This workshop will bring together experts in the epigraphic cultures of half a dozen different languages and scriptural traditions who are also involved in creating (or developing) digital editions and databases of inscriptions, to explore these questions and other shared interests during a day-and-a-half of short presentations and group roundtable discussions.

The workshop will be immediately preceded by an EpiDoc workshop (5-6 October) designed to introduce the basics of the EpiDoc editing system. The two events, co-ordinated but independent, together form the culmination of a three-year project sponsored by the Partner University Fund of the French American Cultural Exchange (FACE) and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, “Visible Words: Research and Training in Digital Contextual Epigraphy”, which has aimed to promote research and training in the application of digital technologies to the study of inscriptions in their spatial contexts. In the spirit of the Visible Words project, the workshop is avowedly exploratory and collaborative in nature. Our goal is to further the shared enterprise of advancing the study of inscriptions through digital technologies by seeking to find commonalities (both disciplinary and technological), to recognize and define differences, and to identify productive areas for future investigation and development.

The practice of inscribing texts and other non-verbal messages in durable surfaces is widespread throughout human societies, past and present, and the variety of material and textual practices used to create them is as diverse as the cultures in which they developed. For all their variety, however, the purposes and uses of inscriptions tend to fall within a few broadly defined categories (dedicatory, honorary, funerary, legal, etc.), and the media and methods by which they were produced (carving in stone, painting with brush, engraving or casting in metal, etc.) are often similar across cultures. Inevitably, scholars of the inscriptions of any particular culture have over time developed specialized conventions of classification and editing suited to the nature of their material—conventions that in many cases have fossilized into disciplinary norms or standards that in turn have shaped non-specialist inquiry into or even understanding of the inscribed material and its place within the broader culture.

The advent of the digital age has provided an opportunity for students of inscriptions to rethink the ways that their material is presented and to update and revise the standards and conventions of their disciplines. Many have taken advantage of the guidelines and open-access tools for xml-based editing and 3D digital imaging developed by collaborative ventures such as the EpiDoc initiative (http://sourceforge.net/p/epidoc/wiki/Home/) and the Digital Epigraphy and Archaeology Project (http://www.digitalepigraphy.org/) to develop, or to begin to develop, new methods and standards for the scholarly publication of inscriptions in the digital age. Thus far, however, despite the ease of interdisciplinary exchange, thanks to the increasingly widespread use of a common language (xml) to describe and characterize epigraphic phenomena that are themselves often shared across cultures (e.g. arrangement of the text, correction or cancellation of text, type of text-carrier or support), digital epigraphists tend still to work more often within the confines of their disciplinary structures than outside them.

The time seems right, therefore, to ask whether digital epigraphists might profit from considering their common challenges and aspirations across disciplinary boundaries, in a way that could lead to the development of a translinguistic, supra-cultural understanding of epigraphy as a distinct mode of human communication with its own conventions and aesthetics, as coherent and self-contained as literature or art. More modestly, can those involved in developing digital editions or databases of inscribed materials benefit from sharing techniques or strategies for exploiting digital technologies to the best advantage for different potential audiences?

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