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‘Structured Absences’: Digital Provenance Research and the Fragmented Civic Collection

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Digital provenance research tools (structured databases, controlled vocabularies, linked and open data) presuppose a documentary chain to be reconstructed; yet that chain is not always clear.

The arms and armour of the Museo Civico di Castello Ursino in Catania demonstrate this: many gaps are not accidental losses but structural consequences of the processes through which the collection was formed, arranged, transferred and silenced. The 203 objects (inv. 1101–1327) derive from three nuclei: the museum of Prince Ignazio Paternò Castello of Biscari, founded in 1758 (Pafumi 2006) and transferred to the Museo Civico between 1930 and 1934; the collections of the Benedictines of San Nicolò l’Arena; and the purchases made by director Guido Libertini and the lawyer Pappalardo. Left out of the 1980s catalogue, the collection has remained silent to this day. The project catalogues it according to the ICCD OA 3.00 standard in an Omeka S database, with a focus on provenance (Mancuso 2024), and identifies four forms of “structured absence”:

- **Testimonial absence**: Grand Tour travellers, interested only in antiquities, enacted a damnatio memoriae of the modern (Mancuso 2024). Of twenty printed sources, some mention the Biscari armoury: Riedesel (1767) and Vivant Denon (travelled 1778, publ. 1788); de Borch (1782) recognises «un assortiment d'armes anciennes pour servir à l’histoire des progrès des arts»; Bigelow (1831) describes medieval panoplies, Turkish muskets and Damascus scimitars. Others are silent, like Münter (1786) and Goethe (1787), or record rooms by then inaccessible, like de Gourbillon (1820).
- **Dispersive absence**: objects recorded in inventories but no longer present. In 1876 the Ministry declined to purchase the Biscari arms; in 1892 the antiques dealer Giuseppe Sangiorgi requested permission to export «100 or more crates» of Biscari furnishings, which were broken up at auction the following year (Mancuso 2014).
- **Material absence**: hilt fragments and parts arbitrarily dismantled or reassembled (fig. 1), where the object itself becomes the absence.
- **Acquisitive absence**: the armour inv. 1101–1104 (fig. 2) is physically intact, yet no document records how, or from which nucleus, it entered the collection. Held at the Prefettura since 1964, it also shows a dislocative absence: the object exists, but outside the museum.

These absences should not remain blank spaces but be recorded as data. In the database, a dedicated field (fig. 3) records their type, interval, last documented holder, sources consulted and research status: 198 of 203 records show at least one gap. Each field is aligned with CIDOC CRM:

- the unknown acquisition is an E8 Acquisition without identified actors;
- the gap statement and its type are expressed through P3 has note and P2 has type;
- the gap interval through P4 has time-span;
- the Prefettura through P49 has former or current keeper;
- the sources consulted through P70i is documented in (E31 Document).

Testimonial silence has no CRM equivalent. It is expressed through a local property linking the Grand Tour sources, catalogued as Omeka S items, to the collection.

Fig. 1 *Parrying dagger*, c. 1600–1700. Catania, Museo Civico di Castello Ursino, inv. 1289.

Fig. 2 *Corslet and close helmet*, 1580–1600. Catania, Museo Civico di Castello Ursino, inv. 1101–1104.

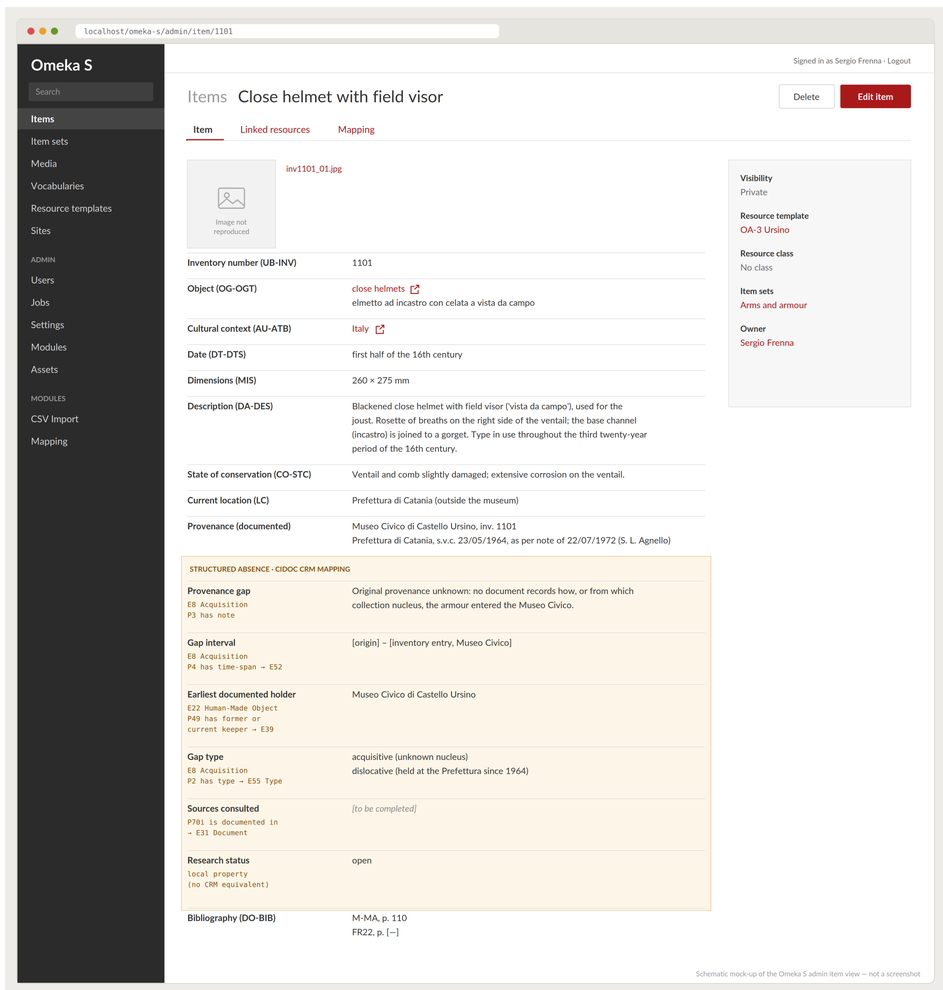

Fig. 3 *Omeka S record of the close helmet inv. 1101 (ICCD OA 3.00), with the “structured absence” field: gap type, interval, last documented holder, sources consulted and research status.*

References

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