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Review : WIRE: Women In The Roman East Project

"WIRE: Women In The Roman East Project" is a web-based digitization of historical materials that inform us of the social, political, and economic lives of women in the Roman Near East. Currently, the collection consists mostly evidence from the first centuries of Roman imperial rule (1st c. BCE - 3rd c. CE). The website is an online database curated by Professor Robyn Le Blanc (University of North Carolina at Greensboro) and Dr. Sean P. Burrus (Bowdoin College Museum of Art) that attempts to bring focus on the presence of women in archaeological, mostly primary, sources to help scholars and interested public to better understand the largely overlooked experiences of women under the empire. Gathering information about relevant pieces from publications, field records, and museums, they aim to "address the silence, and where possible, recover lost voices and different perspectives of the past."(About) The online archive has an eclectic collection of physical and textual evidence from diverse sources and it has been constantly updated as the authors broaden their research. In addition to being a database for browsing, it also intends to be a supplement to the classroom and to be integrated into related high school and higher education courses. With this goal in mind, the WIRE team incorporated an interactive map feature to present the artifacts and a "pedagogy" section to provide guidance and examples of using the website to teach. Therefore, this review will examine the use of digital platform of the website both as an online library and as an educational tool.

The accessibility of an online platform supports the website's primary aim to bring scholarly attention to the study of women in the Roman East. The academic contribution of

WIRE is evident in a simple Google search of "women in Roman East": it's one of the only sites that provides primary evidence instead of interpretive articles on the subject. It's online presence can certainly aid related academic pursuits that might otherwise be discouraged by the lack or inaccessibility of resources. What makes the WIRE collection special is that the authors gather data of a common theme horizontally across disciplines/medium. The website's most essential function is, then, to display these objects. Taking a closer look at the "browse items" tab, it's noticeable that every entry is recorded in a systematic fashion: as explained in their about page, each item is identified by the town or city associated and a random four-digit sequence. This meticulous labeling system enables the users to easily reference the items and, thereby, provides a basis of clear virtual communication. For each item, there's an image when available, its "Dublin core" data consisting of its basic archaeological information, and type-specific metadata based on the category of the object. The comprehensive information helps both the scholars to easily incorporate the item in their research and the public to also have a general idea. The combination of slideshow display and metadata list indicates a lack of interactive potential. I want to assume here that it's a conscious decision to focus on the archival values rather than flashy display features. However, the website still hasn't reached full functionality even solely as an online archive. For example, clicking on the "Greek" tag under a specific item's metadata will give a list of relevant entries, but searching the word "Greek" in the upper right search tab yields no result. Furthermore, the keyword/tags associated with each item are awkwardly both too general and too specific that might leave scholars who know exactly what they are looking for and the public who have little knowledge of the history. It definitely takes some time clicking through all the tags to get familiar with the vocabulary used in tagging items. Although there's

no clear indication that they are improving the search feature, I do think searchability is key to a more user-friendly modern archive.

As indicated in their "about" page, the authors "are developing tools to explore and interact with the resources through mapping modules, timelines, keyword explorers and more" in order to aid educational endeavors. Under the "map" section, the user can filter items by the themes on the right and view the location of the items on a modern day map. The numbers indicates how many entries in the database are associated with that region. Clicking on the numbers makes the map zoom in and give a more detailed geo-distribution until it displays all the items of a single city/town. Every pin represents an object and can lead to the item's own description page. The dragging and zooming features are also very intuitive and similar to most interactive maps. The key themes listed also suggest how the authors conceptually organize the items and help guide users with any knowledge level to explore the database.
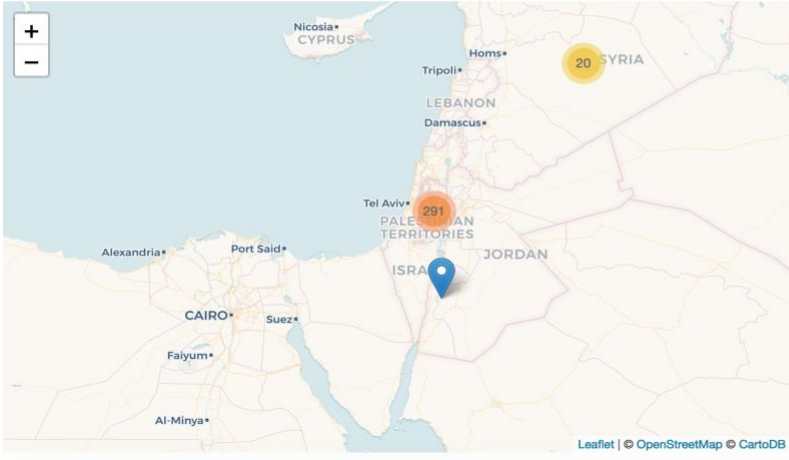
Coins
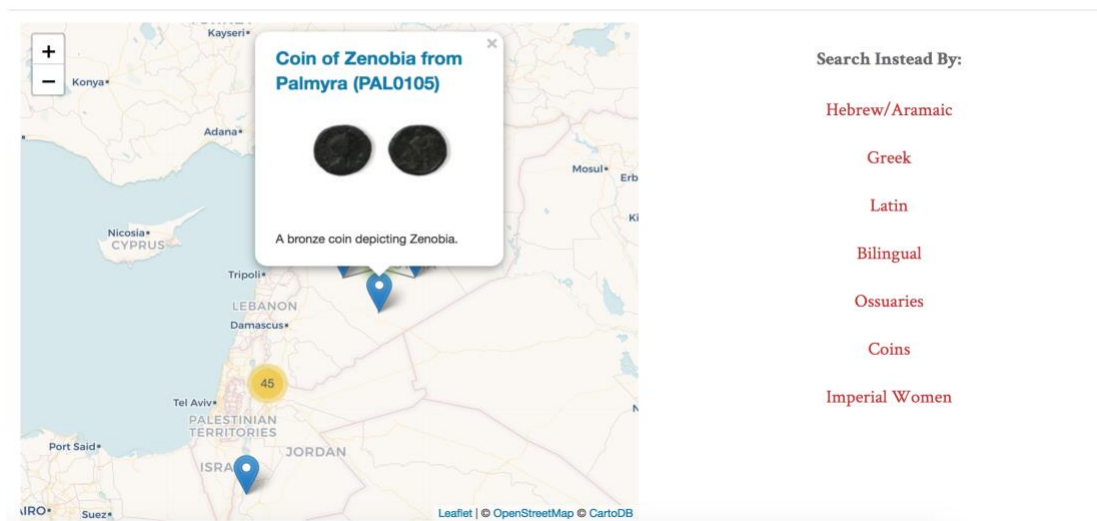
The map can also be accessed from the "browse item page", by selecting "browse map". Instead of finding items based on locations from the map, this feature aims to locate the item of interest

on the map. But the entries are all listed on the right without any grouping and it's overwhelming

to sort through the list except simple mindless browsing. But I did notice that at the bottom of

Browse Items on the Map (312 total)

Browse All   Browse by Tag   Search Items   Browse Map

Find An Item on the Map

Sarcophagus of Nateira and Innous (GER0203)

Tombstone of the family Publius Aelius Augustus (GER0202)

Tombstone of the "wife of good merit" (GER0201)

Woman's burial? (GER0204)

Bronze coin of Crispina (GER0101)

Terracotta figurine of a nude woman juggling (GER0102)

Leaflet | © OpenStreetMap © CartoDB

every item page, there's a placeholder for "geolocation." Maybe future development will provide

a hyperlink to the item's pin on the map and can more effectively locate items on the map.

Overall, the map is an effective interactive tool to showcase the geographic scope of historical

evidence of women's lives and the cultural diversity in the Roman East. It's also one of the only

contextualization the website provides.

Indeed, to become a better educational tool, interpretation and contextualization might be

inevitable for WIRE. Although its essential goal is to present primary sources of women's

presence, it can definitely incorporate display or organizing features to help the users better

understand the items. Afterall, WIRE is a curated compilation with subjective standards and

goals. And to better acknowledge the intention behind the project and to make the site more

accessible to everyone who wishes to learn about the women's experience, it should consider

providing explanations of the archaeological/historical importance of certain objects. It will be more successful at actually addressing the silence if the authors provide more rationale behind including each item. Since the website is still during its beta testing, I look forward to a site that reaches its potentials as an archive and discovers new possibilities as an educational tool.

Metadata

Title: WIRE: Women in the Roman East Project

Description: digitization of historical sources related to the experiences of women in the Roman Near East

URL: http://wireproject.org/

Name: Robyn Le Blanc and Sean P. Burrus

Place: Bowdoin College Museum of Art; University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Date Created: 2017(beta version released)

Date Accessed: February, 2019

Availability: Free