ACTIVITY ONE
An Introduction to Databases and the Database of Religious History

The Database of Religious History (DRH) is an open access¹, digital repository of information concerning the global history of religions. Experts from around the world answer a series of questions about religious groups, places, objects and texts, and the DRH publishes these answers online. Users can then compare and contrast these answers to quickly learn more about a single religious group, check their existing assumptions, or look for patterns in religious practice through space and time. They can also look to entries to find additional sources to complete more advanced research. While the DRH is designed to be publicly accessible and user-friendly, if the user is not familiar with how databases function, getting started can be confusing and daunting. To start working with the DRH, it is therefore helpful to first consider what a database is, and how the DRH is structured. As you work with this and other databases, you will become more comfortable integrating digital tools into research and assessing data. These skills can help you in your future career as a student, and are also widely applicable to a number of professional career paths.

Working with Databases

A database is an organized collection of data (i.e., facts/information) held on a computer. Databases allow for information to be selected and organized in different ways in order to help answer different questions. When you query a database, you are asking the database to show you a select group of data. When a database is published on the internet as open access, anybody should be able to easily query the stored data and use it for research; however, it is often necessary to understand the structure of the database in order to use it effectively. A database is not a search engine. Both search engines and databases are used to sort through vast amounts of data to find relevant information. A database, however, refers to a specific, structured collection of data, while a search engine like Google uses algorithms to search through unstructured data posted online by any number of users. You cannot type any key word or query into a database and expect it to provide you with results ranked in order of relevance. This is both a limitation and a virtue of databases – you may be limited by the query options, but you are also less likely to be provided with irrelevant data.

¹ Open access means that the information can be accessed for free on the internet and used for a variety of non-commercial purposes.
Consider words that have multiple spellings, like the word “colour”. There is a ‘u’ in colour in the British/Canadian spelling of the word but not in the American spelling. If you typed “color” into a Canadian database, you may end up believing the data does not exist, while a slight change in spelling could significantly alter the results.

To provide an example, we can consider data that is entered into a table or spreadsheet. When data is first entered into a simple database, it is often organized into fields like the cells of a table, organized into columns and rows. As more data is entered, these can branch into multiple complicated or related tables. The vast amounts of data that are stored in databases tend to go beyond what could be easily referenced in a table, but for now, we will look at a simple example.

### TABLE 1: DECORATED FIGURINES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Figurine</th>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Size (height)</th>
<th>Colour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bes</td>
<td>Human</td>
<td>10cm</td>
<td>Blue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hathor</td>
<td>Cow</td>
<td>15cm</td>
<td>Pink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horus</td>
<td>Hawk</td>
<td>10cm</td>
<td>Red</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amun</td>
<td>Ram</td>
<td>15cm</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 includes some basic information. Thanks to the title of the table, it is clear that the information all relates to a collection of decorated figurines. The top row gives the column headings, which demonstrate what information has been collected. The table is only useful if we want to know something about the name, form, size, or colour of an entered figurine. It is also not complete – no colour has been entered for the Amun figurine.

If this data were entered into the database, and you searched for “Horus”, you could be provided with the form, size, and colour of the specific Horus figurine added into the database. If you searched for “Osiris”, however, you would receive zero results. In addition, if you wanted to compare the colours of figurines, but typed in, “color”, you would also receive zero results. Similarly, if you searched for “colour” and “Amun”, nothing would show up, because no data has been entered into the relevant field.

To understand how information is organized into a specific database you may have to read some initial information about how the database is organized. You may need to experiment in order to get a sense of which fields exist, and so which queries will be most fruitful. While this can be frustrating and time-consuming at first, once you are comfortable using databases for research, you will be much more successful at finding relevant information that may otherwise be unavailable on general search engines.
The Structure of the Database of Religious History

As noted above, the data that has been entered into the DRH consists of answers to a series of standardized questions provided by expert scholars who study the history of religion in different global regions. The preliminary answers to these questions mainly consist of the simple responses: yes, no, field doesn’t know, and I don’t know. The answers to these queries can be quantified (expressed in numerical form) and used to show general patterns and trends across regions and time periods; however, as these questions can often be complicated and difficult to answer, scholars also have the option of adding substantial comments to explain how they have interpreted the question and how their answer reflects their position on the subject. In this way, the DRH consists of quantitative and qualitative (descriptive) information.

When using the database, there are two significant ways to search for information. First, users can browse for data related to a specific religious group or place. This search will provide the user information in the style of an encyclopedia entry, with a series of expert answers on the specified topic, in addition to a map showing the relevant region. Each entry also includes a number of additional print and online source citations that can be used for further investigation into the topic. For instance, if a user were to search for “Buddhism”, they would be provided with a selection of entries related to Buddhism in different regions and time periods. If they were to search for “Rome”, they would be provided with a selection of entries related to different religious groups and monuments connected to Rome.

The second way to search for data is to use the visualization tools in order to compare all of the expert answers to a single question. This will allow users to compare a religious practice or belief across a wide geographic and temporal area. For instance, one of the questions scholars have answered is, “Is supernatural monitoring present?” Using the visualization tool, you can search for the answers to this single question. The different answers will be displayed on a colour-coded map and timeline, showing the different religious groups that do or do not believe in supernatural monitoring. The answers can be filtered to examine a specific region, time frame, or to limit the answers to a specific religious tradition as well. Users can also view and compare the qualitative answers to the filtered questions by selecting the “table view”.

As noted above, many of the questions provided in the database are difficult to answer. There is therefore the possibility that some scholars will provide different responses to the same question. If a knowledgeable user disagrees with one of the entries, they also have the option to challenge an answer and leave a competing comment. In this way, users are actively building on to the database and contributing to our understanding of religious history.

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Getting Started

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Reading Response Questions

1. What is the difference between a database and a search engine?
2. What are some of the reasons that a user may receive zero responses when querying a database?
3. How does the DRH gather quantitative and qualitative information?
4. What are the two main ways that a user can search for information in the DRH?
5. Consider the structure and function of databases, and the ability of experts to challenge each other’s answers. What does this suggest to you about the creation of historical knowledge?