

FALSI e FALSARI

NELL'EPOCA DI INTERNET

False testimonianze. Copie, contraffazioni, manipolazioni
e abusi del documento epigrafico antico



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a cura di

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Falsi e falsari nell'epoca di Internet

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EPIGRAPHIC DATABASE FALSAE (EDF): GENESIS, STRUCTURE, CRITICAL ISSUES AND POTENTIAL APPLICATIONS

Lorenzo Calvelli

ABSTRACT

This article explores the hermeneutic capabilities of the digital resource Epigraphic Database Falsae (EDF: <http://edf.unive.it>) through an analytical approach. In particular, the author examines the genesis of the database, its architecture and its limits, as well as some potential improvements and innovations for future projects.

Key-words: Inscriptions; Epigraphic Forgeries; Digital Epigraphy; Digital Humanities; Open Science

According to one of the state-of-the-art methodologies in data science analysis, in order to move a digital project into the second half of its life cycle, it is necessary to transition from the phases of data collection and cleansing to those of data exploration, modeling and interpretation (*Fig. 1*). We are ready to apply this approach to the IT resource EDF - *Epigraphic Database Falsae*¹, which constitutes the main digital output of the PRIN collaborative project «False evidence. Copies, forgeries, manipulations and abuses of the ancient epigraphic document»². Yet, to investigate the relationship between epigraphic forgery and the potential application of digital epigraphy, and to understand the scope for future research, it is first of all appropriate to consider EDF's origins, its architecture and its limitations. Such a reflection is useful not only for those who are not yet familiar with this resource, but also for those who have contributed to its implementation.

Until recently, the absence of a database dedicated to the phenomenon of epigraphic forgery was explicitly criticised in the literature³. In 2015,

a prototype IT model was developed thanks to a pilot project funded by Sapienza University of Rome and hosted by their DigiLab server⁴, but a digital census of forged inscriptions included in the printed volumes of the main epigraphic *corpora* was still a *desideratum*.

In the proposal of our collaborative PRIN project «False evidence», which was drafted and submitted to the then Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) in January 2016, a very strong need to develop a dedicated electronic resource was already clearly present. The document, the abstract of which can be found on the website of the current Ministry of Universities and Research (MUR)⁵, still stands out today for the pioneering nature of certain insights, at a time when digital epigraphy was still in its infancy. First of all, it reiterated how the digital tool should be «free of charge and freely accessible on the web». This option was a precursor of the most recent policies on Open Access and fits well today with the guidelines on Open Science that the European Commission adopted in its Horizon Europe framework programme (2021-2027)⁶. Another aspect that

¹ <http://edf.unive.it>

² «False testimonianze. Copie, contraffazioni, manipolazioni e abusi del documento epigrafico antico»; see CALVELLI 2018.

³ ORLANDI et al. 2015, p. 42: «Forgery is a field of study still in its infancy. For example, we lack an electronic database of

all forged texts».

⁴ CALDELLI - ORLANDI 2020, p. 133.

⁵ <https://prin.mur.gov.it>

⁶ https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/strategy/strategy-2020-2024/our-digital-future/open-science_en

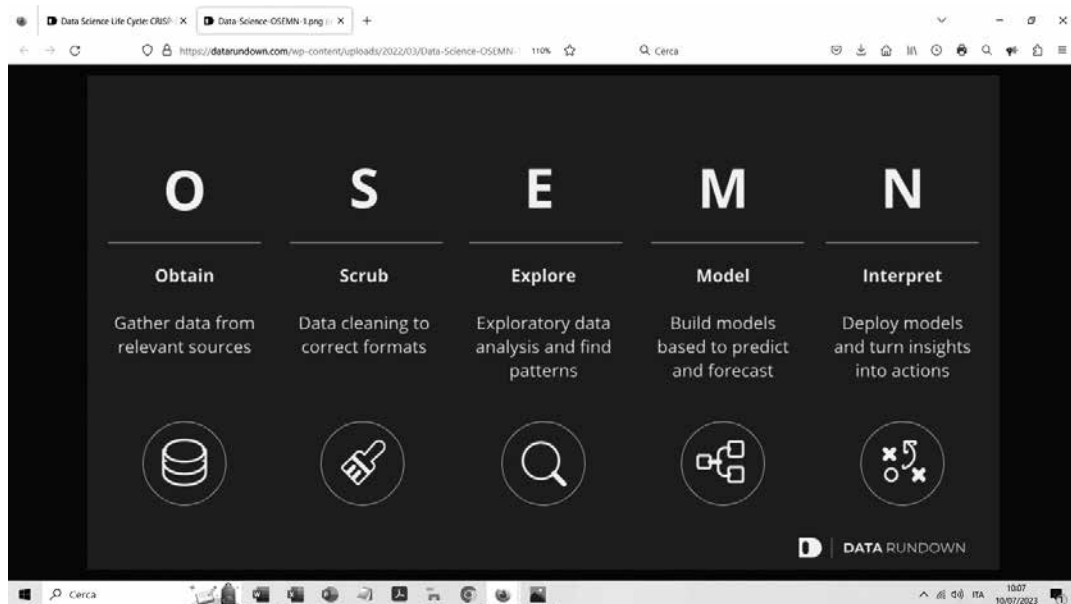


Fig. 1. The life cycle of digital projects from a data science perspective (source: <https://datarundown.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Data-Science-OSEMN-1.png>).

was already indispensable was the interaction between texts and images: indeed, right from the conception of EDF, it was deemed necessary for the database to include not only the transcription of the textual component of the inscriptions and a rich set of metadata related to their monumental description, but also the visual reproduction of both ‘material forgeries’, i.e. inscriptions realised on a concrete physical support, and the handwritten and printed evidence of so-called ‘paper forgeries’: «The census of fake inscriptions will be carried out by means of a computerised database of texts and images, which will include photographic reproductions and facsimile drawings»⁷.

In order to ensure immediate feedback from all members of the project, as well as from external users, it was also decided that the digital records would be made available online as they were completed, so as not to produce a static resource, but, on the contrary, a database that would be continuously enriched and improved,

thanks to ongoing collaboration. A final feature identified from the embryonic phase of EDF was the need to ensure its interoperability with the main digital epigraphic resources already included in the EAGLE (*Electronic Archive of Greek and Latin Epigraphy*) project⁸, incorporated thanks to European funding from the *ICT Policy Support Programme* into the *Europeana network of Ancient Greek and Latin Epigraphy*⁹.

It is against this background and, after more than 20 years of experience with the EDR (*Epigraphic Database Roma*)¹⁰ and EDB databases (*Epigraphic Database Bari*)¹¹, to which several members of the PRIN project had long contributed, that EDF was born. EDF itself now constitutes a major component of EAGLE. Among the many benefits derived from its inclusion in the EAGLE galaxy, it is worth mentioning that this choice has enabled pre-existing partnerships and agreements to be extended to our new digital resource, including those related to the repro-

⁷ «Il censimento delle iscrizioni false sarà realizzato mediante un database informatico di testi e immagini, che comprenderà riproduzioni fotografiche e disegni in facsimile». For the distinction between material forgeries and paper forgeries, already foreseen by Theodor Mommsen in the formulation

of the *Corpus inscriptionum Latinarum*, see CALVELLI 2019a, p. 9.

⁸ <http://www.eagle-eagle.it>

⁹ <https://www.eagle-network.eu>

¹⁰ <http://www.edr-edr.it>

¹¹ <https://www.edb.uniba.it>

duction rights of cultural heritage owned by the Italian state¹².

Once funding had been obtained from the Ministry (albeit following a 55% cut in the budget initially requested), the project focused on identifying some crucial methodological problems. Faced with the lack of a shared theoretical definition of the concept of epigraphic forgery and its classification based on objective criteria, the formulation of a common lexicon was identified as a priority, which was repeatedly reviewed by the international scientific community¹³.

In principle, we deemed it convenient to maintain, both terminologically and conceptually, the dualism between *inscriptiones genuinae* and *inscriptiones falsae*, already found in the volumes of the *Corpus inscriptionum Latinarum*. This dichotomous approach was, however, subject to a thorough epistemological revision, which made it possible to highlight how the precariousness of the distinction between true and false was in fact already very blurred in the eyes of the *CIL* editors themselves¹⁴. Specifically, Theodor Mommsen had initially conceived of a more fluid intermediate category, called *inscriptiones suspectae*, which, as the German scholar himself warned, was intended to play a role as the ‘purgatory’ of the *Corpus*¹⁵, but this was later abandoned in order to simplify the editorial framework. The *CIL* volumes also include other types of inscriptions, such as the *externae* and *alienae*, which were brought together in a single section with the *falsae*¹⁶. The common feature of these document categories, which are all conceptually very different, was that they were unsuitable as sources for the

study of ancient history according to the geographic approach adopted by Mommsen and his collaborators. They were therefore removed from the core sections of the *Corpus* and labelled by the addition of an asterisk (*stellula*), which works almost as a mark of infamy. It is precisely these inscriptions that today deserve to be investigated analytically, not least because, by Mommsen’s own admission, it had not been possible to make a judgement on each of them, essentially due to the lack of time with which to examine them individually¹⁷.

Lexical and epistemological reflections were therefore combined in the project agenda with a complex redefinition of the digital vocabularies to be applied to the resource we were developing. In this regard, an important starting point was provided by the harmonisation work previously carried out by the content providers of the EAGLE project¹⁸, which is now being supplemented by the results of working groups within the epigraphy.info digital community¹⁹. The availability of accurate classifications and lexical lists, already subjected to authoritative checks, made it possible to align the fields of EDF, as well as the metadata produced therein, with the main existing resources in digital epigraphy and, in particular, with EDR and EDB.

Of course, within the scope of the classification of a fake inscription, it was necessary to conceptually modify certain fields, insofar as, for instance, it is not actually possible to indicate the ancient context for which it was produced. While when filing a genuine inscription, one indicates where and when it was made, when working on a fake inscription, one must rather ask oneself about the time and place to which

¹² http://www.edr-edr.it/it/Documenti_it.php

¹³ Particularly noteworthy are the conferences «La falsificazione epigrafica in Italia. Questioni di metodo e casi di studio» («Epigraphic forgery in Italy. Issues of method and case studies»), held in Venice on 10-11 October 2018, and «False notizie... fake news e storia romana. Falsificazioni antiche, falsificazioni moderne» («Fake news and Roman history. Ancient forgeries, modern forgeries»), held in Gargnano sul Garda from 3 to 5 June 2019. The papers presented during these two scientific meetings, along with some additional studies, are collected in the volumes edited by CALVELLI 2019b and SEGGENI 2019.

¹⁴ See CALVELLI 2019c, pp. 94-96; Id. 2023, pp. 62-64.

¹⁵ BUONOCORE 2017, p. 891: «Le *falsae et suspectae* dovranno servire non solo per l’inferno, ma anche da purgatorio» («The

falsae et suspectae should not only be used for hell, but also for purgatory»: letter from Theodor Mommsen to Giovanni Battista de Rossi; Berlin, 3 February 1881).

¹⁶ See CALVELLI 2019d.

¹⁷ *CIL* IX-X, p. XI: «Summa res eo vertitur, quod non tam inscriptiones singulas in iudicium vocavi, quam singulos auctores. Accurate investigare in singulis titulis quae leguntur num dici possent vel non possent, num quod occurreret fraudis indicium et quomodo rursus ab eiusmodi suspitione eximerentur, hoc si mihi imposuissem, ne alterius quidem septennii labore ad finem umquam pervenissem. Quare aliam viam ingressus singulos auctores examinavi».

¹⁸ <https://www.eagle-network.eu/resources/vocabularies>

¹⁹ https://epigraphy.info/vocabularies_wg

those who created it intended it to be attributed. Thus, purely by way of example, a forgery produced in Florence in the 18th century can claim to be a genuine inscription made in Rome in the early imperial period. For this reason, a series of ‘alleged’ categories have been introduced in the EDF record, indicating under these rubrics the ancient city or region, as well as the epigraphic class or social type, to which those who produced the forgery intended to assign it.

The process of digitising each individual inscription has also made it possible to clearly understand how the *mare magnum* of the *falsae* of the *CIL* includes very different but, at the same time, partly overlapping types of documents. Firstly, it became clear that the distinction between forgeries produced on a hard material support and forgeries known from the pages of manuscript codices and printed volumes cannot be clearly drawn, as many inscriptions had a dual channel of production and transmission. Developing a tripartition initially elaborated by Alfredo Buonopane²⁰, we also decided to classify digitised inscriptions according to the intent of their producer. From this perspective, a distinction was made between pure forgeries, copies (complete, partial or combined) of ancient inscriptions, and modern inscriptions, which simply imitate models from the classical era, without any malicious intent.

A particularly innovative aspect of the metadata recorded in EDF concerns the possibility of tracking all stages of the life cycle of forged inscriptions, by linking each piece of information to a specific source. Indeed, unlike most other digital resources in the field of epigraphy, EDF allows not only the recording of the alleged findspots of inscriptions and of their places of preservation (alleged or real), but it also offers the possibility to track any of their secondary transfers. In this way, it is possible to identify the production sites of the fake materials and reconstruct the collecting history that marked their dispersion. Thus, EDF manages to make up for one of the most serious

shortcomings of the first volumes of the *CIL*, whose indexes lacked a section on where the inscriptions were kept, regardless of whether they were considered genuine or fake²¹. Indeed, only from volume VIII onwards did the editors of the *Corpus* realise that a *recensus locorum recentiorum* should also be included²². This initial shortcoming was due to the fact that the attention of Mommsen and of his colleagues was entirely focused on identifying the location for which the inscriptions had been produced in antiquity. In contemporary epigraphic science, however, the concepts of epigraphic landscape and epigraphic situation²³, which are applicable not only to the production phase of inscriptions, but also to the different stages of their life cycle, make it imperative to map the mobility of inscribed monuments both textually and spatially (as we hope to do with some future funding). In EDF, it is also possible to search on the basis of the names of those who produced the fake inscriptions. This feature has automatically created a repertoire of those forgers or alleged forgers, who were so negatively judged by the editors of the *CIL* and who today deserve to be investigated again in the context of a less punitive and more focused approach to the cultural history of the various epochs.

Potential future developments of EDF still include an articulated list of *desiderata*, both technical and content-related. Regarding the former, it is to be hoped that the database will be able to expand its geographical scope, not only by completing the indexing of *falsae* produced in the Italian context, but also by extending its boundaries beyond the territory of Italy to include epigraphic forgeries from the rest of Europe and the Mediterranean, as well as those preserved in public and private collections overseas. An important step towards such an international approach was taken with the creation of the English version of the database, sponsored by the *Venice Centre for Digital and Public Humanities*²⁴. In order to ensure better visibility of the data entered into EDF, an in-

²⁰ See BUONOPANE 2014, p. 293.

²¹ CALVELLI 2019d, p. 68.

²² An *Index locorum recentiorum* also appears at the end of the *Supplementa Italica* published by Ettore Pais in 1888.

²³ On epigraphic landscapes see, by way of example and

with further bibliography, RUIZ GUTIÉRREZ 2013; LASAGNI 2017; TANTILLO 2017. For the concept of the ‘epigraphic situation’ see LAMÉ 2015, pp. 11-15; see also CRESCI MARRONE 2019.

²⁴ <https://www.unive.it/vedph>

teroperability project with the *Epigraphische Datenbank Clausus Slaby* (EDCS) was also initiated²⁵, to enable its users to access more comprehensive data and images, which are already available in EDF.

Finally, these considerations on the potential application of EDF cannot be separated from a remark on its critical issues, which mainly concern the rapid obsolescence that inevitably affects any kind of digital resource. Originating as a relational database integrated into the EAGLE federation, EDF inherited its architecture from its elder ‘siblings’ with its pros and cons²⁶.

Mapping recently undertaken as part of the *FAIR Epigraphy* project²⁷, of which EDF is a partner, generated a number of the following technical *desiderata*:

- ensure the sustainability of EDF in a long-term perspective;
- export EDF data in xml format;
- apply an explicit Creative Commons CC.BY 4.0 licence to EDF content²⁸;
- promote the interoperability of EDF with other online digital resources, such as Trismegistos²⁹;
- transfer the EDF bibliographic repository to a stable resource, such as Zenon³⁰ or Zotero³¹.

In order to realise this twofold wish list, both content-related and technical, new funds are obviously needed. With this in mind, we reiterate our hope that the good results achieved by the collaborative PRIN project «Forged evidence» may lead to a new joint project, which, by drawing on funding from different sources and, possibly, on international funds, will enable the EDF digital resource not only to survive and be maintained from a technical point of view (beginning with the necessary security updates), but also to be further enriched, both from a scientific and a technological point of view.

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²⁵ <http://www.manfredclaus.de>

²⁶ See PANCIERA 2006.

²⁷ <https://www.csad.ox.ac.uk/fair-epigraphy>

²⁸ <https://creativecommons.it/chapterIT/index.php/licence-your-work>

²⁹ <https://www.trismegistos.org>

³⁰ <https://zenon.dainst.org>

³¹ <https://www.zotero.org>

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