

WE NEED A DIGITAL EPIGRAPHY MANUAL

REFLECTIONS ON TEACHING DIGITAL EPIGRAPHY TO HISTORY STUDENTS

- WHO DID NOT KNOW ABOUT EPIGRAPHY OR ANCIENT LANGUAGES BEFORE -

INTRODUCTION

Effectively integrating digital epigraphy into higher education environments in Spain remains a complex challenge. Firstly, Spain lacks an interdisciplinary academic structure akin to Classics, as the field is fragmented into separate undergraduate programs such as History, Archaeology, or Classical Philology. Proficiency in classical languages is limited outside Classical Philology, and none of these programs offer specialized training in Epigraphy. To date, no handbook tailored to this disciplinary fragmentation exists. Addressing this gap is our primary objective.



STUDENTS

In both undergraduate and master's thesis projects, we have identified significant shortcomings in students' ability to cite, interpret, or even transcribe epigraphic materials. Students remain largely unaware of existing digital epigraphy databases. Those aspiring to careers in research, museums, public outreach, or secondary education would benefit from supplementary training to acquire tools that could enhance their future professional practice.

OBJECTIVE

Our aim is to equip students with foundational competencies to effectively utilize digital epigraphy databases, regardless of their career aspirations, while extending these skills to non-formal educational settings.

ACTIVITIES & OUTCOMES

We have implemented diverse initiatives across multiple university-level programs:

- A) Seminar on Digital Epigraphy (optional; UAM undergraduates and UAM-UCM Master's in Ancient Studies; 2023/24 & 2024/25): These seminars combined theoretical and practical training in database navigation, search strategies, and applications for scholarly publications. Feedback was positive, though challenges emerged, including difficulties in conducting targeted searches, transcribing documents, and interpreting database content. A recurring issue was the frequent obsolescence of hyperlinks and website inaccessibility, necessitating continuous data updates.
- B) Practical Workshops for "Introduction to Written Testimonies" (mandatory; UAH's History undergraduates; year 3; 2024/25): Seven sessions focused on digital transcription of Greek (an unfamiliar alphabet) and Latin inscriptions, alongside database training. Notably, widespread misuse of ChatGPT was observed during exams, where students were permitted unrestricted online resources. While AI tools could identify images already present in databases, they failed to process original photographs taken by instructors. Furthermore, AI-generated responses lacked contextual analysis of database content. Students who abstained from AI consistently outperformed their peers. Additionally, participants petitioned the department for classical language courses—a development we interpret as a positive outcome.
- C) Practical Workshop for "Ancient History II" (mandatory; UAH's History undergraduates; year 2; 2024/25): A session dedicated to the Ancient Graffiti Project revealed persistent challenges in interpreting epigraphic Latin and navigating databases, despite guided instructions. Students also struggled to synthesize historical narratives from available data.



(WORK IN PROGRESS) CONCLUSIONS

We need a Digital Epigraphy manual. A collaborative, updatable Digital Epigraphy Manual is urgently needed. To ensure longevity, individual chapters should feature Digital Object Identifiers (DOIs) to archive versions and facilitate updates. This resource must be developed through academic collaboration, with input from stakeholders to debate its structure and update mechanisms. It should adhere to Open Access principles and comply with FAIR (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable) standards. Crucially, the manual must serve the needs of diverse professionals—epigraphers, computer scientists, historians, archaeologists, and philologists—to address the persistent issue of outdated resources and broaden its accessibility. Only through such an approach can we bridge existing gaps and reach multidisciplinary audiences.

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