

Creating digital collections of the ancient epigraphic heritage in Bulgaria through collaboration

Iliev, Dimitar

diiliev@uni-sofia.bg

St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia, Bulgaria

Sharankov, Nicolay

n.sharankov@uni-sofia.bg

St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia, Bulgaria

Ancient epigraphic heritage and its corpora in Bulgaria

The lands of today's Bulgaria have a rich and diverse epigraphic heritage from the period of Antiquity. The ancient Greek inscriptions date from a time span of approximately 12 centuries, from 6th c. BCE to 6th c. CE. More than 5,000 in number, the largest part of them is published in two big corpora (Mihailov 1956-1995, Beševliev 1964). Many monuments, however, are either left outside the big collections, often scattered in inaccessible publications, or need serious revisions even when they are known and quoted. In the recent years, some publications appeared aiming at correcting and updating some of Mihailov's reading in *IGBulg*, but they also need further expansion (Sharankov 2016). The current state of the study of Latin inscriptions from Bulgaria is even more complicated: there does not exist any comprehensive publication meeting modern scholarly standards. The number of the Latin inscriptions is comparable to that of the Greek inscriptions, although they belong to a much shorter period, from the beginning of the 1st to the end of the 6th c. CE. Only a small fraction of them was published in what was intended as the first part of a large corpus which never materialized (Gerov 1989). Some inscriptions are included only in rather old editions with multiple errors and incomplete data, while many others still remain dispersed, obscure, or unknown to the scholarly public.

The Telamon collection and the AJAX platform

Inspired by the achievements of the EpiDoc initiative and its guidelines for encoding ancient documents in TEI XML which have become the *de facto* standard in the field (Tom Elliott / Bordard, Gabriel et al.: 2007-2022), a team of researchers at the Department of Classics to the University of Sofia, Bulgaria, initiated the creation of the *Telamon* online collection of the Greek inscriptions from Bulgaria. In *Telamon*, inscriptions from the large corpora and other publications are gathered for the first time in one place, provided, also for the first time, with metadata, translations, and commentaries in English and Bulgarian, and also inspected by close personal observation (*ex autopsia*) and re-interpreted in the light of new data, if needed. For this purpose, the close collaboration in the team between an epigrapher, a webmaster, assistants and coordinators, created a customized EpiDoc XML template for the encoding of the inscriptions, as well as our own AJAX front-end platform for the storage, indexing, visualization, and filtering of the collection of .xml files. AJAX is partly based on the functionalities of the Epi-Doc front-end service (<https://github.com/Epi-Doc/EFES>), but the underlying architecture differs from it. The XML code is stored in an SQL database and then processed with

PHP, thus making AJAX more manageable by a webmaster with the skills needed for the maintenance of a generic website. The platform is light and flexible, allowing for embedded maps of geo-referenced inscriptions and other improvements. It is open-source and freely available for download on the project's web page both as a server and as a desktop application: <https://telamon.uni-sofia.bg/en/page/project>. Since the launch of the website, we have been actively seeking the support of various regional historical and archaeological museums to promote digital epigraphy among the museum specialists as well as to retrieve important new data for the inscriptions in our collection. So far, collaborations with several museums have been established, thus providing the wider scholarly audience using *Telamon* with updated information for many inscriptions previously studied only through publications which sometimes appeared decades ago.

The Tituli collection

The most fruitful among these collaborations is the one established with the National Archaeological Institute with Museum (NAIM) in Sofia which keeps the largest collection of ancient inscriptions from Bulgaria. A group of researchers at NAIM together with a part of the *Telamon* team is currently working on customizations of the *Telamon* template and the AJAX platform and is preparing a pilot database of encoded Latin inscriptions. Building upon what is already achieved by *Telamon*, the *Tituli* project pays special attention to rarer types of monuments peculiar to Latin epigraphy, to the encoding and indexing for features of iconography and decoration that have generally been overlooked, as well as to developing accurate encoding and indexing of the complex titulatures of Roman emperors (a problem so far largely unsolved worldwide). For the initial part of the *Tituli* project, the team has selected monuments which reflect the diversity of Latin inscriptions from Bulgaria. Preference is given to inscriptions from the huge collection of NAIM, as well as to monuments kept in several regional museums in Northern Bulgaria. Careful study and detailed documentation is made of all relevant inscriptions in order to clarify their data and authenticate or revise any existing readings in the publications.

Encoding, vocabularies, authorities

The template according to which the single inscriptions in both collections are encoded, then visualised, and indexed is Epi-Dox compatible and valid against the latest versions of the EpiDoc schema. However, it is customized according to the peculiarities of the local source material and the audiences targeted by both web sites. One of its prominent features is the doubling of all the elements in the metadata potentially containing text. This ensures the bilingual content of the output via the attribute *@xml:lang*. The same reduplication of elements occurs within the body of the text in the parts dedicated to translation and commentary. The metadata concerning the material of the monument, the object types and the document types are linked to authority lists containing different categories, which, in turn, are adapted from the EAGLE Europeana vocabularies (<https://www.eagle-network.eu/resources/vocabularies/>). The place name, ancient or modern, are as well linked to the respective gazetteers, Pleiades (<http://pleiades.stoa.org>) and Geonames (<https://www.geonames.org/>). The exact locations of the monuments is displayed on maps embedded in the web sites.

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