The Musawwarat Graffiti Archive is an interactive open access research archive. It is dedicated to the digital preservation, publication and promotion of African cultural heritage. By sharing scientific knowledge globally it contributes to bridging the digital and knowledge divides.

Musawwarat es Sufrā in a Global Perspective

Musawwarat es Sufrā, located in Sudan, is one of the most recent additions to UNESCO’s World Heritage List. As part of the group entry ‘Archaeological sites of the Island of Meroe’ it is acknowledged as being one of the most intriguing archaeological sites on the African continent. Its temples and other monuments date primarily to the Merotic period (c. 300BC-AD350) of the kingdom of Kush, one of Africa’s major early states. The Merotic realm formed an interface between ancient Egypt, the Greco-Roman Mediterranean and the Near East. Traces of the movement and transformation of ideas and knowledge within the ancient world are manifest in the thousands of graffiti that were incised into the walls of the so-called Great Enclosure, a unique, labyrinthine building complex forming the centre of the site. This multi-layered archive of images, inscriptions and markings was added to over the past 2300 years. It reflects various aspects of the ever changing life-worlds of the people of the past, and of today. The archive also forms a treasure trove for present seekers of knowledge, be they researchers or members of the interested global public.

African Cultural Heritage Online: the Open Access Musawwarat Graffiti Archive

The Musawwarat Graffiti Archive was developed in a collaborative effort by the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, the European Cultural Heritage Online (ECHO) initiative, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and the Golden Web Foundation. It serves as a case study for the development of a work approach allowing the online publication of large image collections together with related extensive and varied data sets. These are made available for scholarly analysis as well as public appreciation via an easily accessible web interface. With the ‘Pictures in Place Database’ a solution was developed especially for the integration of systematic graffiti-focussed information and data on the exact spatial contexts in which the pictorial and inscriptive graffiti were created and used. Such space-related data sets are difficult to publish in traditional paper format and thus often neglected in research and publication. The Musawwarat Graffiti Archive thus presents a multi-faceted approach to the open access publication of intricate visual data. In an ongoing process it aims at making accessible the full corpus of graffiti at Musawwarat, thus providing an exemplary platform for barrier-free research into an extensive collection of primary sources on Africa’s past.

Open Access Initiatives and the Globalization of Knowledge

Apart from the promotion of the study and the physical and digital preservation of African cultural heritage the Musawwarat Graffiti Archive also encourages scientific collaboration regardless of users’ locations or means. Access to cultural heritage on a global scale is often restricted to members of the Western world. Non-Western as well as non-institutional researchers often find it difficult to gain access to data collections and even research results on cultural heritage, effectively excluding them from studying their/our own past and from meaningfully partaking in the global academic discourse. The Musawwarat Graffiti Archive is contributing to bridging the digital and knowledge divides by opening a major research archive, thus helping to connect researchers and research communities. It promotes open access principles based on the ECHO infrastructure and it develops ideas for bringing large bodies of primary data and research results into the global public domain.

Visit the site: http://musawwarat.graffiti.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de

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