

MAKING THAT CONNECTION

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For a very long time, late July and early August were synonymous for me with the frantic days at the end of a dig season, followed by a series of exhausting travel connections — trains, cars, planes, more planes — as I worked my way home. I suspect that this is a familiar image to many Day of Archaeology bloggers, and some are probably trying to make their connections on the way to or from a dig as I write. For the fourth summer in a row, however, I'm not in the field, and as a result I've been thinking of connections from a different perspective. Instead of those airport connections I was always on the verge of missing, I've been thinking about the way we make connections to archaeological material in an increasingly digital space.

The more I thought about it, the more it seemed to me that my Day of Archaeology could be summed up as a series of interconnected stories about — what else! — connections. The first of these stories emerged from the Intro to Ancient Greece class I'm teaching this summer. My students had an exam today — perhaps not the most fun way to celebrate the occasion, but apropos, because on that exam I asked them both to make connections between the present, the *Odyssey*, and Aegean Bronze Age archaeology, and to explore the connections that existed in the past between different places and cultures (one of the essay choices asked them to consider whether culture-contact was a positive or a dangerous force in the development of a society).

On a more engaging level, the same students will be working over the weekend on a group project. Each student group is tasked with [creating a spatial narrative](#) using the [Knight Lab's StoryMap platform](#). I usually have student groups do a [slightly different project](#) using the Open Knowledge Foundation's [Timemapper](#) interface, but small summer classes allow me to experiment, so I thought I'd try something new. Ordinarily, I ask them to create their own take on an aspect of ancient Greece by placing five related objects or events in space and time. StoryMap focuses less on time and more on connections across space, though, so for this assignment I asked them to tell a story through the construction of an itinerary with seven stops. [Here's an example I made for them](#), using the voyage of Odysseus to look at later traditions associating it with real places. I'm hoping that this project will help them to get even more comfortable with the idea of connections between places, objects, ideas and people in the ancient Greek world.

The second story still involves students, but this time in the background. I'm currently the editor for Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic Greek Archaeology for the [5th, online-only, edition of the Oxford Classical Dictionary](#) (pitch me if you have a post-Bronze-Age Greek archaeology entry you think needs to be added!). Over the last year, the editors have been meeting with each other and OUP to work out how this edition will take advantage of the web, and we've been soliciting new content for a launch next spring. This afternoon, I finished the editorial review of the first completed contribution in my area. It was a great entry — short, clear, well referenced, authoritative. At the same time, there were lots of potential connections to online resources that hadn't yet been included, and going through and identifying some of

them gave me the most exciting vision I've had yet of what this new OCD might become. I've also been lobbying hard for the inclusion of Linked Data approaches and the use of [Uniform Resource Identifiers \(URIs\)](#) from various gazetteers in the metadata associated with entries, so that the entries can benefit from those resources (automated mini-maps generated by named-entity-recognition and alignment with [Pleiades!](#)) and — I hope — so that they can eventually enrich the LD ecosystem too. My goal in this work is to make more resources discoverable, not only for students but also for the public and, frankly, for us professionals. I'd love to look up an obscure archaeological site I don't know in the OCD and find not only summary information, but also a link to database entries for objects that were found there a hundred years ago. Also, I'm a visual person — I like seeing pictures of things, and I like being able to find more pictures of similar things that I might have missed. I think the OCD project has tremendous potential in this area.

That is, as long as it links out, as long as it allows links in, and as long as there are shared reference points that can help to organize all these connections. I've seen this work, on an impressive scale, with the [Pelagios project](#), now in its fourth and even more ambitious incarnation. The Pelagios team used URIs from the Pleiades gazetteer and a community of practice to tie together archaeological, topographical, photographic, and literary information from across the ancient world, and now have their sights set on the medieval world and the East. Having seen how their approach made it possible to build connections across datasets while building connections across a community of practice, I joined forces with Ryan Shaw at the University of North Carolina and Eric Kansa of [Open Context](#) to propose a gazetteer that might do something similar with time periods (as we all know, a source of intractable disagreement, or at least inconsistency, among most archaeologists). Through the generous funding of the [NEH Office of Digital Humanities](#), we have been able to build [Periods, Organized](#) (PeriodO, for short), a gazetteer of period definitions that attempts to get around the problem of agreement by providing a URI for any period definition that includes coordinates in space, coordinates in time, and a citable authority.

And this leads me to my third story. I spent the other part of my afternoon today writing emails to PeriodO collaborators, including UNC PHD student Patrick Golden, to whose web development chops we owe a major debt (thank him for [the impressive and responsive PeriodO user interface](#)), and meeting with Sarah Buchanan, a PhD student at the School of Information here at the University of Texas at Austin, through whose efforts our initial dataset (now more than 1700 definitions) has been populated. We're approaching a point in the project where we'll be able to accept contributions directly from users, and we're trying to incorporate a few key datasets that will serve as a resource for other linked data projects. This is what really draws me to the linked-data community: even though I sometimes feel a bit lost in all the terms, the potential for this approach to connect and reveal information stands out, and — at least in the ancient world — its ability to connect us as scholars is constantly on display.

Over the next year, thanks to the [Provost Teaching Fellows](#) program at UT, I'll be working on a project that seeks to make it easier for those of us who are not RDF aficionados to generate linked-data-ready metadata, while creating tools that help us to involve students in the process. This, then, is my Day of Archaeology: working to help students connect information about the past, working to build an infrastructure in which it's easier for everyone to connect to information about the past (and to connect

one set of information to another), and working to make connections within a community that will foster and advance our shared efforts. Ok, I'm not running from the domestic to the international terminal at Boryspil to catch a plane, or getting off an overnight train from Catania at Termini, but these kinds of connections are pretty good, too.