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Acciarino, Damiano, project lead. Atlas of Renaissance Antiquarianism (ATRA). Database

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Acciarino, Damiano, project lead.

Atlas of Renaissance Antiquarianism (ATRA). Database.

Venice: Ca' Foscari University of Venice, 2021. Accessed 27 January 2023.
mizar.unive.it/atra.

The Atlas of Renaissance Antiquarianism (ATRA) database offers a digital gateway to “the circulation of antiquarian learning in sixteenth-century Europe” by linking letters of scholars involved in the development and spread of “the antiquarian method” (“Home”). The database is the result of a European Commission-funded MSCA-IF project that ran from 2017 until 2020 (grant no. 745704). The platform was realized by a team of eight Italian scholars under the general editorship and supervision of Damiano Acciarino and guided by an impressive advisory board of 14 internationally renowned scholars. Project partners include the University of Toronto, the Università Iuav di Venezia, the Haifa Center for Mediterranean History (HCMH), the Association for Textual Scholarship in Art History (ATSAH), and the Centro di Studi Medioevali e Rinascimentali “E. A. Cicogna.”

The database presents itself as a searchable list of 6,450 records, alphabetically arranged based on the first column, “Item,” which is vaguely defined in the glossary as “Antiquarian information found in letters.” The “Item” category features such diverse things as architectural items (e.g., “Abbeys,” “Grotesques”), events (e.g., “Abdication”), institutes (e.g., “Accademia dei Virtuosi”), authors (e.g., “Aelianus”), writings (e.g., “Annales Maximi”), objects (e.g., the vague “Antiquities,” featuring 57 times), historical-genealogical information (e.g., “Families” of various eras and regions), scholarly professions (e.g., “Grammarians,” “Historians”), esthetic ideals (e.g., “Imitation”), and of course epigraphic and numismatic sources, especially “Inscriptions” in various languages, “Coins (Roman),” and “Coins (Greek).” The platform offers useful statistical information about the “Items” in two forms: a visual circle-based representation and a bar chart. This functionality indicates that inscriptions and coins were at the core of the antiquarian interest, together with prominent classical authors, especially Roman ones.

The user can generate these statistical representations for the other letter metadata categories as well, which include “Mss.” (manuscripts), “Year,” “Language,” “Sender,” “Addressee,” “Field” (corresponding to scholarly discipline), “Topic,” and “Subject.” The utility of the statistics functionality seems

less pronounced in most of these columns, but it is certainly not useless, as it allows one to get rough insight into the linguistic constitution of the letter corpus, for instance (see below). Whereas “Field” is sufficiently clear, the difference between “Topic” and “Subject” remains somewhat unclear. The glossary does not help one here, as it defines “Field,” “Topic,” and “Subject” each as an “Area of focus.” The user is left to hypothesize that “Subject” offers a general label for what is being discussed (e.g., “Forgery,” “Sources,” or “Interpolations”), whereas “Topic” seems to be more specific. Annoyingly, however, both columns contain the value “Sources.” Moreover, “Field,” “Topic,” and “Subject” are counterintuitively arranged, moving from the very general “Field” to the very specific “Topic” to the again more general “Subject.”

The final column of each record contains three icons. First, a file icon gives the user more details about the record, including the content of the letter, connections, edition information, letter number (less ideally in Roman numerals), specific and general bibliography, and the initials of the record editor. Second, an external link icon occasionally refers the user to an associated digital object. For instance, in record 850, the “Catacomb of Priscilla (Rome)” is linked to an image of this object in Wikimedia Commons. Oddly enough, this does not occur for record 851, which concerns the very same item. This seems to be a recurring issue, as it also holds for other “Catacomb” records, for instance. Third, an icon with crossing arrows redirects the user to a list of all records that are interconnected through one of the metadata included. For every selection of records, users can generate statistic representations for each of the metadata, allowing them to navigate the sources in a multimodal manner and to gather in the blink of an eye the antiquarian subjects that took centre stage in specific sixteenth-century networks.

The data are easily searchable through straightforward “basic” and “advanced” search interfaces, allowing users to compile different subsets of data in keeping with their research interests. For instance, I have an interest in Hubertus Goltzius, a pioneer of numismatics who ran a short-lived publishing house in the Flemish city of Bruges during the 1560s and 1570s. A simple search for “goltzius” results in 11 records and tells me that Goltzius must have exchanged letters on numismatics with his more famous contemporary Justus Lipsius, discussing specific coins (e.g., RRC 489/6 in record 827) and ancient authors referring to coins, including Juvenal, Strabo, and Tacitus (records 3419, 5547, and 5682, respectively). The extant letter exchange appears to be monodirectional,

from Lipsius to Goltzius, although I am left to wonder whether more letters remain to be found. Additionally, I gather that Goltzius's numismatic work, *Fasti magistratuum et triumphorum Romanorum* (1566)—which is oddly referred to as “Fastos magistratuum et Triumphos Romanorum” in the “Topic” field—circulated in Rome shortly after its publication, and that its contents and value were discussed among Italian antiquarians, including Fulvio Orsini, Antonio Agustín, and Onofrio Panvinio (records 2698–2701).

Reading the detailed records through the file icons, I learned that these scholars heavily criticized the *Fasti* for its dependency on earlier Italian works and its amateurish nature, with Orsini complaining that “it is a beatiful [sic] book, yet with many errors” (record 2701). The search, moreover, gives insight into the nature of early modern scholarship and the prejudices of scholars keen to jump to conclusions, since I learned in a letter of 1567 that “Agustín defines Goltzius’ work as a work of amateurs—even if he hasn’t seen the book yet” (record 2699). A rough indication of these interesting details is given in the statistic visualization (Fig. 1). Unfortunately, it is not possible to combine different metadata and visualize networks, which would have been a tremendous additional asset. Most remarkably, the sender and addressee data are not combinable, even though they are put together in a six-page PDF list included in the documentation.

Other documentation includes a glossary I judge a little too succinct and, hence, too vague, especially with regard to the key term “antiquarian(ism).” Additionally, another six-page PDF file outlines the manuscripts recorded in the database and their acronyms, leaving the reader to wonder what an en dash in the “Mss.” column means. Is there no manuscript extant? Or has it simply not been recorded? Or was it deemed somehow irrelevant? Further, the documentation contains a three-page list of editions consulted and a short list of seven compilers and their initials (corresponding to the team mentioned above). This PDF documentation features in a section called “Index” that is part of a separate ATRA website (unive.it/pag/33168) that links to the database and vice versa, although not very straightforwardly so. This website also offers information on ATRA’s “Mission,” its aims as a database, a selection of events and publications associated with the database—or rather, with Renaissance antiquarianism in general—and, finally, an overview of the people and partners involved, including contact details and funding acknowledgments.

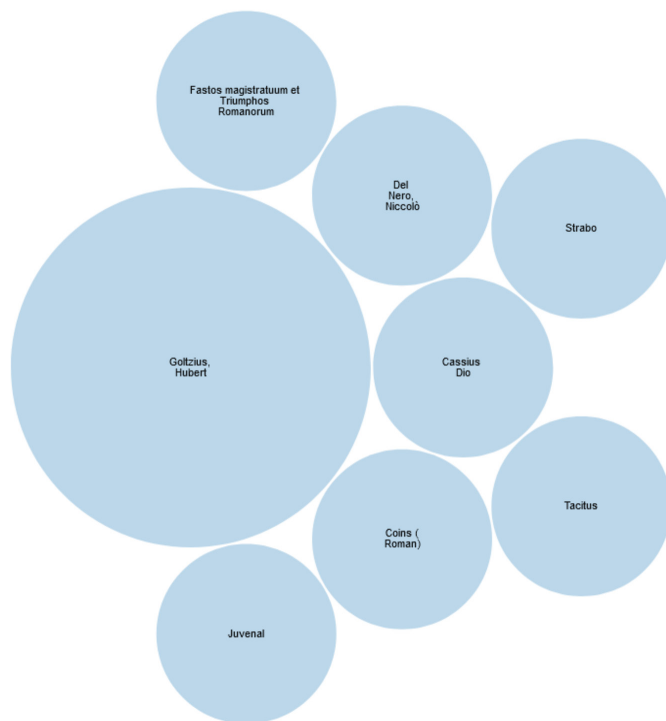


Figure 1. "Item" visualization for the basic search "goltzius."

Users wanting to get a glimpse of what is understood by "antiquarianism" should turn their attention to the short "Mission" and "Database" sections on the accompanying website. The scholarly value of studying Renaissance antiquarianism is situated in the "empirical evidence" that was the central object of this nascent interest as it "played a primary role in the evolution of the entire cultural/intellectual life of Early Modern times" ("Mission"). It is here that one would expect more details about Renaissance antiquarianism, but the user merely learns that "[a]ntiquarian erudition is by nature a cross-road of disciplines," after which an enumeration of 29 disciplines follows, from "Archeology" to "Zoology" (with epigraphy oddly missing and "Collecting" and "Publishing" being rather atypical disciplines). The database claims to offer "in-depth coverage of all aspects of Renaissance antiquarian learning and fills the present gap with a complete analysis on the subject" ("Mission"). This claim is overly ambitious and probably stems from the project application text.

It should in any case not be taken to reflect the reality of the database, as its statistic visualizations clearly indicate that of the 29 disciplines listed, a select group constitutes the core focus, especially “Numismatics” and “Philology,” and to some extent “Architecture.”

The impression that the mission statement was written as part of a more ambitious project text seems confirmed by the claim that letters written in “Latin, Italian, French, Spanish, German and English collected from all regions of Europe” are considered, which a quick advanced search in the “Language” column shows is incorrect. Only Italian (3,827), Latin (2,090), French (322), and Spanish (211) documents appear, with Italian prevailing, suggesting that this is in the first place not a database of European but of Italian antiquarianism, especially in the years 1550–1600.¹ There are, of course, plenty of non-Italian sources recorded, as my “goltzius” query above illustrates, but even there the results gravitated somewhat towards Goltzius’s Italian reception. Rather than a “complete analysis,” ATRA offers an interesting cross-section of antiquarian scholarship in the Renaissance around a portion of the Mediterranean, with some links to prominent northern intellectuals like Lipsius and with the unmotivated addition of the odd early seventeenth-century document.

The “Database” section insists on ATRA’s connective force, as it brings together data “that otherwise would probably never come into contact.” My “goltzius” query has duly acknowledged this force, although as a user I am left to wonder about the completeness of the data with which I am confronted. The query has also led me to a “new cultural itinerar[y]” regarding the reception of Goltzius’s *Fasti*, and I can see how it would be able to shed light on the development of ideas through the—admittedly hazy—“Field,” “Topic,” and “Subject” fields. Here again, however, the section offers project speak rather than realistic outcomes, which emerges best in its last sentence: “Innovative and revolutionary interpretative pathways will come to light, conferring a renewed awareness of the concept of Renaissance antiquarianism and offering to the entire academic community further instruments to investigate the History of Ideas.”

Instead of these promotional pitches, users would benefit more from details about things such as the software behind the platform, the criteria for source selection and the method of processing, interoperability and reusability,

1. I would also note that the simplistic language tagging, referring to only one language for each document, seems a bit amiss, since many of these letters were multilingual. I would have also added Ancient Greek to the list of languages, as several of these antiquarian scholars corresponded in this language.

and other technical elements. Interoperability especially feels like a missed opportunity, as ATRA could have been neatly integrated with the valuable Early Modern Letters Online (emlo.bodleian.ox.ac.uk), with which there is substantial overlap in terms of sources. Links to individual records would have made reference to the database and its contents much easier, especially since individual record IDs appear in only one place—and an easily overlooked one at that. As a service to the user, the team could have linked to the full texts of letters when available online, stimulating the double-checking of their data and interpretation. Now one has to rely on the editors' reading, which, although very useful to persons unfamiliar with the languages of the documents, only gives indirect access to the sources—which is not how Erasmus and his colleagues would have wanted it. Regarding the letters' texts, I found it disappointing that often no modern editions were consulted, especially with regard to such prominent scholars as Lipsius and Josephus Justus Scaliger, for whose correspondence there are recent editions of high quality available (see the ILE series and Botley and van Miert's multivolume edition, respectively). The focus on letters, finally, is understandable but largely left unmotivated. Why are antiquarian works excluded? This would, of course, result in an even larger source base than the letters alone (terrifyingly numerous in themselves), but these works, too, lay bare network connections, as they interact with previous scholarship by citing, refuting, copying, and rewriting.

In sum, I see considerable potential in ATRA for conducting new research on Renaissance antiquarianism and, more broadly, sixteenth-century intellectual culture and networks. The connections it establishes are useful to scholars in the field, but in its current form the database has not realized its full potential. To this end, the Atlas of Renaissance Antiquarianism would require an update in terms of definition and homogenization of categories (especially "Item," "Topic," and "Subject"), editions referred to, primary sources and online resources linked to, reusability and export possibilities, and formal issues (e.g., reducing the number of typos and making record IDs more visible). I sincerely hope that the team behind the resource will have the opportunity to work on these shortcomings, even now that the project funding has ended.

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