

Altinum. A Wikidata project for Latin epigraphy and prosopography

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In short

Altinum is the first Latin epigraphy project hosted on **Wikidata**, the open and collaborative database supported by the Wikimedia Foundation. Launched in 2024, it marks a new initiative in digital epigraphy, bringing together inscriptions from Altinum, a Roman municipality in eastern Veneto. More than just a catalogue of inscriptions, *Altinum* represents the first digital prosopographical corpus of the municipality, integrating data from EDR, EDCS, analogue catalogues, and unpublished theses. The scholarly goal of *Altinum* is to demonstrate the operability of an **interdisciplinary, multilingual, and dynamically editable** database. By incorporating this information into Wikidata, users can query, visualize, and analyse the data generating **graphs, maps, statistics, and family trees**. Through **customizable queries**, scholars can uncover new connections and insights, demonstrating the power of Wikidata as a tool for historical research.

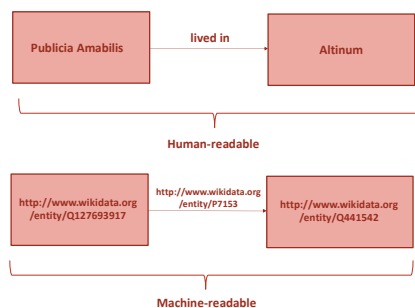
Why Wikidata?

Traditional databases offer predefined queries and limited **language support**, whereas Wikidata provides a dynamic, multilingual, and **customizable platform**. It fosters collaboration, allowing researchers to create, add, delete, correct, extract and analyze data in an **open-access ecosystem**. Given the increasing interdisciplinarity of humanities research, we need tools capable of integrating vast datasets across multiple domains. Existing Latin epigraphic databases—such as EDR, EDH, RIB, and EDCS—are often fragmented and focus on specific aspects (Lorito 2018; Orlandi 2021; Tupman 2021). Wikidata, by contrast, links essential metadata—place, date, type, text, and references—to controlled vocabularies and authoritative sources, enhancing accessibility and interoperability (Zhao 2023).

Altinum joins a growing network of digital epigraphy initiatives, including the Wikibase instances **EAGLE** and **Greek Metrical Inscriptions** (Ortimini, 2024) and the Wikidata project **IDEA** (Thornton, Seals Nutt & Chen 2024), all of which leverage Wikidata's capabilities to manage and query epigraphic data.

LOD at the core

Digital epigraphy and the Digital Humanities thrive on interoperability, particularly through Linked Open Data (Hyvönen 2020). RDF (Resource Description Framework) is the backbone of LOD, structuring data as interconnected triples. This technology underpins projects like Linguistic Linked Open Data, Pelagios, and GeoNames. Wikidata adopts the RDF model, enabling data to be linked, queried, and exported in multiple formats.



The architecture of Wikidata

RDF is a way to structure data in machine-readable triples building what in Wikidata is called statement: subject (item), predicate (property), and object (value). For example, the statement "**Publicia Amabilis lived in Altinum**" would be represented as:

Example of a query

- **Subject:** Publicia Amabilis (Q127693917)
- **Predicate:** lived in (P7153 'significant place')
- **Object:** Altinum (Q441542)

Entities are uniquely identified by Q-IDs (e.g., Q441542 for Altinum), while properties (P-IDs) define relationships between them (e.g., P7153 for 'significant place'). Queries are executed using **SPARQL**, a language for retrieving data sets from Wikidata's structured repository.

Let us query details about Publicia Amabilis as an example. Suppose we want to find the place where Publicia lived:

```
SELECT ?place ?placeLabel WHERE {
  wd:Q127693917 wdt:P7153 ?place.
  SERVICE wikibase:label
  { bd:serviceParam wikibase:language "en". }
}
```



Breaking it down:

wd:Q127693917 (subject prefix:machine-readable ID) → Publicia Amabilis (human-readable).

wdt:P20 (predicate prefix:machine-readable ID) → "significant place".

?place → object (as a variable) of the statement.

SERVICE wikibase:label { bd:serviceParam wikibase:language "en". } → Ensures results are displayed in English (or the preferred language).

Expected result:

Altinum

Behind the scenes of Altinum

Integrating epigraphic and prosopographical data into Wikidata required a meticulous, multi-step approach:

1. Data extraction & formatting: information from EDR, EDCS, and unpublished sources (Pivetta 1997/8) was compiled into structured CSV files.

2. Mapping & ontology alignment: each data point was linked to an existing Wikidata property. Where necessary, new properties were proposed, such as 'writing technique' (P12876). Controlled vocabularies from projects like EAGLE were employed to ensure consistency.

3. Challenges:

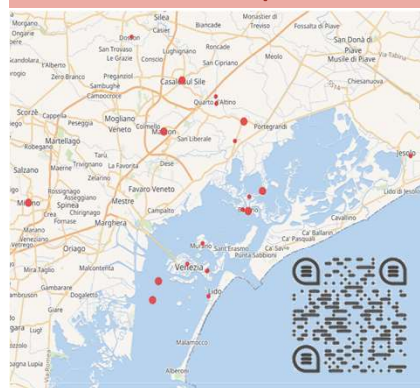
3.1 Ontology: the EAGLE project provided a landmark, but its application in Wikidata required adaptations to meet academic and non-academic requirements: although extensive and epigraphically quite satisfactory, it does not always seem to correspond the unambiguous understanding of its terms by the wider community (especially those not versed in epigraphy) nor does it follow either the ISO standard for multilingual thesauri or the IFLA guidelines.

3.2 Chronology: since Wikidata requires that given a time interval an intermediate date be specified, the qualifiers 'earliest date' (P1319) and 'latest date' (P1326) have been used, but this solution is not always epigraphically acceptable, nor is it easily searchable given the complexity of the coding.

4. Batch upload: data were imported using QuickStatements, a tool for bulk editing, but Open Refine software also performs the same function. More expert users can take things to the next level by programming bots in Python using the Pywikibot library.

For **prosopographical data**, Barbara Pivetta's thesis (Pivetta 1997/8) provided a key reference, allowing the cross-referencing of names, social status, and familial relationships. Individuals were assigned unique Wikidata entries enriched with biographical details (see *Data on Zenodo* Qrcode). The results? **Over 30,000 edits, including 644 inscriptions, 665 individuals, and 218 gentes**, enabling complex SPARQL queries, network visualizations, and dynamic prosopographical reconstructions.

Map of the sites of discovery of Altinum inscriptions



Conclusions

The *Altinum* project is part of a broader effort to enhance digital epigraphy through open, interoperable data. In collaboration with projects like **IDEA** (International Digital Dura-Europos Archive) and **GMI** (Greek Metrical Inscriptions), it aims to establish a unified **Epigraphy Project** that adheres to **FAIR** Epigraphy principles—ensuring that epigraphic data are **Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable**. This initiative seeks to standardize data models (Cenati, Bodard et al. 2021), align controlled vocabularies, and integrate structured datasets within Wikidata and other platforms, fostering collaboration across different epigraphic corpora. By connecting **diverse digital epigraphy initiatives**, the project aspires to create a **shared, multilingual, and dynamically queryable research environment**, promoting long-term sustainability and accessibility in the field.

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Data on Zenodo



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