

Information Technologies for Epigraphy and Cultural Heritage

Proceedings of the First EAGLE International
Conference



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Information Technologies for Epigraphy and Cultural Heritage

Proceedings
of the
First EAGLE International Conference

a cura di

*Silvia Orlandi, Raffaella Santucci,
Vittore Casarosa, Pietro Maria Liuzzo*



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4. Between Harmonization and Peculiarities of Scientific Domains

Digitizing the epigraphic heritage of pre-Islamic Arabia in the project DASI

Alessandra Avanzini, Annamaria De Santis, Daniele Marotta, Irene Rossi

Abstract

DASI is an ERC-Advanced Grant project aimed at digitizing the pre-Islamic inscriptions from Arabia and fostering best practices for the digitization of the epigraphic heritage related to Semitic languages. This paper describes the content model, the standards chosen, and exemplifies the vocabularies in view of a possible harmonization of data pertaining to the specific domain. The architecture of the system and the tools for encoding and retrieving textual content are also illustrated.

Keywords

Digital epigraphy, pre-Islamic Arabia, vocabularies, text encoding, epigraphic standard.

4.1. Studying the epigraphic heritage of ancient Arabia: overview of the project DASI

From the late 2nd millennium BC until the advent of Islam, the huge territory designated as Arabia was a country of literate civilizations, which are known almost exclusively by their enormous epigraphic heritage in different languages and scripts.¹ However, Arabian studies is yet a very young field. Epigraphic material of pre-Islamic Arabia is only relatively studied and is often difficult to interpret. Furthermore, this cultural wealth today is hardly accessible, due to the complicated socio-political situation of some regions of the Peninsula.

¹ For an overview of the topic, see ROBIN 1991 and MACDONALD 2000.

The five-year project DASI – Digital Archive for the study of pre-Islamic Arabian inscriptions² has been funded by the European Research Council with the objective of getting the whole corpus of ancient Arabian inscriptions inventoried and digitized. At the third year of the project, nearly 7000 Ancient South Arabian inscriptions are accessible for fruition on the web, plus a number of inscriptions in the Aramaic and Ancient North Arabian languages,³ which are available thanks to the cooperation with UMR 8167-Orient & Méditerranée of the CNRS-Paris and the project OCIANA – Online *Corpus of Inscriptions of Ancient North Arabia of the University of Oxford*.⁴

The second objective of the project is to enhance Arabian studies by means of the edition of the material on the web, scientific publications and dissemination, in order to achieve a better overall perception and knowledge of the civilizations of pre-Islamic Arabia and stimulate the protection of their cultural heritage.

The third objective of DASI is to foster methodologies and getting a common understanding of best practices and procedures for the digitalization and preservation of the epigraphic heritage, with a special attention to the specificities of the pre-Islamic Arabian cultures and Semitic languages.

4.2. Describing inscriptions

DASI is the development of the project CSAI – *Corpus of South Arabian Inscriptions*, which had been set up in 2001 by the same research group of the University of Pisa. CSAI was a pioneering attempt to publish the entire Ancient South Arabian (hereafter ASA) epigraphic corpus in digital form.⁵ The digital edition of the inscriptions consisted of XML files, each one grouping the inscriptions belonging to one ASA

² The project, under the directorship of Prof. Alessandra Avanzini of the University of Pisa and with the collaboration of the Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa for the technical part, was funded within the Seventh Framework Programme “Ideas”, Specific Programme “ERC – Advanced Grant”, Grant Agreement n° 269774. <http://www.dasiproject.eu>

³ DASI –*Digital Archive for the Study of pre-Islamic Arabian Inscriptions*. <http://dasi.humnet.unipi.it>

⁴ <http://krc2.orient.ox.ac.uk/aalc/index.php/en/news/286-the-safaitic-database-online-sdo>

⁵ The project is described in AVANZINI et al. 2000; see also AVANZINI 2008 for the editorial criteria.

sub-corpus. The description model focused on the text, whose editorial interventions and onomastic features were marked.

The clearly text-oriented model of CSAI has undergone changes over time. The digitization of inscriptions preserved in museums and the adoption of the holistic interpretation method, led to the enhancement of the description of the physical support in order to wholly appreciate the interdependency between the inscription and the objects carrying the text, which are often artistically valuable.⁶

4.2.1. A hybrid system for uniform data retrieving

The new approach of DASI is a compromise between the two models applied by most of the projects related to digital archiving and publication of epigraphs:⁷ the database approach and the XML approach. Whereas the latter – experimented in CSAI – had some limitations,⁸ DASI is a hybrid system combining both the technologies for archiving and displaying data. It consists of three main components: a relational database, a data entry and a front end.

The database stores not only metadata, but also text encoded in XML format according to the EpiDoc standard⁹, being the data entry provided with an editing module specifically developed to encode pre-Islamic Arabian inscriptions.¹⁰ In this way, the texts of the inscriptions are still “fully queryable and manipulable” [CAYLESS et al. 2009, p. 26].

On the other hand, the entire content of the database is extracted in XML by a web service, called XMLManager, in order to construct the dynamic sections of the front end. In particular, the text of the inscriptions is indexed by using a customization of the library Berkeley

⁶ The adoption of a multidisciplinary method of study – that includes the linguistic, the philological, the archaeological and the art-historical perspectives as well – was enhanced thanks to the funding of related projects such as CASIS and MENCAWAR, which focused on the direct examination and documentation of the inscriptions preserved in the museums involved.

⁷ See BABEU 2011 for a worldwide overview of single projects relating to digital epigraphy.

⁸ Namely, those relating to the management of multiple users providing data via web and of highly structured data (description of supports, origin of objects, etc.).

⁹ EpiDoc: Epigraphic Documents in TEI XML. <http://sourceforge.net/p/epidoc/wiki/Home/>

¹⁰ The advantages of a database and its web-based data entry system are well known: ease in data insertion via web browsers; use of controlled vocabularies that ensure uniformity of data; data sharing among a large number of users; integrity of data, due to different levels of authorization.

DB XML in order to perform complex full-text queries, such as textual variants, word ranges etc. (see 4.3.2).¹¹ The XMLManager, properly implemented, allows to meet another requirement of the digital publication of inscriptions[CAYLESS et al. 2009, p. 30]: the possibility to export the archived content according to different XML standards (e.g. EpiDoc). Scholars are thus enabled to access raw data and add their own interpretive and editorials interventions.

4.2.2. The data structure

The database has been designed on the basis of a conceptual model which conveys the complexity of epigraphs and takes into account the multiple disciplines involved in their study.

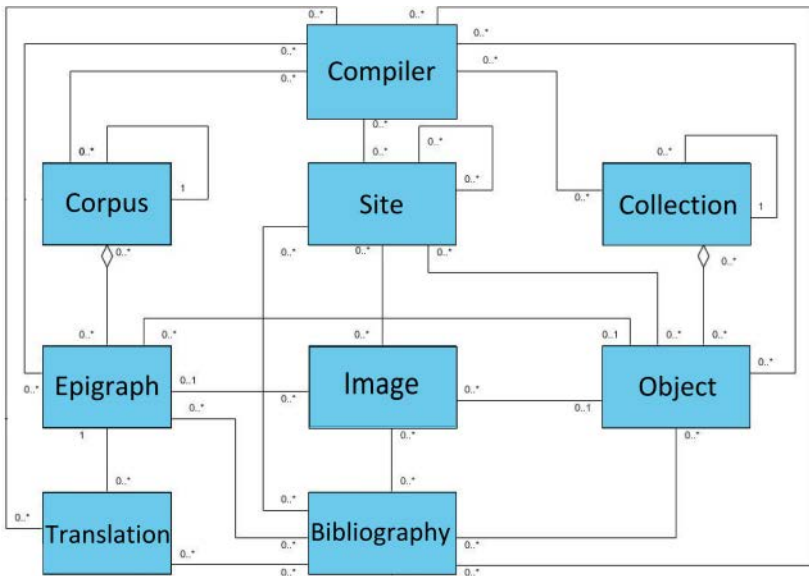


Fig. 4.1. The conceptual model of DASI. The diagram summarizes the entities that represent several aspects of the inscriptions and their relations.

The diagram summarizes the entities that represent several aspects of the inscriptions and their relations.

¹¹ Further web services allow users, registered to the system, to get documents in downloadable and printable formats (presently PDF and RTF) and access a version of the front end with more features for archiving and editing.

The dual nature of inscribed artefacts, as material objects carrying inscriptions and textual information carried by objects, is represented by two separate but strictly related entities: “Epigraph” and “Object” (Fig. 4.1). Each item digitized in DASI is represented by a physical object linked to one or more epigraphs, each one provided with its own images and bibliography.¹² As for the “Epigraph”, the model allows to overcome the limitations of the paper editions, still partly present in some projects of digital publishing based only on databases.¹³ The focus on the text, that already characterized CSAI, has been strengthened by the enhancement of the searches performed on the texts and a forthcoming lexicon of some South Arabian languages (see 4.4). Moreover the attributes of the entity “Epigraph” provide information on linguistic features, writing, chronology and type of text; in addition to the notes of apparatus, there are general and cultural notes.

Information about an object is not embedded in the attributes of the “Epigraph”, but has its own autonomy, while maintaining close ties with that of the inscription. Indeed, the entity “Object” includes attributes regarding: type of support, materials and dimensions, provenance and archaeological context, and the detailed description of its decorative elements.

In order to highlight the complexity of inscriptions, contextual entities are considered. For instance the entity “Site” has been connected with the entity “Object”. DASI supplies not only the information needed to contextualize artefacts, such as provenance or place of production, but also ancient and modern toponyms, geographical coordinates, country, region, ancient kingdom, archaeological information about the sites, such as monuments, history of studies, archaeological missions and so on.

Finally, the entity “Image” is linked both to “Epigraph” and “Object”: this double relation gives the opportunity to provide a suitable

¹² The data model of DASI lends itself to be represented by the CIDOC CRM conceptual model (<http://www.cidoc-crm.org/>) in view of a possible encoding in computational semantic, while preserving the advantages of the EpiDoc description. The benefits of this approach in terms of ontologies and *linked open data* are well exemplified in DOERR et al. 2010 and ÁLVAREZ et al. 2011.

¹³ BODARD 2008, p. 2: “The objects on which the texts are inscribed, the stelae, statues, wall panels, tablets, and grave monuments, are studied by archaeologists and art historians for whom the written texts are little more than a footnote, if not an inconvenience. This fact has tended to keep inscriptions in an academic limbo – not quite literary text and not quite archaeological object”. See also BABEU 2011, pp. 97-98.

visual documentation for both the object as a whole and the portions where the inscription is placed. This allows to perform the functions of “scale” and “media” [BODARD 2008] and provides more precise information (e.g. several inscriptions on a single support).

4.2.3. Transcription and encoding

The benefits of XML encoding of texts have led to the spread of EpiDoc within the scientific community [ROUECHÉ 2009]. This spread will be further increased if easy-to-use tools are offered to epigraphists. This is the reason why DASI has developed a tool that allows to obtain an EpiDoc text without learning XML.

An XML editor has thus been integrated into the data entry (Fig. 4.2). It does not handle a generic XML, but a set of EpiDoc elements to represent specific phenomena, according to the scientific needs of the project DASI. The encoding is transparent to the user, who is not bound to learn XML syntax and work directly on the code, but only uses menus and buttons to enter the Latin transliteration (UTF-8 set) and the phenomena to be highlighted.

The encoded phenomena are:

- structural phenomena (line breaks and in-word line breaks);
- phenomena concerning the relationship between text and support (broken support, turn of side);
- onomastics (names of individuals and social groups, toponyms, etc.);
- textual portions (signature, eponyms, etc.);
- transcription phenomena (ambiguous and lost characters, lacunae, text omitted);
- symbols (word divider, paraph);
- editorial interventions (restored text, superfluous characters, corrections);
- grammatical phenomena (grammatical analysis of the words).

The development of the editor faced some problems related to the creation of valid and well-formed XML documents. The editor prevents users from entering elements in positions not allowed by the EpiDoc schema and not considered within the project.

The editor verifies that tags are rightly nested in order to avoid overlapping. In this regard, *fragmentation* is the solution [MARINELLI et al. 2008] used by DASI: in case two elements overlap, the last element which was inserted, is divided into several fragments; each of these fragments is provided with an identifier and related with the others through linking attributes. This rule has been adopted because it is not predictable which information level will be encoded first. For example:

<supplied> inserted after <persName>

```
"b<supplied reason="lost" xml:id="e8" next="e9">r </supplied>
<persName type="gender" subtype="m"><supplied reason="lost"
xml:id="e9" prev="e8"> Dr</supplied>ḥm</persName>
```

<persName> inserted after <supplied>

```
"b<supplied reason="lost">r
<persName type="gender" subtype="m" xml:id="e3" next="e4">
Dr</persName></supplied><persName type="gender"
subtype="m" xml:id="e4" prev="e3">ḥm</persName>
```

Even though the EpiDoc guidelines suggest to use the Leiden conventions¹⁴, DASI only partly matches them. In fact, being the Leiden conventions focused on Greek and Latin sources, they are not always suitable to represent the same phenomena in pre-Islamic Arabian texts. For example, they represent the unclear text with a dot under the individual characters; in the transliteration of Semitic texts this would create ambiguity, because the dot is used as a diacritical mark to transcribe some phonemes typical of the Semitic languages (e.g. the dental emphatic phoneme, represented by the South Arabian letter 𐩦, is transcribed with the letter ḍ). Presently this is not a limitation, since the encoding is carried out with XML elements in the digital edition.

¹⁴ General Introduction To The EpiDoc Guidelines. <http://www.stoa.org/epidoc/gl/latest/intro-intro.html>

taxonomies and the tradition of Arabian studies do not allow to totally adhere to existing vocabularies and thesauri, as illustrated below, and have led to the creation of independent vocabularies.

4.2.4.1. Language

The classification of the ancient languages of the Arabian peninsula is one of the still debated topics among scholars of the ancient Near East. Even though general linguistic taxonomies including languages treated in DASI are already available,¹⁶ they do not allow to point out the linguistic peculiarities that the epigraphic sample of DASI shows, depending on the chronological and geographical distribution.

About the Ancient South Arabian¹⁷, the third level of the vocabulary (Tab. 4.1) has been added in order to represent further sub-divisions within the corpora corresponding to the linguistic varieties of the chief languages.¹⁸

In addition to the ASA languages, DASI includes epigraphic materials belonging to the Ancient North Arabian, the Aramaic and the Old Arabic linguistic groups. Similarly to ASA, discrepancies in the distinction between languages and varieties led to implement the independent vocabulary according to the classification of the experts in that linguistic domain.

¹⁶ 2009. Multitree: A digital library of language relationships (<http://multitree.org/>). Ypsilanti, MI: Institute for Language Information and Technology (LINGUIST List), Eastern Michigan University: useful thesaurus providing for each language the ISO 693-3 code, alternative labels, definition, hierarchical relations and bibliography.

¹⁷ Being the authors part of the “Corpus of South Arabian Inscriptions” research group, this paper refers mainly to the ancient South Arabian culture, which developed at the southern edge of Arabia (today’s Yemen) in the late 2nd millennium BC. A monumental and a minuscule alphabets were used to inscribe public and private texts in four different languages (Sabaic, Minaic, Qatabanic, Hadramitic), for a total of around 12,000 inscriptions known to date.

¹⁸ The Minaic inscriptions, for instance, are divided into Central Minaic inscriptions – coming from the motherland of the kingdom of Maʿīn – and the Marginal Minaic inscriptions – found outside southern Arabia. The Marginal Minaic differs from Central Minaic in terms of grammar, lexicon and formulas. The Sabaic documentation has been divided mainly on the chronological basis: the texts until the 4th century BC pertain to Early Sabaic; those testifying for the last two centuries of South Arabian history (4th-6th AD) are Late Sabaic; from the 4th-3rd century BC to the 4th AD, the inscriptions from the Sabaean homeland are considered Central Middle Sabaic, those from the high plateau south of Sana have been grouped as Southern Middle Sabaic and those originating from some areas of the northern regions of Yemen are labelled Northern Middle Sabaic. The peculiar traits of the Ancient South Arabian languages are described in STEIN 2011; see also AVANZINI 2004 for Qatabanic, PRIOLETTA 2013 for Hadramitic, and ROSSI 2014 for Minaic.

Group	Language	Variety
Ancient South Arabian	Hadramitic	
	Minaic	Central Minaic
		Marginal Minaic
		Undefined Minaic
	Qatabanic	Central Qatabanic
		Marginal Qatabanic
		Awsanite
		Undefined Qatabanic
	Sabaic	Early Sabaic
		Central Middle Sabaic
		Southern Middle Sabaic
		Northern Middle Sabaic
		Late Sabaic
		Undefined Sabaic
	Undefined South language	Ancient Arabian

Tab. 4.1. «Language» vocabulary. Selection of items from the vocabulary of DASI showing the addition of the level related to the varieties of the ASA languages.

4.2.4.2. Textual typology

This vocabulary is aimed at organizing inscriptions based on the typology of their texts. The categories it is made by, refer to fixed textual models attested in the inscriptions. These models were defined taking into account the formulary pattern, that is composed of [AVANZINI 2008, pp. 152-153; STEIN 2010b, pp. 264-269]:

- constituent parts: lexicon items (in particular the main verb) and morpho-syntactic features;
- their linear lay-out.

As in the previous vocabulary, the comparison with the existing ones¹⁹ has pointed out that some of the entries have exact matches, others are just related to some terms²⁰, and the remaining ones have no match at all (Tab. 4.2), since the textual typologies reflect the particular use that every civilization makes of writing.²¹

DASI entry	Definition	Match
Construction text	<i>text posted on public or private structures, reminding who constructed or restored them (eventually in order to indicate their possession); the text typically includes verbs meaning “build”, “found” (bny, hḥdt)</i>	Bauinschrift
Dedicatory text	<i>dedication of an object or a person to the divinity for different purposes, the text including the verb “dedicate” (ḥqny, sʕlʕ)</i>	RT Weihinschrift
Writing exercise	<i>text related to scribal practice (copies of sample texts, lists of grammatical forms, etc.)</i>	
Ritual text	<i>text reminding religious rituals</i>	

Tab. 4.2. «Textual typology» vocabulary. The selected terms exemplify the results of the comparison between the DASI vocabulary and existing vocabularies used in the epigraphic domain synthesized by EAGLE – Type of Inscription.

4.2.4.3. Support type

The list of controlled terms referring to the physical supports of inscriptions includes a sort of classification of the ancient Arabian material

¹⁹ EAGLE Vocabulary – Type of inscription. <http://www.eagle-network.eu/voc/typeins/>

²⁰ This kind of relation occurs, for instance, when the preferred label and the scope note of a term explicitly refer to the Greek and Roman specimen, as expected, due to the domain of the network.

²¹ The minuscule inscriptions on wooden sticks offer a unique insight of the private uses of writing in ancient South Arabia. The rich typology of those texts deduced by STEIN 2010a is a clear example of the complex classification of pre-Islamic Arabian inscriptions based on content.

culture. It has been created on the basis of the repertoires focused on individual classes of artefacts and the early attempts at systematizing the history of pre-Islamic Arabian art.²² Thus, as knowledge of the latter advances, the vocabulary is still in progress.

²² See, as examples, the works by ANTONINI 2001, 'ALĪ 'AQĪL et al. 2007, ANTONINI DE MAIGRET 2012, respectively about the stone statues, the bronze artefacts and the history of art in general, and the catalogues of the exhibition on the ancient Yemen, traveling in Europe between 1997 and 2002 (see e.g. SIMPSON 2002).

DASI Term	Sub-term	Definition	Match
Incense burner	circular	objects used to burn aromatic substances, with circular shape	AAT: incense burner [ID: 300198817]
	squared	the censer has a squared shape, sometimes placed on four angular legs	
	with truncated pyramidal base	characterized by a censer placed on a base of truncated pyramidal shape	
	with splayed foot	short cylindrical censer on a splayed foot	
Stela	aniconic stela	typical of the Qatabanian area, they are constituted by an inscribed base supporting an upper and plain slab. The top can be either convex or concave	AAT: stelae [ID: 300007023] EAGLE: Stele (http://www.eagle-network.eu/voc/objtyp/lod/250)
	with eyes or stylized face	particular and homogeneous group from the Jawf area and few samples from Qatabani, representing eyes or a schematic facial outline	
	with figure in relief	isolated human or animal figures, usually realized in high relief	
	with narrative scene	decorated by narrative scenes, usually composed by multiple elements depicted in low relief	
– continued on next page			

Table 4.3 – continued from previous page

DASI Term	Sub-term	Definition	Match
	<i>with framework</i>	<i>refined by a decorated framework in low-relief with abstract-figurative elements or with geometric motifs, associated in various and different combinations</i>	

Tab. 4.3. «Support type» vocabulary. Sample from the vocabulary illustrating the degree of correspondence between the list of terms of DASI and the EAGLE – Object Type vocabulary, focused on supports of inscriptions, and the Getty AAT, which is instead a general thesaurus for artistic objects.

Presently, it results to be compatible with the Getty – AAT and the EAGLE – Object Type vocabulary²³ for artefacts whose identification is strictly related to the inscriptions they carry. However DASI includes further terms intended to represent the peculiarities of the ASA art.²⁴

4.2.4.4. Decoration

In spite of its title, the “Decoration” vocabulary does not include the decorative motifs surrounding the inscriptions only. Due to the importance and complexity of the representations, resembling sometimes proper figurative scenes, the vocabulary has been implemented so as to enable the description also of figurative subjects and iconographies.

The standard classification systems already available,²⁵ being focused on the western visual culture, presently does not consider some of the figurative subjects distinguishing the ASA artefacts. Among them, the symbols are commonly found in ancient Near East context as well: used to express a concept in a synthetic and striking way, they could be part of the decoration but are closely linked to the inscription too. Their description is of great importance, since their study and interpretation is still at the beginning.²⁶

²³ The Getty Research Institute – Art & Architecture Thesaurus Online (<http://www.getty.edu/research/tools/vocabularies/aat/>); EAGLE Vocabulary – Object Type <http://www.eagle-network.eu/voc/objtyp>

²⁴ For instance the term “stela” has been split into five entries referring to as many types of stela: the “aniconic stela”, the stela “with eyes or stylized face”, “with figure in relief”, “with narrative scene” and “with framework”, whose different physical characteristics correspond to different dating, zones of provenance/creation and functions.

²⁵ IconClass (<http://www.iconclass.nl/>) is the most suitable among the standard classification systems for subjects in visual works: through hierarchical paths and queues of keys it allows to identify single elements and the context and the significance of scenes.

²⁶ As an example, the so-called “Totschläger”, a sort of curved stick, is attested in contexts related to the main Sabaeen god Almaqah; the simultaneous analysis of its representations, the text and the figurative subjects could light up the nature of this relation. See: GROHMANN 1914 and GAJDA 2012 for issues about ASA symbols; BLACK et al. 1992 for an overview of the ancient Near East figurative subject and the above mentioned ANTONINI DE MAIGRET 2012 dedicated to ASA art.

DASI Entry	Iconclass notation	EAGLE term
Recumbent antelope	25F24(ANTELOPE)(+534) <i>hoofed animals: antelope</i> <i>(+ squatting, crouching animal)</i>	
Head of antelope	25F24(ANTELOPE)(+33) <i>hoofed animals: antelope (+ head of an animal)</i>	
Human gesture – hand raised	31A2511 <i>arm raised upward</i>	
Crescent moon and disc		
Totschläger		
Guilloche	48A98131(+1) <i>ornament ~ circle and derived from circle, e.g.: guilloche (+ surface pattern ~ ornaments)</i>	Guillochis

Tab. 4.4. «Decoration» vocabulary. Examples of: figurative subjects corresponding to Iconclass notations, decoration fitting with terms from the EAGLE – Decoration vocabulary and DASI entries with no concordance.

4.3. Publishing digitized inscriptions

4.3.1. Content browsing

The front end of DASI²⁷ publishes data distinguished into objects, epigraphs and sites, by different levels. The level determines the amount of material that can be accessed via indexes and tools.

The top level, including all the materials archived and published, allows content browsing through a Google map in the homepage. Here are positioned the sites from which users can consult the related records.


The “Project” sub-levels, corresponding to the major linguistic groups (e.g. Ancient South Arabian, Ancient North Arabian), consists in turn of “Corpora” and “Collections”, that include materials homogeneous for language and deposit respectively. Both provide some textual tools, the indexes of inscriptions, objects and sites, in addition to the above mentioned map, and a list of bibliographic references. Each index gives access to data by an alphabetic list of items that can be

²⁷ DASI – Digital Archive for the Study of pre-Islamic Arabian Inscriptions. <http://dasi.humnet.unipi.it/>

screened through a set of filters on metadata. The filters are almost the same as those used to refine the textual search results (see below 4.3).

Data describing each item – be it an inscription, an object or a site – are then displayed in a specific card. Each type of card collects not only the information concerning the pertaining entity, but also pieces of information relating to the related entities which are considered fundamental to complete its description.

CIAS 47.11/o 1/F 72 Q 269; Ja 122; CSAI I, 125



INSRIPTION INFORMATION

Language	Ancient South Arabian » Qatabanic » Central Qatabanic	
Alphabet	Ancient South Arabian	
Script typology	Monumental writing	
Writing technique	Incision	
Measure of letters	2.5	
Chronology	Period	C
Textual typology	Dedicatory text	

TEXT

marker

1

Br't d't byt Rtd'I bn S²hz s¹q—

2

nyt d't Hmym 'itr Ygi slmt d—

3

hbn hg-n tkrbt-s¹ l-wfy-s¹ w-wf—

4

y 'dn-s¹ w-mqm-s¹ w-qny-s¹ qzrt

5

'm d-Rbh w rs²wt 'm d-D←ymt

6

b→Wrw'I Gyln Yhn'm |

Fig. 4.3. Upper part of an epigraph card in DASI front end site. Sigla, image, metadata and transcription of an inscription. Further details are given below the text: translation, information on the support and its provenance, bibliography.

For example, an epigraph card includes the text of the inscription, its translation(s) and other data concerning the text (Fig. 4.3), and also the basic information on its support and on its origin/provenance context, provided with the links to the related “object” and “site” cards. This representation of the content contributes to highlight the autonomy of the various entities and allows a rapid consultation while providing complete information.

4.3.2. Textual tools

The major effort in the publication of the catalogued material has been made to provide tools for the study of the epigraphic text. Indeed the reconstruction of lexicon and grammar of the languages of the Arabian peninsula is one of the most urgent needs for a full comprehension of the inscriptions and, consequently, of the culture and history of these civilizations.

The *textual search* is one of the most sophisticated functions of the DASI system, which is a powerful mean for the scientific study of the inscriptions. The system allows to search for strings of characters and display results as:

1. text portions
2. distinct words.

For instance, entering the pattern “*t *ml*”²⁸, the system retrieves all the texts consisting of two words, the first one ending with “t” and the second one containing “ml”. The results:

²⁸ The wildcard * allows to search for: complete words or words with a given string of characters in any position (beginning, end, inside). The search finds also words beginning, ending or containing lacunae.

- in the case 1., are displayed as the text portions “bnt yqhmlk”, “bynht ³mlk”, “gdr̄t mlk”, etc.
- in the case 2., are grouped by the words “³mlk”, “bnt”, “bynht”, “gdr̄t”, “mlk”, “yqhmlk”, etc.

The examples above show that the system assumes the boolean operator AND between adjacent strings of characters. The filter *Word range* sets the maximum number of words that can intervene between the first and the last words to be searched for. The system retrieves effective results if the value of the range is $r \geq n-1$, where n is the number of strings typed in the research box. For example, if one searches for the three strings “b* *tm *m*”:

- with $r=2$, the system retrieves the following contexts: “S²c̄rm **b-dtm n^cmt̄ w-b**”, “s²ft-s¹ **b-dtm s¹³mnt̄ ³tr̄t**”, etc.
- with $r=3$, the system retrieves the following contexts: “w-mq̄tr̄nhn **ḡ-b ³tw̄tm w-ms¹l̄mn ḡ-dhbn ḡ-b**”; “S²c̄rm **b-dtm n^cmt̄ w-b**”; “s²ft-s¹ **b-dtm s¹³mnt̄ ³tr̄t**”, “c³b-s¹ **b-dtm s¹wfy Hwkm ^cmd̄kr**”, etc.

The textual search is performed by the Berkeley DB XML on the texts al-ready tokenized. This process segments the text on the basis of rules that con-sider a space, a divider symbol (<g type=“wordSeparator”/>) or a clitic com-ponent (<milestone unit=“clitic”/>) as the elements distinguishing one word from another: if one searches for the strings “f ³tw̄w”, the system will retrieve all three of the forms “f ³tw̄w”, “f | ³tw̄w”, “f-³tw̄w”.

The system is also able to search for textual variants. DASI uses both in-line and external apparatus methods to encode variants. The latter is preferred when the editor chooses one reading or onomastic interpretation only: the variants are recorded in separate notes and cannot be searched. On the contrary, variants are coded in the text of the inscriptions when, from a point of view of the reading or of the interpretation of the text, they have the same probability of being true. Therefore a textual search can be performed on them. For example, in a context $w_1 w_2 ((w_{2.1})) ((w_{2.2})) w_3$, the system can retrieve $w_1 w_2 w_3$ but also $w_1 w_{2.1} w_3$ and $w_1 w_{2.2} w_3$. This output is obtained by adding specific attributes to words while indexing, which are:

- the number of the word (w_2 , $w_{2.1}$, $w_{2.2}$ have $n=2$)
- the level (L0: w_2 ; L1: $w_{2.1}$; L2: $w_{2.2}$; all the other words are on the L0)
- the id of the group of variants, as there might be more than one in a text (w_2 , $w_{2.1}$, $w_{2.2}$ have $id=1$).

The example shows the principles followed:

- each variant of a specific group adds a level to the text: in the example there are 3 levels,
- the search combines the variants of all the levels with the level 0 of the other words.

The system manages a series of filters to refine the search on the texts of the inscriptions (onomastic categories, textual portions) and on the metadata (language, textual typology, support, decoration, site, etc.).

The search function generates a list of results presented in a concise and legible manner. It shows their distribution among languages and their onomastic category (if any) at a glance, allows to view the contexts in which they appear and then to access the inscriptions, where the text searched for is highlighted in bold.

In addition to the dynamic textual search tool, DASI provides lists of words in alphabetical order, which can be generated according to the level of corpora at which the lists are accessed (e.g. the whole ASA corpus, or the Qatabanic corpus, or one of its sub-varieties, etc.; Fig. 4.4). There are two different *lists of words*: one includes the words beginning with a letter, which can be complete or contain a lacuna inside or at the end of the word; the other one lists the words beginning with a lacuna and therefore lacking the first letter that would assign them to an index letter in alphabetic order. Both lists are created though a textual search following the same principles of tokenization showed above, but with no string searched for. Each of these lists can be refined to give only the lexical or the onomastic results, as a whole or by a specific onomastic category.

TOOLS

Q Textual search

Word lists

Map

INDEXES

Corpora map

Collections map

Epigraphs

Objects

Sites

Bibliography

Help

Editorial Criteria

Word list occurrences

10 total occurrences for word **m'ḥg**

activate image preview

language	epigraph	context
Early Sabaic	MAFRAY-Husn Āi Sālih 1	» 3Y gb b-fdldm b-m'ḥg N m ⁴ (n) l-m'ḥg smn «
Early Sabaic	MAFRAY-Husn Āi Sālih 1	» b-m'ḥg N m ⁴ (n) l-m'ḥg smn g-Wdm w- «
Early Sabaic	MAFRAY-Husn Āi Sālih 1	» s ² 2mwy yd' bn m'ḥg N m ⁴ d ¹⁰ S ² wn s ² - «
Early Sabaic	MAFRAY-Husn Āi Sālih 1	» s ² -hw yd' n bn m'ḥg s ¹¹ mn' d-g Ws ² bm «
Early Sabaic	MSM 3611	» w-hwdr w-hqb m'ḥg ² hmy Byhn l-ms'qt «
Early Sabaic	RES 3902 bis N° 131	» Lzn ² bny jw-kl m'ḥg-hw Yfd g-3ys'qyn «
Central Middle Sabaic	Ghul Hūl 2	» w-hwr ² n w-syhn m'ḥg-hmw Dhbm ms'qt s ² - «
Central Middle Sabaic	Ir 7	» S ² htj k-y twm dy m'ḥg-hmw g-Yfd s'qym «
Central Middle Sabaic	RES 3911	» s ² qr 2[...]s ² w-mqh m'ḥg-hmw Dbyn w-hry «
Central Middle Sabaic	Ry 404	» (g)- M (g)nm w-rjdw m'ḥg ² hmy w-brt-hw «

Fig. 4.4. Example of occurrences of a word retrieved through the word list in DASI front end site. The occurrences of the word *mr*² in the Qatabanic corpus are listed, with the sub-corpora they belong to, the sigla of the inscriptions and the occurrence's context in the inscription.

4.4. Future developments

Since the enhancement of knowledge of the ancient Arabian civilization is one of the main objectives of DASI, the future efforts of the project are directed toward the interoperability of records and the harmonization of controlled vocabularies.

On the first side, DASI has committed to make available its data in different export formats. Surely records will be entirely distributed according to the EpiDoc standard that is the one presently assuring the valorization of texts and allowing the digital edition of inscriptions.

As regards the vocabularies, DASI will refer to external terminologies, as recommended by the EpiDoc guidelines themselves, as far as possible. To some extent it will try to interact with other projects and contribute concepts not included in already existing vocabularies.

Finally, the creation of digital *lexica* of the ASA languages is already scheduled. In fact, this is one of most urgent needs for the studies on Ancient Arabian epigraphy, as the amount of linguistic material has increased exponentially in the last years, calling for updating of established dictionaries. The lexicon will consist of a list of roots; each root will be entered into the system and provided with its definition. The words deriving from it and attested in the inscriptions will then be

linked to the pertaining root and analyzed in grammar, with the aid of the context of its occurrences provided by the word list.

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