

# Constructing the Commons: Archaeological Projects as Organized, Collective Enterprises

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July 04, 2025

## Abstract

Archaeological research is inherently collaborative, in that it involves many people coming together to examine a material assemblage of mutual interest by implementing a variety of tools and methods in sequence and in tandem. Independent projects establish organizational structures and information systems to help coordinate labour and pool information derived thereof into communal data streams, which can then be applied toward the production and publication of analytical findings. However, these information commons are not egalitarian; project communities establish practical expectations for how people in different positions should engage with archaeological information based on their roles. Contributing to and extracting from the commons is therefore scaffolded by diverse yet converging commitments to a collective enterprise, which are instilled through participation in a community of practice.

Through an abductive qualitative data analysis based on recorded observations, interviews, and documents collected from three cases, this paper highlights how digital systems designed to direct the flow of information do so via the coordination of labour and the strategic arrangement of human and object agency. Specifically, I highlight how the information systems that archaeologists rely on to generate records, internal reports, published papers and integrated datasets reify, reinforce, and sometimes challenge entrenched power structures and divisions of labour. For instance, I observe that each level of documentation effectively communicates local understanding to a broader collective by rendering prior work as series of formal processes performed by interchangeable agents; recognition of prior creative agency therefore diminishes as narratives about the objects of interest are further developed. At the same time, latent awareness of the practical circumstances, decisions and actions that contributed to records' creation enable them to be recontextualized, as needed. However, this ability to recontextualize data erodes at projects' boundaries, where familiarity with creative circumstances fades.

By characterizing the documentary media that archaeologists use to capture, organize and share knowledge as tools that facilitate controlled communication, and which govern how certain people may contribute to and access collectively-maintained knowledge, this paper re-casts the formation of data commons as a social rather than a technical enterprise. In highlighting some social and relational aspects of data work that are often overlooked when developing local and global research infrastructures, the paper puts forward a theoretical framework that explains the awkwardness of using other people's data, and the underwhelming results of initiatives to integrate data in contexts of reuse.

**Keywords:** information commons, collaborative commitments, divisions of labour