally attuned to the Open Access and Open Science movements, with many epigraphic projects making their digital datasets freely accessible online (Bozia et al. 2014; see also Depauw and Gheldorf 2014; Haertel 2007; Prag et al. n.d.; Reynolds et al. 2007; USEP 2003–2019). For ethical, methodological, and technological reasons, many epigraphers see the digital transition as the future of their discipline. Comparable efforts are underway in archaeology, too, with the growing popularity of online data repositories, of which The Digital Archaeological Record (tDAR) represents the most prominent initiative to date (Marwick et al. 2017; see also Altschul et al. 2017). Indeed, expansion of digital storage and presentation of research seems inevitable in both fields, given

the impetus throughout the social sciences and humanities to assert contemporary relevance through digital presence.

Epigraphers and archaeologists have already begun significant collaboration in digitally based research areas, as evident from the many innovative studies cited and in the supplementary bibliography. Yet even among these initiatives, many demonstrate the widespread tendency to strongly privilege one dataset over the other, particularly in projects that are not grounded in interdisciplinary data collection and analysis from the onset. Social network and spatial analyses by members of the Maya Hieroglyphic Database Project and scholars of the Khmer empire offer thought-provoking conclusions in their own right but also suggest directions for balancing and expanding interdisciplinary, digitally based research. In considering where monumental inscriptions are positioned in the geopolitical landscape, for instance, researchers could ask, how do texts' locations correlate with archaeological evidence for what they document? How accessible were inscriptions or actual places of ritual practice to people moving through those areas? For ritual contexts like those addressed within the Maya Hieroglyphic Database Project, one could compare the contents of caches associated with monumental texts themselves, for example, to interrogate how memorializing particular rituals may or may not have corresponded with the artifacts intentionally deposited near their hieroglyphic records.

Broadly viewed, the cited Classic Maya and the Khmer studies concern the relationship between an inscription's position and content and human mobility. Subsequent studies could also consider the spatial arrangement of text-bearing objects in terms of consequences for human interaction with their contents. What events or forms of discourse are recorded where, and to whom are they potentially visible? Where are they located relative to archaeological evidence for those activities? And what are the consequences of these answers for understanding human interaction with the material, textual, and physical environment? Digital technologies present a wealth of tools to collaboratively pursue these and other interdisciplinary questions, especially when such research is founded on mutual awareness of how both archaeological and epigraphic evidence can contribute to answering them.

But the digital trajectory of research brings a series of challenges for archaeologists and epigraphers, too (Altschul et al. 2017). First, projects undertaking digital documentation and editing of text-bearing objects, or any archaeological materials for that matter, require substantial financial and human investment in equipment, technical training, and labor for data input that is often done manually from paper records. Rapid and ongoing technological evolution necessitates constant curation of data, metadata, and digital infrastructure to ensure that project outcomes remain functional (Elliott 2014; Kansa et al. 2020). This phenomenon threatens to further widen the gap between institutional and individual haves and have nots, privileging those with the resources to keep pace with technological developments while others fall farther behind (Lor and Britz 2012; Senier 2014). It is particularly problematic when the data being presented freely online originate from communities that are already marginalized and not able to negotiate access, representation, or other rights on equal footing with the data's creators (Earhart 2012; Gupta et al. 2020; Senier 2014; Young 2019).

Moreover, given the scale of many digital projects, scholars (or their students) are occupied for years at a time with data collection and input. Their reduced capacity to conduct analysis slows the pace of disciplinary advancement. The situation becomes especially problematic for researchers employed in academia, where data aggregation, curation, and presentation have relatively low value on the academic hierarchy. Effectively, then, large-scale digital epigraphy initiatives are viable only for tenured scholars who no longer face pressure to regularly produce traditional publications. Long-term impacts of this imbalance remain unclear. Large digital epigraphy projects create opportunities to engage a more diverse population of young academics and to jumpstart their scholarly growth (Reid 2012). But they also run the risk of hampering professional development, keeping important epigraphic and archaeological data and resources in the hands of a few senior scholars, and ultimately increasing barriers of entry into fields that already suffer from silo-ization (Brier 2012; Flanders 2012).

Yet from the challenges also arises a chance to expand interdisciplinary collaboration into the realm of problem solving. As archaeology and epigraphy navigate today's digital research landscape, practitioners of both fields would benefit from direct engagement to find solutions together. Database development, data aggregation, digital publication, curation—these difficulties are common to scholars across the digital humanities and social sciences. To standardize documentation procedures for text-bearing objects and simplify the transfer of information into long-term database storage, for example, epigraphers and archaeologists could collaboratively develop an open source software that is widely compatible, records essential data required by both fields, and can be flexibly adapted to conditions specific to individual research projects (e.g., capacity for born-digital field recording vs. post-field scanning and OCR processing of handwritten field notes). In a more decentralized scenario, archaeologists and epigraphers could enhance data interchange by more regularly using shared digital standards like TEI and XML for data encoding and publication.

In addition to common research endeavors, shared challenges in digital initiatives present another avenue for archaeologists and epigraphers to collaboratively enhance current scholarship on text-bearing objects and to increase interoperability of their data and results. In short, the future of research on text-bearing objects in archaeology and epigraphy certainly has a digital character. However, the degree to which it will resonate throughout the diverse, global community of epigraphers and archaeologists depends largely on the resources, motivations, and political dynamics within each scholarly tradition.

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