

OCHRE DATA SERVICE

Sandra Schloen

In the beginning...

...were clay tablets from the Persepolis Fortification Archive, whose future now lies in the hands of the Supreme Court. Regardless of the fate of the physical tablets, their digital selves will be safeguarded in the Online Cultural and Historical Research Environment (OCHRE), having been captured there over these past ten years in all of their textual, lexical, artistic, and photographic glory. More than 6,300 fully articulated text editions, 11,000+ glossary entries, and almost 170,000 images (50+ TB) are managed by OCHRE's integrative research environment, which also serves as a collaborative dissemination platform, and an archival repository.

...was legacy data, the management of which consumed much of the energy of the OCHRE Data Service staff in the early days. File cabinets full of the paper trail of archaeology expeditions, like those of the ten-year expedition to Zincirli; drawers and boxes of slides, CDs, and film negative strips, some taken of objects not likely to be seen again from museums in Syria; documents like those of the Chicago Demotic Dictionary, woven together with now obsolete, non-Unicode fonts — these are the data salvaged from research of the past by the OCHRE Data Service to begin new life in the digital age.

...is data born digitally on new research projects like that of Tell Keisan, Israel. Under the direction of David Schloen, field staff running OCHRE onsite and offline record excavation details, capture geospatial-features, and create a photographic record, all of which is in the database and on the server by nightfall in time for its first backup at the University of Chicago's Digital Library Development Center (DLDC). This satisfying process fully captures the spirit of the mantra from the early days of computing “get it once, get it early, get it right!”

...is itself a phrase that carries great significance for a major new project recently taken on by the OCHRE Data Service entitled Critical Editions for Digital Analysis and Research (CEDAR). Conceived of by David Schloen, and with the financial and technical support of former University of Chicago student Paul Funk of Cambridge, Massachusetts, CEDAR will provide a single software environment in which scholars can trace textual variants and explore the transmission of major literary traditions. Partnering in the ambitious task of creating digital critical editions of canonical corpora, while also developing and testing a digital system for their exploration and analysis, are the following UChicago colleagues: Christopher Woods for the Gilgamesh Epic; Jeffrey Stackert of the Divinity School for the Hebrew Bible; and Ellen MacKay of the English department for Shakespeare's plays. With Genesis 1:1 as our starting point (“In the beginning...”), our initial test cases will be the first eleven chapters of the Book of Genesis (the “Primeval History” from Creation to Abraham), the Sumerian copies of the Gilgamesh Epic, and the various early printings of Shakespeare's Hamlet. Texts and variants will be digitally captured and preserved; facsimile images will be linked; commentary will be tracked down and integrated; and tools will be developed to explore these rich collections. Underlying these tools is the OCHRE database with its generic and highly flexible, yet rigorous, data model, which provides a common platform for data integration, analysis, and publica-

tion of scholarly knowledge in the humanities. The CEDAR project will show that a common, shared system can be applied to common problems of scholarship across a range of disciplines.

...were the students, seeking to use technology to answer research questions. Thirty years ago it was student David Schloen whose study of the economic texts at Ugaritic found him entering person- and place-names into now long-outdated Paradox tables, foreshadowing the more powerful data structures that would evolve from the rudimentary beginnings of database technology and which would, many years on, inspire OCHRE. Seven years ago it was student Miller Prosser — studying Ugaritic under Dennis Pardee, crafting a Microsoft Access database to capture the details of the texts he was researching for his doctoral dissertation — who reached the conceptual limits of standard database approaches. Now a senior Research Database Specialist at the OCHRE Data Service, and a valued colleague, Miller exploits OCHRE to the fullest, diligently amassing and unifying all things Ugaritic in the Ras Shamra Tablet Inventory (RSTI) project database. Just this month a new crop of students signed up to work on the various research projects supported by the OCHRE Data Service. Despite the ongoing cycle of research project beginnings and endings, this remains constant ... the steady stream of hard-working, highly intelligent, invariably impressive student assistants for whom we are infinitely grateful. While they pause with us but for a while, they contribute richly, then move on to their own beginnings.



Figure 1. New this year: publish data from OCHRE directly to a traditional website. Pictured here is: ods.uchicago.edu/rsti.

For more information regarding our services and our active research projects, please visit our website at: <http://ods.uchicago.edu/rsti>.

Note

¹ <http://persepolistablets.blogspot.com/2017/06/supreme-court-takes-up-dispute-over.html> (last accessed July 10, 2017)