

Disentangling the Intertwinement of Digitalisation and Decolonisation

27-28 November 2025

Organized by
Eleanor Q. Neil and Rubina Raja
(Aarhus University)

The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters, Copenhagen





Yale University Art Gallery archives. Image © Rubina Raja.

Front cover

Original image courtesy of Yale University Art Gallery, digitized by Professor Rubina Raja and team.

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Outline

Archaeology's relationship with its colonial past is well-documented and much discussed, but what still requires unpicking is the intersection of colonial archaeological projects, especially those of the 19th and 20th centuries, and their contemporary digital footprint. This conference will explore how the historiography of archaeology and contemporary archaeological practice are now being mediated through digital media. We invite contributions that extend beyond mere digitisation and online publication and engage deeply with the ways in which digital materials influence examinations of historiography, archaeology, and the attendant ethical considerations.

By bringing together two strands of research—namely the nature of digitality in archaeology and the transformation of archaeological research through decolonial practice—and applying them to questions of preservation, historiography, and larger questions of narrative production within archaeology, this conference aims to problematise how academia approaches archaeological research in the digital age.

Essential to how archaeologists interpret the past is their relationship with material and materiality. In what ways does digitisation change that relationship, what relationship does the digital object have with the original, and how does that in turn impact the narratives we create? These knotty questions will be explored through sensitive and in-depth engagement with the nature of archaeological practice, as well as with the nature of the objects themselves. Furthermore, we invite contributors to examine the ways archaeology has been impacted by (and has contributed to) digital colonialism (i.e., the aggregation of digital resources and data which excludes, or is at the expense of marginalised communities). Together, these two approaches to digital archaeological research will generate nuanced and critical discussions that will advance both the material and ethical dimensions of archaeological practice.

This conference will include contributions that move beyond the mechanics of digitisation and specifically seek to explore how digitised material shapes research, interpretation, and knowledge production, and the ways in which we can move the discipline towards a decolonial practice. While contributions will primarily stem from research that concerns the Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean, the focus is upon the potential (or lack thereof) of digital material and digitised archival material in decolonising archaeological research.

Programme: Thursday 27 November

8:30–9:00 Coffee and tea (3rd floor)

9:00–9:30 *Introduction: Archaeology, Archives and the Digital Turn*
Eleanor Q. Neil & Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)**Chair: Jen A. Baird (Birkbeck College, University of London)**9:30–10:20 *Big Digs and Coloniality of Knowledge in the Digital Landscape*
Anne Hunnel Chen (Bard College)10:20–11:10 *Digital Dataset as an Archive*
Isto Huvila (Uppsala University)11:10–12:00 *Disentangling Gerasa's Excavation History through Datafication*
Laura P. Gotfredsen, Eleanor Q. Neil & Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)

12:00–13:00 Lunch for speakers (3rd floor)

Chair: Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)13:00–13:50 *Digitising Gaza's Maritime Past*
Georgia Andreou (University of Southampton)13:50–14:40 *Power Beneath the Page: Classical Mapping and Colonial Legacies*
Stuart Dunn (King's College London)

14:40–15:15 Coffee (3rd floor)

15:15–17:45 **Visit to Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek**18:00 **Speakers' Dinner** (Delphine, Vesterbrogade 40)

Programme: Friday 28 November

8:30–9:00 Coffee and tea (3rd floor)

Chair: Anne Hunnel Chen (Bard College)9:00–9:50 *Collection, Collation, and Curation: A Critical Reflection on the Digitisation Impulse*
Eleanor Q. Neil & Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)9:50–10:40 *Ghosts in Machines: The Afterlives of Archaeological Archives and the Ethics of Care*
Jen A. Baird (Birkbeck College, University of London)10:40–11:30 *Digital Archives of Immoveable Heritage in the 21st Century: Curation, Collections, and Communities*
Ine Jacobs (Oxford University) & Tim Penn (University of Reading)

11:30–12:30 Lunch for speakers (3rd floor)

Chair: Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)12:30–13:20 *Objectifying the Archaeological Archive*
Chloë Ward (Ludwig-Maximilian University)13:20–14:10 *Sharing Primary Sources on Auguste Mariette and the Birth of the Egyptian Antiquities Service*
Thomas Lebée (Musée du Louvre)

14:10–14:40 Coffee (3rd floor)

Chair: Eleanor Q. Neil (Aarhus University)14:40–15:30 *From Field Data to Data Field: Documenting Archaeology in the British Museum's Collection Database*
Vicky Donnellan (British Museum) &
Danlei Zhou (University of Reading)15:30–16:20 *Colonial Legacies and Cypriot Antiquities in the Digital Age: A Critical Exploration*
Polina Nikolaou (University of the Aegean)**Chair: Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)**

16:20–17:10 Closing discussion

17:10–18:15 **Reception at the Academy**

Big Digs and Coloniality of Knowledge in the Digital Landscape

Anne Hunnel Chen
Bard College

This paper examines the issue of coloniality of knowledge as it intersects with digital colonialism in the information landscape descendant of early foreign-run excavations in the Middle East. Adapted from the work of Latin American intellectual Aníbal Quijano, the theoretical concept of ‘coloniality of knowledge’ gives name to the (sometimes subtle) ways that dominant societies maintain their power in relation to subjected populations by silencing or delegitimizing alternative forms of knowledge.¹ Within the digital realm, the vehicle for continuing such delegitimization or silencing is often metadata shaped by a limited (disciplinary, cultural, institutional) perspective. Metadata asserted in connection with digital surrogates for collection objects ultimately drives their searchability, prescribing precisely which keywords and versions of placenames will surface collection items. It also, perhaps unwittingly, authoritatively asserts into a digital footprint what is worth knowing in connection with colonially entangled places.

Current global inequities in access to modern information and communication technologies, such as computers and high-speed internet, together with the pervasiveness and persistence of dynamics related to coloniality of knowledge, have resulted in an online information landscape tied to Big Dig excavations that disproportionately reflects the perspectives and serves the needs of users in the Global North. The paper will use the case-study of Dura-Europos to highlight common microcolonialisms in collection metadata, and draw attention to gaps and biases in shared technical infrastructure aimed at promoting interoperability and discoverability across the digital realm, teasing out how these aspects contribute to shaping who has access to and benefits from the physical and intellectual products descendent of the massive earth-moving endeavors of more than a century ago, and whose perspectives define what is worth knowing in relation to such places. Drawing on the recent work of the International [Digital] Dura-Europos Archive and the Lives in Ruins outreach initiative, it will close with reflections on concrete steps we can take now to begin changing this dynamic.

Digital Dataset as an Archive

Isto Huvila
Uppsala University

The impact of the digitalisation of archaeological field practices has been debated heavily since the 1990s. On a positive note it has been praised of the opportunities of increasing the efficiency, level of detail and extent of documentation. On the downside, the digitalisation of archaeological information work has been criticised of a fixation on data hoarding and of demoting interpretation and knowledge-making. While there is clear evidence of the change in data and information artefacts produced during archaeological fieldwork, there is so far relatively little research on the specifics of the change and its implications to the information record of archaeological practices. The aspirations to be able to reproduce inherently irreproducible, destructive archaeological fieldwork through information record are surely inflated but a question remains of how and to what extent the digital record of archaeological practice qualifies as its archive, both in metaphorical and judicial senses.

This talk discusses the extents and means of how digital archaeological datasets form an archive of (digital) archaeological practice documenting both archaeological observations (data) and the practices (paradata). The discussion builds on extensive research on the documentation practices of archaeological data making, processing and use, and more specifically draws from an analysis of digital field documentation datasets. The analysis shows how digital datasets provide both a highly detailed and multifaceted record of field practice but at the same time, as David Weinberger noted (in a positive sense) of digital information in 2007, contributing to that “everything is miscellaneous”, or risks to become that.

Disentangling Gerasa's Excavation History through Datafication

Laura P. Gottfredsen
Aarhus University

Eleanor Neil
Aarhus University

Rubina Raja
Aarhus University

This presentation takes its point of departure in the legacy data related to the American-British excavations in the Decapolis city, Gerasa in the 1920s and 1930s. A large part of the documentation related for these large-scale excavations are kept at Yale University Art Gallery in physical form with only parts of the material digitized and made available online. This presentation focusses on some of the results of the on-going "The Aarhus-Yale Digital Archive Platform for the Danish Inter-World War Archaeological Engagement in the Middle East" and the considerations of the project as it moves towards an array of publication outlets – including in a digital shape – for this legacy data. Questions which must be grappled with include: What new lines of enquiry arise from preparing the documentation for digital publication? Who will the documentation be accessible for and what scholarly value will it hold? What can we learn and apply in future initiatives which deal with excavation legacy data and the datafication of it?

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Digitising Gaza's Maritime Past

Georgia Andreou
University of Southampton

Archaeological practice in Gaza has long been shaped by systemic limitations—political, financial, and infrastructural—that impact both the physical preservation of heritage and the intellectual labour of local heritage professionals. Yet, too often, and particularly in the past 2 years, Gaza's archaeology is presented as a victim of "historical circumstances," sidelined within broader narratives of digital preservation.

This paper examines how digital tools can both reproduce and resist those narratives. Drawing on a baseline survey of maritime archaeological sites conducted before the current war, it presents findings from GAZAMAP (2021–2023), a University of Southampton project that developed low-cost, open-access workflows for monitoring deteriorating maritime heritage sites in Gaza. Using participatory GIS tools and open-access mobile apps, GAZAMAP worked with local partners to document sites and promote community-based engagement with heritage.

GAZAMAP also engaged with the ethical and epistemological implications of creating digital records under conditions of occupation and active conflict with emphasis on: (1) how such records function within global digital infrastructures shaped by colonial legacies and (2) what narratives they reinforce or disrupt.

Reflecting on the politics of digital heritage data production, this paper examines how Gaza offers both a methodological model and a challenge to prevailing modes of archaeological knowledge production in the Middle East. It argues for a more critical approach to digital archaeological approaches, shaped by those who have long been excluded from its tools, platforms, and narratives.

Power Beneath the Page: Classical Mapping and Colonial Legacies

Stuart Dunn
King's College London

Maps have always been sites and vehicles of political and cultural narrative, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly. Explicit carto-narratives furthering political agendas gained particular currency in the twentieth century, when a series of aggressive propaganda conflicts coincided with mass print media with good graphical capabilities. Most carto-narratives however are implicit, conveying and encoding the assumptions, biases and cultural viewpoints of the mapmaker, without adopting an overtly biased or political view. Starting with W. Smith and G. Grove's Atlas of Ancient Geography, Biblical and Classical, this paper will survey early North and West European maps and atlases of the ancient world as a subgenre of such cartography. Insidiously and without any demonstrable intention to do so, these atlases perpetuated a view of Greek, Roman and Biblical antiquity which was at the same time scientifically deterministic and Orientalist, and which unconsciously reflected the contemporary colonial milieu of the nations in which they were produced. The second part of the paper will explore how contemporary digital research on Classical place, which likewise utilises data infrastructures and platforms which are products of Global North techno-industrial milieu, are nonetheless deconstructing and critically framing this legacy.

Collection, Collation, and Curation: A Critical Reflection on the Digitisation Impulse

Eleanor Q. Neil
Aarhus University

Rubina Raja
Aarhus University

Drawing on a variety of the Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean, this presentation seeks to unpick some of the driving influences behind the urge to digitize, and what might qualify as a successful digital archaeological project. Archaeological archives already represent one layer between the archaeologist and the physical material, what does the added layer of digitality add or subtract from that relationship? As we explore this enormous question, we will also seek to bring forth nuanced considerations of regularly accepted truth of digital projects. Accessibility, for example, is often cited as a primary (and in some way innate) outcome of digitization, but what does or does not qualify as accessibility, and for whom rarely gets deeper scrutiny. Flowing from this, it is also important to engage with the ways in which academia privileges traditional publication metrics, which shapes, and indeed limits, the ways in which digital tools and methodologies are deployed. The metrics of success for a digital or digitization project, also often rely upon 'usability' which impacts the extent to which a platform is frequented and, therefore, a careful unpicking of the role of functionality and aesthetics, is especially pertinent to understanding and reframing a successful digital or digitization project. It is unlikely that identifying universally applicable answers to these questions is possible, and so, instead, we seek to illuminate the ways in which these questions are intertwined with issues of ethical archaeological and archival work, and how the stalling, or circularity of discussions of digital practice is also hindering the progression and development of archaeological research.

Ghosts in Machines: The Afterlives of Archaeological Archives and the Ethics of Care

Jen A. Baird
Birkbeck College, University of London

Archaeology's history, at least in the story it tells itself, is the steady gain of technological revolutions: from stratigraphy to carbon dating to aDNA. Digitisation was one of a long line of technologies that archaeologists eagerly picked up, keen to enable data re-use, new forms of analysis, and open access. This digital turn means that it is now easy to turn to the archaeological archives online, including the photographic collections, of a great number of legacy archaeological projects. However, so too is it easy to stumble upon, in those digital archives, unmediated images of violence: of coerced labour, of child exploitation, of physical distress. With a particular focus on archaeological photography, this paper will examine the ways in which archaeology has failed to be sensitive towards aspects of its past, and how digitisation can be responsible for not only replicating but amplifying those mistakes, often to the detriment of already marginalised actors and communities. It will question whether archaeology needs a more explicit framework and ethic of care.

Digital Archives of Immoveable Heritage in the 21st Century: Curation, Collections, and Communities

Ine Jacobs
Oxford University

Tim Penn
University of Reading

In this paper, we explore the current state and potential future directions of formal digital archives dedicated to immoveable cultural heritage. These resources, run by universities and institutions, have grown significantly in response to the destruction of cultural heritage in the Middle East and North Africa since 2011. They have the potential to offer remote access to sites, buildings, and artifacts, reducing or even eliminating the need for time-consuming, costly, and sometimes dangerous or impossible travel. However, these archives are often curated by heritage professionals primarily for other experts or interested amateurs. They remain entirely isolated from a plethora of alternative digital documentation that is growing at a remarkably fast rate.

The content of many research archives continues to reflect the priorities of 19th- and 20th-century colonial excavations. Collections tend to focus on Pharaonic, Greek or Roman monumental structures and their architectural features, while later uses of these sites, if preserved at all, are less frequently documented and, when captured, often receive less attention. Additionally, photographs of archaeological sites rarely include contemporary people, despite many heritage sites being popular recreational spaces today. This absence reinforces a static view of heritage, rooted in the past rather than acknowledging its ongoing presence today. By contrast, other digital initiatives on platforms like Flickr and Instagram, though typically less formal and sometimes less valued in academic circles, offer a richer variety of perspectives and creators who provide a broader, more nuanced view of immoveable heritage.

We propose that formal digital archives have much to gain from engaging with these creators, perspectives and platforms and vice versa. On the one hand, formal archives would gain accessibility and ability to document sites not otherwise visitable, especially with the proliferation of smart phones with good cameras. They would also be pressed to incorporate contemporary narratives on how cultural heritage is used in the present (often in intangible ways). On the other hand, formal digital archives constitute a reliable and sustainable venue to document intangible uses of heritage. They also offer contemporary populations an opportunity to challenge academic narratives around 'musealized' archaeological sites with their own voices.

In short, in this paper we advocate for a collaborative, bottom-up approach to the documentation of immoveable heritage that fully embraces the diverse ways people from different backgrounds interact with cultural heritage today, leading to a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of heritage in the digital age.

Objectifying the Archaeological Archive

Chloë Ward
Ludwig-Maximilian University

Digitisation is an important aspect of archaeological research in the 21st century, not least because of the significant amount of archaeological recording which is now born-digital. While digitisation is often heralded as key marker of progress and an important part of making archaeology more accessible, it is also beset by often overlooked pragmatic and ethical issues. Furthermore, without a good understanding of the history of archaeological research, we risk perpetuating and even enhancing problematic past modes of practice, narratives, and interpretations.

The fundamental difficulties with digital archives have long been discussed by the archive profession, as has the often unintentional neo-colonial impact that digitisation projects can have. On the other hand, the archive profession's engagement with the materiality of archives has been relatively limited. Therefore, the issue of digitisation is one that can be well served by combining methods and concepts from both archaeological and archival theory. This paper will draw on interdisciplinary research which integrates both archaeology and archival practice in order to present a more nuanced understanding of the impact of materiality and digitisation on the production, or often intentional construction, of archaeological knowledge. The discussion is primarily based on examples from Egypt and Sudan which are both highly relevant to attempts to decolonise archaeological practice. Overall, I argue that the intersection of materiality and digitisation is of fundamental importance to both archaeological and archival disciplines and an area in which the two disciplines would benefit from greater collaboration.

Sharing Primary Sources on Auguste Mariette and the Birth of the Egyptian Antiquities Service

Thomas Lebéé
Musée du Louvre

Auguste Mariette is a central figure of 19th century Egyptology. He was born in France, discovered the Serapeum of Memphis, became deputy curator of the Louvre and founded Egypt's Antiquities Service and the Cairo Museum. His achievements and struggles were instrumental in the early development of Egyptian archaeology. In the current reflection on the origin of archaeology practice in the East and Orientalist scholarship, Mariette's figure may offer interesting insights as a case study.

Despite Mariette's central role in the history of Egyptology, little attention has been paid to seek primary sources helping to understand the context of his career, beside a handful of pioneering works now decades old. For a few years, we have been working on an ongoing digital edition of letters written throughout his whole life. A recent, almost general and fortunate willingness of archives centres to allow the use of their collections made possible this enterprise. Digital means also allow for high edition standards, simple workflow and unparalleled reach in scholarly dissemination.

This project offers sometimes unsuspected glimpses at the positions of Mariette, his administration and the actors of Egyptology. Personal and official correspondence allow a better understanding of their actions and feelings between Europe and Egypt. We thus intend to elaborate the historiographic background of this complex era in Egypt and Egyptology, and to share how we hope to contribute to the critical analysis of this situation.

From Field Data to Data Field: Documenting Archaeology in the British Museum's Collection Database

Vicky Donnellan
British Museum

Danlei Zhou
University of Reading

With archaeology now widely understood as a historically situated and socially engaged enterprise (Hodder 1982; Trigger 2006), increasing scholarly attention, and critique, has been directed at the nature of archaeological knowledge production within the contexts of field practice and project organisation, drawing on a range of materials and methods including (auto)ethnography and archives (Heffron & Çağlar 2024; Kiely et al. 2025; Leighton 2015, 2016; Mickel 2021; Quirke 2010). Meanwhile, museum practitioners and theorists are increasingly engaging with the material and intellectual legacy of colonialism in museum documentation (Carreau & Gunn 2024; Christophe et al. 2024; Decker & Wood 2024; Goskar 2024; Jones 2019; Lawther 2022; Turner 2015, 2020). This paper looks at museum documentation of archaeological projects and objects, as an extension of colonial archaeological practice and a source of transformation and empowerment in contemporary museological practice. Using examples drawn from the British Museum's records and collection database, we discuss the problems and potential of documentation in archaeological and museological contexts, particularly as regarding historiography and epistemology. The paper addresses two questions: In what sense, and to what extent, is museum documentation a product of, and productive of, colonial power relations and exploitative and extractive practice in archaeology and museums? How can museum documentation be critically engaged to enable, or, better still, ensure ethical, self-reflexive practice (equity, reciprocity, self-determination) in archaeology and museums?

Colonial Legacies and Cypriot Antiquities in the Digital Age: A Critical Exploration

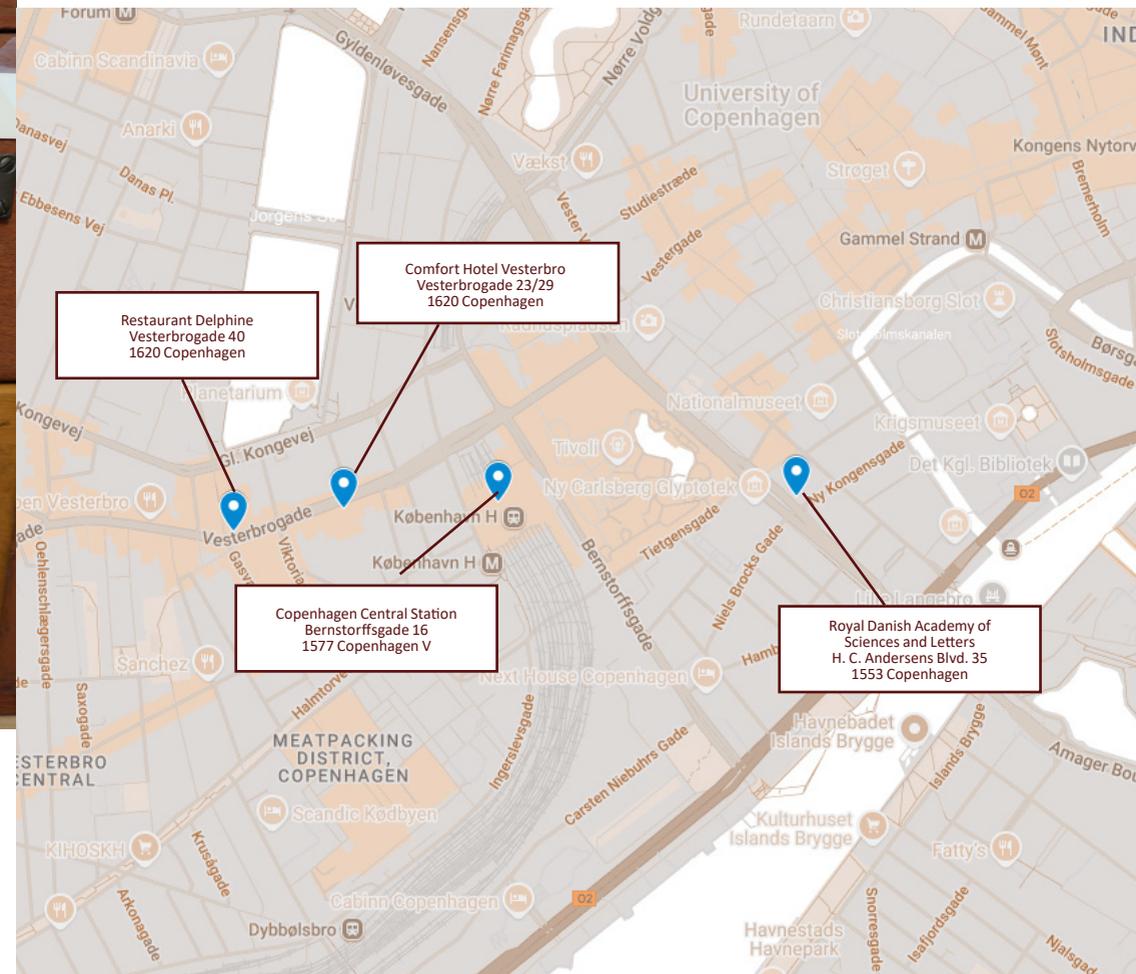
Polina Nikolaou
University of the Aegean

This paper examines the colonial legacy of diasporic Cypriot collections in the digital age, aiming to explore broader questions of narrative production in archaeology as it is represented in the global museumscape. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, museum collections of Cypriot antiquities were formed in Europe and North America as a result of large-scale excavations conducted on the island, which involved a complex entanglement of museum archaeologists, colonial officers, local agencies, and diplomats. In recent years, critical approaches to the historiography of Cypriot archaeology have emerged, analysing the complex colonial legacies of diasporic Cypriot antiquities through a "decolonial" lens. The concept of "decolonization", as an ongoing and contingent process, has been adopted to conceptualize the practices aimed at addressing the impact of colonialism in archaeology and cultural heritage. Since the early 21st century, digitisation projects and digital twins have been increasingly employed to create new, inclusive, and interactive forms of engagement through "co-curation" and collaboration. Similarly, diasporic Cypriot antiquities are being digitized through the collaboration of researchers, archaeologists, universities and museums in Cyprus and across Europe. The digital twins of diasporic Cypriot antiquities are now accessible through online platforms. In this process, the field has emphasized technological innovation and its potential utility, necessitating a critical investigation of the values embedded in these efforts, as they may still reflect colonial narratives. Through the critical analysis of diasporic Cypriot antiquities in the digital age, this paper argues that it is urgent to address the cultural and ethical complexities of the "digital turn" in heritage to move beyond the "decolonial" as a metaphor and into action.



Yale University Art Gallery archives. Image © Rubina Raja.

Venues



Organizers



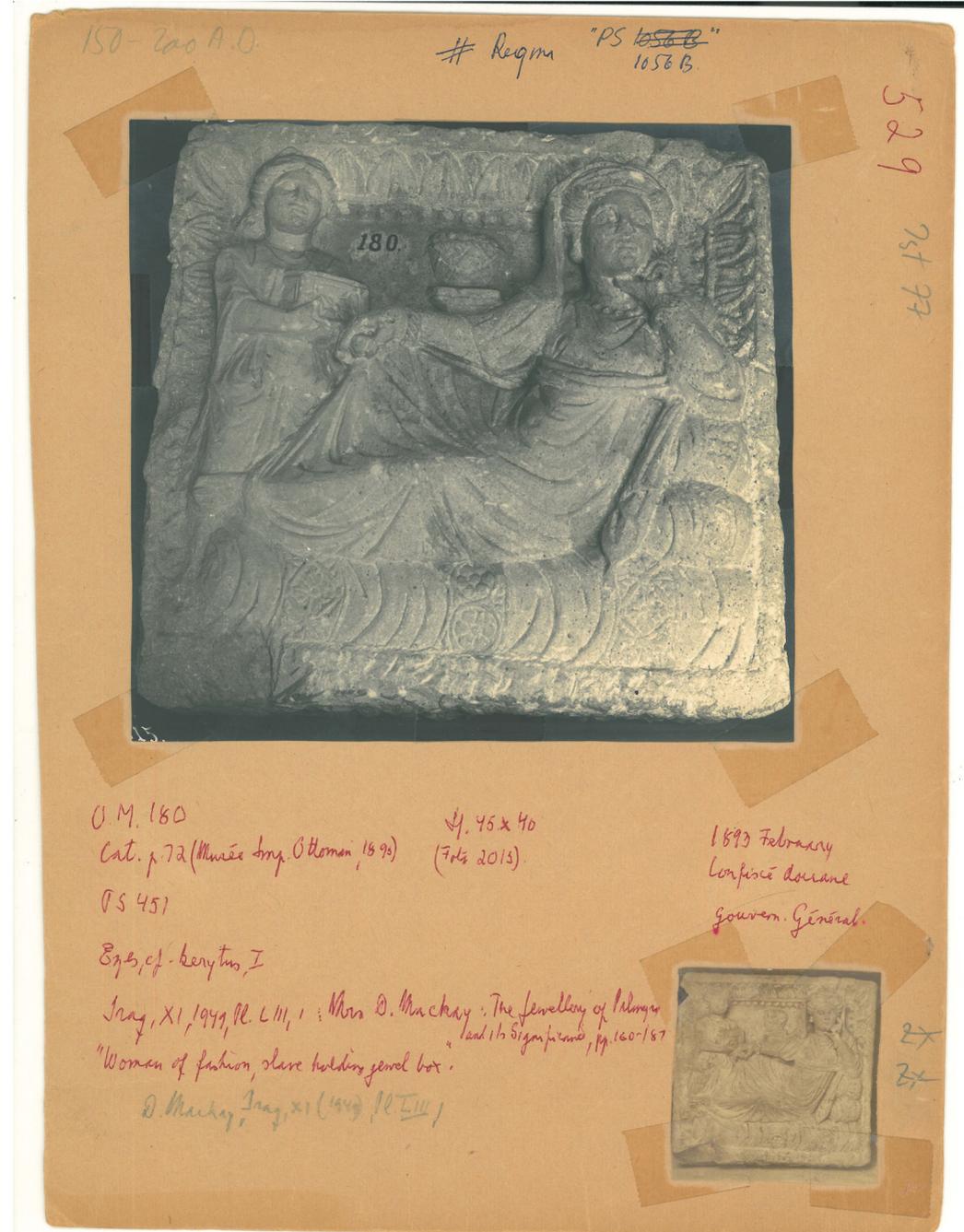
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Conference Webpage

<https://urbnet.au.dk/news/events/2025/disentangling>



Arkeoloji Müzesi, İstanbul, inv. no. 3728/180. Image © Palmyra Portrait Project and Professor Rubina Raja, courtesy of the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek.

Book of abstracts
Organizers:

Disentangling the Intertwinement of Digitalisation and Decolonisation
Eleanor Q. Neil and Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)