International Winter School

**DIGITAL HUMANITIES AND JEWISH EPIGRAPHY**

**WINTER SCHOOL REPORT**

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INTRODUCTION

In the past decades digital humanities have become progressively assimilated into historical studies, also giving rise to an increase in digital epigraphic projects. However, this digital turn has yet to take effect on Jewish epigraphy, meaning epitaphs, synagogal inscriptions, and dedicatory texts in Hebrew, Aramaic, or other languages associated with Judaism. A generous grant from the European Association of Jewish Studies (EAJS), with additional contributions from the Rothschild Foundation (Hanadiv) Europe, Utrecht University and the Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur/ Mainz, enabled a first step towards changing this, through an international Winter School on DH and Jewish epigraphy.

The School was organized by Ortal-Paz Saar and took place at Utrecht University on 19-21 February 2018. The main instructors were Thomas Kollatz and Max Grüntgens from the Digital Academy that forms part of the Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur/ Mainz. The School participants included ten graduate students and early career researchers, as well as four experienced researchers active in the field of Jewish epigraphy. The geographical background of the participants extended over nine different countries:

Antonello Vilella (Bari, Italy), Antony Perrot (Paris, France), Asaf Gayer (Haifa, Israel), Daria Vasyutinsky Shapiro (Beer Sheba, Israel), Ekaterina-Kate Belkina (St. Petersburg, Russia), Esther Zyskina (Jerusalem, Israel), Fabio Porzia (Toulouse, France), Kacper Ziemba (Warsaw, Poland), Matt Bartlett (Exeter, UK), Mikhail-Michael Vasilyev (Moscow, Russia).

Elishabá Mata-Lopez (Salamanca, Spain), Michael Nosonovsky (Wisconsin, USA), Yosef Stepansky (Israel), Haim Sidor (Safed, Israel).

Their research interests were likewise contextually and chronologically diverse, ranging from post-exilic Judean texts, Qumranic scrolls, or Babylonian bowls inscribed in Aramaic, through late-antique and medieval Jewish and non-Jewish inscriptions from Italy, Spain, Ukraine, or Afghanistan, Karaite epitaphs from Crimea, and early modern or modern Jewish inscriptions from the former Soviet Union or Israel.

The main aim of the Winter School was to increase the awareness of researchers to digital humanities tools available to epigraphers, while stressing particular aspects affecting Jewish epigraphy, like right-to-left script, specific calendrical notations, and acronyms. Additionally, the researchers were to be trained in digitally encoding their own data in the format of EpiDoc (TEI XML for epigraphic documents). As will be seen from the following report, these goals have been fully achieved.

This report contains the following items:

a) the original event rationale
b) an overview of the Winter School proceedings
c) the outputs and future collaborations resulting from the Winter School
d) complete Winter School programme
The successful integration of digital humanities in the field of history during the past two decades has generated major epigraphic projects. From Graeco-Roman and cuneiform inscriptions, to Egyptian engravings and Pompeiian graffiti, increasingly more research projects resort to digital methods, opening novel avenues for scholarly exploration. This digital humanities revolution, however, has not yet made a major impact on Jewish epigraphy, consisting primarily of epitaphs, synagogal inscriptions, and dedicatory texts in Hebrew, Aramaic, or other languages associated with Judaism. The most blatant example is the Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicae/Palaestinae, available only as a printed book and PDF, not as a searchable database. Only a small number of projects seek to make available such Jewish texts in a digital format, and to enable further research into them through innovative methods.

The enormous benefits of digital humanities were discussed during the academic workshop ‘Letters in the Dust: The Epigraphy and Archaeology of Medieval Jewish Cemeteries’, organized at Utrecht University in November 2016, and sponsored by an EAJS Conference Grant. The specific case of Jewish funerary inscriptions was taken as illustration, given the workshop topic. While at first some participants were hesitant to acknowledge the advantages of digitization, at the end of the workshop it became evident to all that it provides scholars with excellent tools, enabling them to expand their studies beyond traditional research borders. The discussion also highlighted some of the obstacles standing between Jewish epigraphy and digital humanities: technological challenges on the one hand, and a reticence on the part of traditional scholars on the other.

As a result of the above, and in continuation of the ‘Letters in the Dust’ programmatic agenda, we propose to offer a basic training in digital epigraphy to students and scholars of Jewish studies. The training will specifically focus on the intricacies of right-to-left texts, such as Hebrew and Aramaic. Jewish epigraphy usually employed one or both the above languages, as well as—depending on chronological and geographical variations—Yiddish, Ladino, Judaeo-Arabic or other Jewish ethnolects. During antiquity Greek and Latin were extensively used, but digital tools for these two languages are well-known and can be learned in a variety of courses, whereas no course exists for right-to-left digital epigraphy.

The participants will be introduced to Extensible Markup Language (XML), the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI), and specifically its subset EpiDoc: TEI XML for epigraphic documents. EpiDoc is a set of guidelines mainly designed to encode ancient documents, and present them in a digital format. The results of EpiDoc encoding reflect both the transcription of a given text, as well as a wealth of information about it: details about the text-bearing object (e.g., stone slab, mosaic floor), date, location (original and current), translation, interpretation, bibliographical information, etc. Additionally, this encoding method allows for tagging particular portions of the text that are deemed important (personal names, place names, age), and subsequently analysing these data along horizontal and vertical lines. EpiDoc is increasingly becoming the standard for encoding historical sources, and hence its great importance to historians in general, not only epigraphers.

The benefits of digitally encoding in EpiDoc large numbers of epigraphic items relating to one field are enormous. An excellent example, pertaining to Jewish epigraphy, may be found in the long-term project ‘Epidat’, a database of Jewish funerary inscriptions primarily from Germany, covering nine centuries and over 33,000 inscriptions (http://www.steinheim-institut.de/cgi-bin/epidat). ‘Epidat’ enables searching these Jewish epitaphs for specific parameters, such as a personal name, a biblical quotation, or an iconographic design, and see their occurrence throughout the centuries and in various areas in Germany. This database presents the inscription both as conventional webpages as well as EpiDoc TEI XML, and demonstrates some of the benefits of this digitalization method for Jewish epigraphy. The builder of ‘Epidat’, Thomas Kollatz, will be the lead instructor in this course.
The course aims are two-fold:

1. Increasing the awareness of Jewish epigraphy students and scholars to the existence of, and advantages within, digitalization of inscriptions, and particularly the EpiDoc encoding standard.

2. Providing a basic training that will enable these scholars to independently encode their research data, eventually leading to the establishment of more Jewish epigraphy databases, a major desideratum.

Additionally, the course will result in a teaching module that will be freely available online (see ‘Outputs’) that can be further used to train other audiences of Jewish Studies epigraphists with an interest in digital humanities.

The combination between the direct aims listed above, and the future educational options provided by the teaching module, constitute the rationale for proposing this course. It is bound to set a much needed model for the integration of digital humanities into Jewish epigraphy.

**OVERVIEW OF THE WINTER SCHOOL PROCEEDINGS (19-21 FEBRUARY 2018)**

As most School participants have arrived in Utrecht during the weekend, and some of them have already met at their hostel, the first Monday session already started with a very friendly atmosphere.

After introductory words from the organizer, Ortal-Paz Saar, the participants were welcomed by Professor Joris van Eijnatten, Head of the Department of History and Art History at Utrecht University. In addition to this official capacity, Prof. Van Eijnatten happens to be an expert in digital humanities, whose research explores newspaper data from the last two centuries. He discussed the digital turn of historical studies, with particular reference to Utrecht University, and proceeded with a captivating presentation demonstrating the advantages of big data in historical research. To do so, Prof. Van Eijnatten searched the newspaper collection of The Times for terms related to funerary culture, which often appear in Jewish epitaphs, such as Garden of Eden or Paradise. He explained how the use of these terms in the printed press can be visualized (and may be subsequently analysed) through digital tools, leading to fascinating results.

The next lecture, by Ortal-Paz Saar, introduced the participants to the topic of Jewish epigraphy and ethnolects, including the shifting parameters for identifying a Jewish inscription. The lecture continued with an overview of a newly launched project, PEACE: Portal of Epigraphy, Archaeology, Conservation and Education on Jewish Funerary Culture. The PEACE portal has been presented at the international academic workshop “Letters in the Dust”, which was organized by Leonard Rutgers and Ortal-Paz Saar in November 2016, and was also sponsored by an EAJS Conference grant. Now, the project is already under way, having benefitted from a Rothschild Foundation Hanadiv grant (2017 to 2020). The initial segment of PEACE focuses on epigraphy (funerary inscriptions) and includes three partner projects: FIJI (Funerary Inscriptions of Jews from Italy) – Utrecht University, Epidat (Jewish epitaphs from Germany) – Steinheim Institute, IIP (Inscriptions of Israel/Palestine) – Brown University. Ortal-Paz explained that one of the additional aims of the Winter School was to establish new partner projects for the PEACE portal: scholars who already have databases of Jewish funerary inscriptions—at various stages of development, some not even digitized—and who would like to join forces and make their data widely available through PEACE.

The following lectures formed the core of the Winter School. The two instructors from the Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur/ Mainz, Thomas Kollatz and Max Grüntgens, introduced the participants to the basic notions of Extensive Markup Language (XML) and the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI). This was followed by an explanation of EpiDoc, an encoding initiative designed expressly for inscriptions. Given the different
background of the participants Thomas and Max patiently explained everything from the very beginning, not taking any prior knowledge for granted. From this point onward the participants had the opportunity to exercise hands-on the encoding features explained, using a free-trial version of the XML editor Oxygen.

Most of the explanations employed as example a funerary inscription from Frankfurt am Main, commemorating Bela daughter of Nathan, who passed away in 1272 (see http://www.steinheim-institut.de/cgi-bin/epidat?id=ffb-98&lang=en). The eight lines of this Hebrew medieval epitaph generated much discussion, from the use of the term “important maiden” (bachura khashuva) to the correct reading of missing letters. The discussion focused on the epigraphic, linguistic and cultural content of the inscription, while the questions concerned the digital intricacies of encoding such a text. It was fascinating to see how scholars from different chronological and geographical backgrounds brought their diverse expertise to the discussion: “Do you have such expressions in your data?” “No, we only have ‘important man or woman’, never maiden!” “Is the reading of her name correct? Maybe it should be Bilhaa?” “No, it is a well-attested female name in medieval Ashkenaz!” These parts of the discussion, although conducted as an aside to the main—digital—focus of the School, proved to be no less significant. They demonstrated once again the relevance of a central hub of Jewish funerary culture, which hopefully the PEACE portal will become.

The second day of the Winter School continued with classes on digitization of inscriptions, touching upon the advantages of digital editions in comparison to traditional, printed one. After lunch the entire group left Utrecht by tour bus, and headed to Ouderkerk aan de Amstel. This small village is home to the oldest Jewish cemetery in the Netherlands, Beth Haim, consecrated in 1614. Despite the bitter cold, the visit, with a local guide, was a pleasant one. Some participants compared the tombstones with others familiar to them, from different countries. One of the researchers, Prof. Michael Nosonovsky, had previously visited the Beth Haim cemetery on Curacao, which houses many graves of Dutch-Portuguese Jews. In the 17th century some Amsterdam families had members buried in both locations, with a few epitaphs actually being identical. The participants took many photos of the impressive tombstones, inscribed in more than one language (primarily Hebrew and Portuguese). Numerous stones concluded with the acronym SAGDG or SAGDEG, standing for Su alma goze de
(eternal) gloria (May his/her soul enjoy [eternal] glory), the Jewish-Portuguese equivalent to the Hebrew נצרת, tehe nishmato/a tzeurah be-tzror ha-hayim (May his/her soul be bound in the bundle of life). Once again, questions pertaining to the digitization of such texts arose and were partly answered in the field by the Winter School instructors.

The third day consisted of two parts. In the first more digital encoding issues were presented, and the participants had a chance to better test the digitization of their own data. “We have a few ‘converts’ to EpiDoc”, pronounced happily Thomas Kollatz. The second part of the day formed the conclusion of the Winter School. Ortal-Paz Saar presented a share of her own data on funerary inscriptions from Italy, and explained how its current format will be transformed into a full database by the Digital Humanities Lab in Utrecht. Michael Vasilyev (University programs coordinator of the SEFER organization in Moscow) added a demonstration of an impressive new database of Jewish epitaphs from the former Soviet Union. Although developed by different scholars and dealing with different geographic and chronological locations, the two databases had much content in common. In fact, the common ground for all the participants in the Winter School was broader than the differences existing between their fields. The interest in epigraphy, and in particular those inscriptions pertaining to the Jewish people, made the Winter School experience a cohesive whole, and assisted in realizing its goals in a most pleasant way.
After the School ended the organizer and instructors composed an online survey. Based on the feedback received we will conceive similar events in the future. At this point, it is wonderful to note that when asked about their overall satisfaction of the Winter School, 10 out of 13 participants answered “Very satisfied”:

![Chart showing overall satisfaction](chart.png)

OUTCOMES, OUTPUTS, AND FURTHER COLLABORATIONS

1. As already mentioned, the first aim of the Winter School was to increase the awareness of those working on Jewish epigraphy to digitalization, with a particular emphasis on EpiDoc. This aim has been fully achieved in the context of the present event, and also, to a larger extent, in its preparatory phases. The Call for applications for this school has been published in a wide range of venues, primarily: forums of digital humanities (e.g. the MARKUP mailing list, H-Digital History), forums of Judaic Studies (H-Judaic), relevant websites and newsletters (e.g. EAJS newsflash, the International Catacomb Society), Jewish Studies departments, Facebook target groups (e.g. EpiDoc), and colleagues. The amount of applications received was more than double the number of available places, and additionally, a few people were interested in attending but did not send an application in the end. This indicates that the topic of the Winter School generated sufficient interest, and the Call for applications itself made people aware of the topic’s importance.

2. The second aim of the Winter School, to provide a basic training so that the participants can encode their own data, has also been achieved. In the survey mentioned above the participants were asked to rate their prior knowledge of the School topic as well as their end knowledge. As may be seen from the following charts, most participants experienced a clear increase in knowledge.
3. At the end of the Winter School we opened a Google group titled “Network Jewish Epigraphy”, in which the participants can share questions and new learning materials. We have also started a more popular Facebook group titled “Digital Humanities and Jewish Epigraphy”, open to more participants, in which a variety of links related to this topics are shared.

4. In addition to the above the Winter School will generate a teaching module based on the lessons taught in Utrecht, which can be employed by instructors elsewhere. At the moment (21 March 2018) the module comprises the following:

- PPT slide shows presented during the School
- handouts distributed during the School
- list of suggested literature and websites (constantly updated)
- explanations on converting tabular data (e.g. Excel sheet) into a digital database of inscriptions
- a CSV converter prepared by Max Grüntgens

We will add to it additional videos demonstrating the actual process of encoding for beginners, and proceed to share it with the interested parties (mainly universities and academic institutes, but also academic conventions
where there is an interest in Jewish epigraphy). The teaching module will be made available free of charge (CC BY).

5. Lastly, the Winter School generated several potential collaborations. Those participants who already have a database of Jewish inscriptions (mostly funerary) expressed their interest to collaborate with the PEACE portal in the future. Others were interested in turning a printed database into a digital one, and have already been in touch with the School instructors about that. Given the positive and friendly atmosphere throughout the event, it is certain that these are just the first fruits of a long lasting collaboration.
International Winter School
Digital Humanities and Jewish Epigraphy

Location: Utrecht University, Netherlands
Organizer: Ortal-Paz Saar
Main instructors: Thomas Kollatz and Max Grüntgens (Digital Academy, Academy of Sciences and Literature | Mainz)

The Winter School has been generously sponsored by the European Association of Jewish Studies and the Rothschild Foundation (Hanadiv) Europe, in collaboration with Utrecht University and the Digital Academy at the Academy of Sciences and Literature | Mainz.

Day One. Monday, 19 February 2018

09:00 Meeting in front of Drift 25
09:15 Welcome
09:45 Introduction to Jewish epigraphy: Hebrew, Aramaic and Jewish ethnolects
10:45 What is XML; What is TEI; What is EpiDoc
   Learning by Doing 1: Encode your first text
12:00 Lunch at Utrecht University cafeteria
13:15 – 16:00 What are metadata? Why are they important?
   Learning by Doing 2: Encoding metadata for digital texts and objects
   Learning by Doing 3: How to deal with images
   Learning by Doing 4: How to describe the text-bearing object

Day Two. Tuesday, 20 February 2018

09:00 Interoperability and authority files
   Learning by Doing 5: How to deal with different interpretations, readings, levels of certainty
12:00 Lunch at Utrecht University cafeteria
13:00 – 17:00 Fieldtrip to Beth Haim cemetery in Oudekerk aan de Amstel.
   Learning by doing 6: Encoding actual Jewish epitaphs.

Day Three. Wednesday, 21 February 2018

09:00 Concrete applications of encoding Jewish epigraphy
   Learning by doing 7: How to get a website and/or a draft / book out of encoded files
   Learning by Doing 8: EpiDoc XML as starting point for analysing data
   Learning by Doing 9: Interoperability between encoded corpora – Semantic Web Technologies
   Learning by Doing 10: Community building
12:00 Lunch at Utrecht University cafeteria
13:15 – 14:00 Winter School conclusion
PHOTOS FROM THE WINTER SCHOOL: Instructors Thomas Kollatz, Max Grüntgens, and the participants
Guided field trip to the Jewish cemetery in Ouderkerk aan de Amstel (17th century)