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The Database of Religious History as an Open-Access Digital Resource for the Study of the Ancient Mediterranean World

Caroline Arbuckle MacLeod [1,*], Megan J. Daniels [2] and M. Willis Monroe [3]

[1] Department of History, St. Thomas More College, University of Saskatchewan, 1437 College Dr, Saskatoon, SK S7N 0W6, Canada
[2] Department of Ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern Studies, University of British Columbia, 1866 Main Mall, Buchanan C227, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z1, Canada; megan.daniels@ubc.ca
[3] Department of Historical Studies, University of New Brunswick, 120 Tilley Hall 9 Macaulay Lane, Fredericton, NB E3B 5A3, Canada; willis.monroe@unb.ca
* Correspondence: carbuckle@stmcollege.ca

Abstract

In the current digital world, there is an incredible amount of information at our fingertips. In fact, there is so much information that the sheer amount of data can be overwhelming. As historians, archaeologists, and cultural heritage experts, a significant amount of research or the use of assistants can be necessary simply to shift through centuries of publications to compile relevant resources before cultural questions can be adequately explored. This challenge compounds when attempting cross-cultural analyses. The Database of Religious History (DRH) was initially created in 2012 by Dr. Edward Slingerland as a digital tool designed to help offset these challenges and provide a means for experts, students, and historical enthusiasts to begin to explore significant religious questions without wading through centuries of data. In this article, the authors discuss how information for the DRH is collected from experts, and how it can be organized and queried to explore religious questions. While the database covers the global history of religion, this discussion focuses in particular on its use for exploring the ancient Mediterranean world. The authors also discuss pedagogical resources for incorporating the DRH into classrooms to improve students' digital literacy.

Keywords: Database of Religious History; digital literacy; ancient Mediterranean; history of religion

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1. Introduction

The rising digitalization of both our personal and professional lives has resulted in a substantial increase in the number of digital and online tools that are globally accessible. The disciplines of archaeology and history, and the related cultural heritage sector, are of course, no exception. As experts in these fields experiment with different digital tools, build new databases for their archives, and create new publication resources, an incredible amount of data has moved online. Unfortunately, this has not translated into the accessible, interdisciplinary utopia that it had the potential to be. Much of the data is stored behind paywalls, in complicated databases, and each discipline continues to use unique jargon that is incomprehensible to other experts, let alone an interested public. The sheer amount of data that is available can also be an overwhelming barrier for cross-cultural comparisons and discussions. Moreover, there continues to be a significant divide between the resources created by and for academics and those that are designed for public-facing institutions,

such as museums and libraries. The recent focus on artificial intelligence (AI) has compounded these issues, as tools uncritically combine different sources of information and often incorporate errors or erroneous data.

As discussed in more detail in the background section, the Database of Religious History (DRH) was initially created in 2012 by Dr. Edward Slingerland to help address these challenges.[1] The project is an online, open access database that provides expert sourced data on a global selection of religious groups, places, and texts. Drawing from a diversity of academic and non-academic expertise, it is intended to be accessible for both an expert and public audience, with different options for displaying and manipulating information. Recently, staff at the database have been particularly focused on gathering data for the ancient Mediterranean world. Our focus on both textual and material data allows scholars studying a variety of evidence to contribute to and build on this resource, and we are continuing to add new tools to assist with this process. Finally, pedagogy packages have been designed to help instructors easily integrate these resources into their courses and improve the digital media literacy of their students. In this chapter, the authors provide an overview of the background, guiding philosophy, and function of the DRH, before expanding on these new developments to demonstrate the potential of the database as a resource for the study and exploration of the ancient Mediterranean world.

2. The Database of Religious History: Background Information

The DRH was created in 2012 at the University of British Columbia as the output of a series of ongoing interdisciplinary discussions about the lack of historical data available to answer large-scale questions in the history and psychology of humanity [1]. The compiling of quantitative data on religion is not unique to the DRH. Other databases on religious groups include the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA), which houses statistical datasets (e.g., demographic census records, survey polls) on religious trends, Brill's World Religion Database, and the Paw Research Center, but the focus of these is on the modern world. Historical religion databases include Pulotu, through the Max Planck Institute, which houses data on Austronesian religious beliefs and practices. The closest cousin to the DRH is Seshat: Global History Databank, which encodes data using a centralized research team to study macro-historical trends, including but not limited to religion's role in societal development. There thus remained several gaps in the landscape, including a deeper focus on turning deep, qualitative approaches to religious history into a structured, quantitative encyclopaedia created by experts across a variety of subfields.[2]

Director Edward Slingerland took on the challenge by creating the database project and seeking to recruit historical experts to provide and code the data necessary for analysis. This approach contrasted with other attempts to utilize non-expert research assistants as the primary method of data entry. By directly involving academic experts in the project, the DRH is designed to ensure a level of scholarly rigor and involvement that would not be possible if database entry solely relied on secondary source literature and student assistants. Scholars outside of the project have benefitted from this growing open dataset by, for instance, testing existing theories on pathogens and food taboos [2] or the mathematical space of religion shaped by similarity and difference [3]. Over the intervening years, the project staff have focused more on the potential benefits of recruiting and providing data for historians themselves rather than only as a source of data for quantitative analysis. As a result, the project is now designed to be not just as a source of data but also as a comprehensive encyclopedia of scholarly perspectives on the history of religion while also hosting relevant pedagogical materials.

The theoretical basis for the project takes its inspiration initially from Émile Durkheim's idea that studying the observable traces of religious practice in the historical record, such as

archaeological remains of temples or religious texts, allows a scholar to build up a conception of a "religion" from people who "profess [beliefs] and that practice the corresponding rites" [4], p. 41. The DRH scholarly staff feel that historians and archaeologists are the best sources for, and interpreters of, the "observable traces" to which Durkheim refers. More recently, Anne Taves has offered a useful theoretical model for constructing and defining religion and religious groups that she calls the "Building-Block Approach" [5]. Taves uses a component part model for understanding how religions are composed of and constructed from "religious things", often called an "ascriptive" model of religion. As shall be discussed below, her model aligns well with our poll structure, considering each question as an element of analysis. The theoretical underpinning of the project helped to inform our initial guiding motivation behind the founding of the project; a familiar one to most scholars working in historical fields—the sheer amount of data that is available in various media has created an insurmountable barrier, often leaving scholars overwhelmed at the prospect of sifting through this information to find points of comparison. While digital tools have the potential to provide an inroads to this task, such devices do not yet exist. As Armin W. Geertz noted, "A crucial lacuna in our current state of knowledge is systematic and easily searchable databases containing the cumulative empirical data that archaeologists, historians, linguists, ethnographers, sociologists, and many others have collected during the past few centuries" [6]. The DRH has been designed to allow scholars to input information about the global history of religion through both quantitative and qualitative means in an effort to serve as a tool to meet this challenge [7].

The conversion of data between qualitative and quantitative forms is not without difficulty, however. Recent reviews of the project have highlighted strengths and weaknesses [8,9]. Some of the weaknesses pointed out include the bias of its organically recruited expert pool and the resulting coverage, limitations imposed by the length of the questionnaires, and inherent difficulty in turning rich qualitative sources into digital data, and a lack of interoperable data. These are valid concerns that are always under discussion internally. The project staff are especially aware of the complexity of the data conversion task and have designed the interface to enable a high degree of flexibility when answering questionnaires. We understand the complexity of this task and have designed the data collection interface to enable a high degree of flexibility when entering data. The issue frequently comes down to one of generalization. Can historians answer questions about the past in a definitive sense (i.e., selecting an answer from a set list of options)? While most scholars would rightly find this task difficult, we operate under the assumption that we often do this work implicitly when writing historical studies. Our prose naturally builds in caveats and comments in order to preserve the generalizations that are made because historical data is never perfectly preserved. The DRH allows for multiple answers, comments, and rich media all in an attempt to ameliorate this issue and offer the experts as much flexibility as possible in order to best reflect the historical record [10]. It answers calls in recent years for historians and other humanities scholars to develop rigorous methods to produce and critique generalizations gleaned from the historical record, combining quantitative, digital, and science-based approaches with more traditional humanistic strengths "in deep, textured qualitative readings of historical sources" [11,12].

3. The Database of Religious History: Form and Function

The DRH now serves as an online, open-access repository of information about the global history of religion [12]. The data is gathered through entries completed by field experts, which take the form of questionnaires, referred to as "polls" in the database. Once finalized, each entry is provided with a DOI to ensure the data remains findable, accessible, and citable. Experts either have PhDs related to their topic, are PhD candidates, or are

otherwise considered an expert in their field—for instance an archaeologist with several years of experience working on a specific religious site, a specialized museum curator, or an Indigenous Elder. When an expert sets up their entry, they are asked to add a basic description of their topic, which serves as an introduction, and to designate a year range which their entry covers. They are then invited to create a GIS referenced map by defining a region using a simple mapping tool, and then use a selection of "tagging trees" to mark their entry as related to specific locations and religious groups. Once this initial data is added, they then choose a standard set of questions based on three different polls.

Currently, these polls include "Religious Group", "Religious Place", and "Religious Text". Defining these units of analysis is of course challenging. The project intentionally leaves strict definitions out of the poll categorization in order to allow for the widest collection of data [13].[3] However, we do provide a rough definition when requested for our "Religious Group" poll: "A community or network of people (locatable in space and time) who share common practices, beliefs, and/or institutions, but who are not necessarily conscious members of an explicitly recognized group. The group can be an emic (indigenous) name or category or an etic (scholarly attributed) one". The designation has been left somewhat ambiguous to encourage scholars to include different communities and populations that have previously been excluded from more restrictive categories such as "societies" and "cultures".[4] "Religious Place" refers to a specific monument, tomb, or specified location that has religious significance for these religious groups. "Religious Text" is a text that has religious significance for these groups. Each of these polls then provides a series of different but overlapping queries. The latter two (and future planned polls) were created in order to enable scholars whose expertise lay outside of socio-cultural history to contribute their knowledge to the database. Archaeologists, for example, find that the questions in the "Religious Place" poll align more closely with the types of evidence they are familiar with, and likewise with philologists and the "Religious Text" poll. Behind the scenes many questions from these polls are linked to core questions in the "Religious Group" poll so that the data can be better accumulated across the project.

Each poll begins with questions about general sources for the topic. For the Religious Group poll, the questions are then grouped around the following topics: General Variables, Beliefs, Practices, and Society and Institutions. This poll is therefore most concerned with establishing the general variables for a religious group, and the society in which these individuals practice. The Religious Place poll focuses on a material site and monument associated with a Religious Group. The query topics are therefore different: General Variables, Design and Material Remains, Beliefs and Practices, and Institutions and Scriptures. There is also a space for experts to upload media related to their place. While there are some overlapping areas, the questions allow experts to focus on the evidence for religious practice specific to a single monument or site. Finally, the Religious Text poll includes sections on: Sources and Corpora, General Variables, Production & Intended Audience, Context and Content of the Text (Beliefs and Practices), and Institutions & Production Environment of the Text. While some areas again overlap with the other polls, these queries ask experts to consider both the materiality and context of a specific text, and how it can help to provide information about a Religious Group. The ability to outline geographic regions, to tag locations and religious groups, and the various overlapping queries, helps users find related entries. The queries themselves are designed to help gather both qualitative and quantitative data about each of the topics.

To answer each query, the experts are usually asked to first select one of the following answers: "Yes", "No", "Field Doesn't Know" and "I don't know". Once they have selected one of these answers, they then have the option to add comments to explain their answers. Based on their selection, they may also be asked follow up questions to help break down

the answers further. For example, one query notes, "A supreme high god is present". If the expert answers "No", they have the option of adding a comment, and then moving on to the next query. If they answer "Yes", follow up questions related to the nature of the god, and how they are manifested, will become accessible. By answering first with a multiple-choice selection, the data can be quantified, while the comments allow experts to add qualitative statements. The combination of the two reporting styles allows the data to be accessed and manipulated in various ways using either the Browse or Visualization features of the database.

When users approach the database, the most straightforward option to find and organize the entered data is the "Browse" feature. This allows users to search through the collection of entries by either sorting entries in groups based on features such as publication date, author, region, or poll type, or simply by typing in a search term. This will provide a list of related individual entries. When an entry is accessed in this manner, the information that the individual expert entered is provided, in what is basically a structured encyclopedia-style article. These can be read online or downloaded as a PDF. A final weakness of the database is that while the data is accessible and open-access, it is presently not interoperable, which is a challenge currently being addressed.

The other option is to search and collect data through the "Visualize" feature. This allows a user to search for answers to specific queries across time and space. So, for example, if the user were to search for the query, "Belief in afterlife", they would be able to visualize all the answers, and related answers, to this query from across the database. As of May 2026, this would therefore provide the data gathered from 1146 answers (see Figure 1). The "Quick Visualization" shows the data through graphs, a map, and a time chart. The answer distribution graphs show a breakdown of the different answers, yes, no, field doesn't know, and I don't know; the map shows which regions are represented by the different answers; and a time chart shows the dates to which the answers relate. Users can also select to view the "Table View" which shows each of the answers, the entry to which it is connected, any additional comments, and its author. Users can also refine their search to limit the visualization to specific polls, geographic regions, time periods and more.

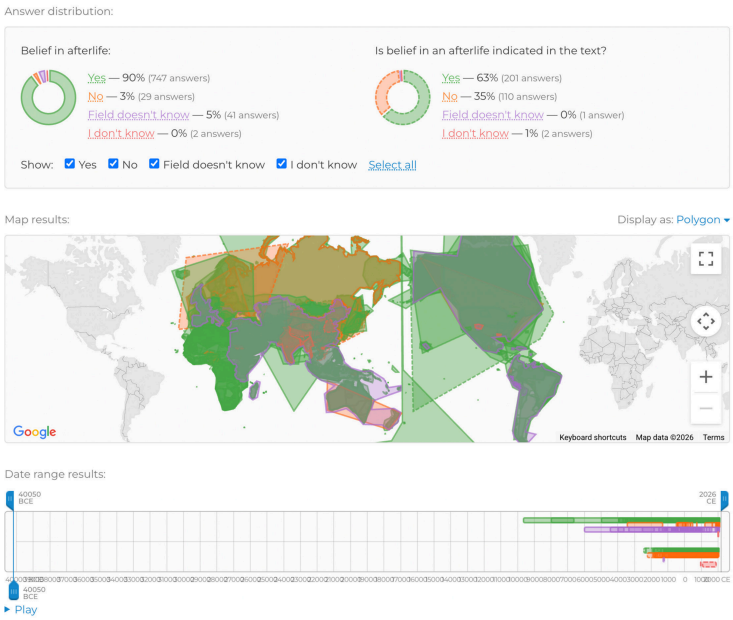


Figure 1. Results from visualization tool query: "Belief in Afterlife". The "Answer Distribution" field shows the distribution of all answers, and this example includes the answers from the Group Poll on the left, and the Text Poll on the right. (Note, percentages are rounded).

A final feature of note allows the database to be even more collaborative. The decision to have vetted experts as the source of data was made in order to ensure that the entries are completed by those with a significant amount of up-to-date knowledge about the topic; however, this does not mean that other members of the public cannot participate. Any individuals are welcome to sign up to the database as users under a particular editor, and have the option to "Affirm", "Challenge" or "Comment" on an existing answer. This helps to promote debate and ensures that additional viewpoints are included.

3.1. The Religious Object Poll

Currently, the Group, Place, and Text polls allow for open communication between religious historians, philosophers, and archaeologists. This information can of course also be used by curators, researchers, and other individuals from the cultural heritage sector as background information for exhibitions and to provide insights regarding the contexts of their collections. In addition, museum curators have served as experts for a number of existing group, place, and text entries; however, the addition of the forthcoming Object Poll will allow these experts to add entries on objects from their institutions to the database, adding to the total information provided for the various included groups. This can help draw attention to these objects, and help other researchers locate related materials.

As with the other polls, scholars begin by including information about the object's find location, the approximate dates for its use, and a brief description or introduction to the artefact and its religious significance. The selection of associated religious groups and regions from the tagging trees also immediately connects this object to additional entries on associated religious groups and relevant places and texts. The Object Poll queries are organized by General Variables, Beliefs and Practices, and Institutions and Scriptures, while the individual queries focus on the find context, the materiality of the object, and how it connects to the beliefs and practices of a religious group. This forthcoming poll has the potential to contribute significantly to the conversations afforded by the database. Objects add a crucial new dimension of evidence for the study of the history of religion, and as this will soon be the smallest level of analysis possible on the database, it opens up space for a multitude of new entries. This will also create new opportunities for pedagogy for those in material studies.

3.2. The Database as a Pedagogy Tool

As an open-access tool written in accessible language, the DRH is also designed to serve as an excellent pedagogical resource [15], particularly for encouraging students in the humanities to improve their digital data literacy. This has been identified as a core foundation for education by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The OECD is an international association that works with governments, policy makers and citizens, "to shape policies that foster prosperity, equality, opportunity and well-being for all" [16]. In 2015, the OECD developed the *Future of Education and Skills 2030* project to consider what skills would be necessary to prepare students for the future. In 2019, they published a Conceptual Learning Framework that outlined the core foundations that would "provide a basis for developing student agency and transformative competencies" [17], p. 2. They highlighted digital data literacy as a core foundation, and noted that, "being literate in this context requires the ability to read, interpret, make meaning of and communicate through digital texts and sources from a variety of online media" [17], p. 5. On the importance of integrating humanities, STEM, and digital competencies in higher education, see also [18,19]. They describe the "explosion of data and the advent of 'big data'", as a particular challenge and opportunity for the current generation of young people, quoting the work of Carlson et al. to express that students must understand "what

data mean, including how to read charts appropriately, draw correct conclusions from data, and recognise when data are being used in misleading or inappropriate ways" [20], p. 5.

Although these works are focused on the educational needs of school-aged children, scholars have addressed similar challenges at the undergraduate level [21], p. 4, with specific reports in the fields of religious studies [22], archaeology [23,24], and Classical Studies [25]. The present authors, who teach courses on the ancient Mediterranean, have also noted the difficulty their own students have had when asked to work with simple databases or to manipulate data in spreadsheets. Part of the problem is that many of the instructors in the humanities and social sciences have also either not been adequately trained in these skill sets, or lack the resources to integrate such activities into courses without adding significant projects and time into curricula. To address this challenge, we have designed a series of pedagogy packages that are freely available to download from the database website. The packages include both student handouts and instructor guides to ensure the process is as straightforward as possible for both parties.

In order to ensure the success of these packages, the selection of activities and tasks have been designed according to the suggestions provided in *Strategies and Best Practices for Data Literacy Education: Knowledge Synthesis Report* [21]. After reviewing a number of research reports, case studies, and available resources, Risdale et al. suggest six key takeaways that should be considered when teaching to improve data literacy—many of which apply to good pedagogical practices in general. These six points are as follows: (1) The benefits of teaching with data must be clearly communicated to the students. (2) Students must have practical, hands-on experience working with digital tools and data, and have time to experiment, explore, and make and correct mistakes. (3) Module-based learning that allows students to slowly build on their skills is essential. (4) Project-based learning is the most successful way to ensure that students understand the concepts being taught. (5) The use of real-world data, as opposed to mock data created for the purpose of teaching, is a much more effective teaching tool. (6) Projects and activities that are related to the existing course subject matter are more successful for encouraging data literacy [21], p. 5.

With these points in mind, DRH staff designed nine pedagogy packages. (1) *An Introduction to Databases and the Database of Religious History* sets out guidelines and definitions for those who have very little experience working with any kind of database. Of particular importance for today's students, it explains the difference between a database and a search engine, a vital distinction that causes much confusion and frustration for those unaware. The exercises that accompany the student worksheet ask students to critically consider the structure and function of databases and the creation of historical knowledge. (2) *Browsing the Database of Religious History* and (3) *Visualizing Data and the Database of Religious History* asks the students to work with the two main tools the DRH provides to access and manipulate data, as described above. Through step-by-step instructions, the students are guided through searches and data queries, and then have the opportunity to experiment with finding data related to their own interests. Additional questions require the student to reflect critically on the process. (4) *Digital Tools and the Study of the History of Religion* is a guided discussion about the use of digital tools to study history and religions. It can be used for a more in-depth class discussion or a term paper guide. The next two activities, (5) *Thinking Critically About Expert Knowledge* and (6) *Considering and Comparing Religious Practices* are designed for students who have learned to use the database, and require more advanced work with the Browse and Visualization tools, respectively. (7) *Undergraduate Supervised Entry* guides students and instructors through the process of filling out an entry as a class. (8) *Guided Graduate Entry* is designed to help graduate students who are filling out entries as experts in their own right. Finally, (9) *Analyzing*

DRH Data provides activities where students are given the opportunity to work with and manipulate raw data in spreadsheets, and create their own visualizations of real DRH data.

The student worksheets include notes about the purpose of the activity, directly stating which skills are being developed, and why this is valuable for the students to know. The packages provide hands-on, project-based learning, and are designed to build on the student's skills slowly, allowing for module-based learning as well. The wide range of topics covered by the database will also allow students and instructors to work with real-data directly related to course work; moreover, the *Undergraduate Supervised Entry*, provides students the opportunity to contribute to the database and work on a professional project in their field. Instructors also have the option of selecting different activities based on their students' experience with databases and the goals of the course.

The packages are designed to help instructors integrate the database without a significant amount of initial planning and exploration; however, as instructors become more familiar with the different entries, they will no doubt find different ways to tailor the data to their purpose. For additional examples of how the database has been used for pedagogical purposes for specific regions, see [26]. Some scholars have already found the specific queries useful as exam or discussion questions, full entries can be assigned as readings, and the visualization tool can be used to create course visuals. Instructors are encouraged to share their different approaches with the DRH, and to provide any feedback when using the pedagogy packages. As all of the materials are published open-access online, they can be easily updated to include instructor feedback.

3.3. The DRH and the Ancient Mediterranean World

Due to a generous grant from the John Templeton Foundation, the DRH team was able to hire seven postdoctoral researchers. The majority of these researchers are experts on the religious practices and peoples of the ancient Mediterranean, each focused on a different region. These include western Europe, Greece, Rome, West Asia, and North Africa, from prehistoric periods through to the early Christian era. Through the efforts of these individuals, and of additional editors and recruited experts, a significant amount of data has been added to the DRH in the last few years, to represent the beliefs and practices of the major religious groups and their associated monuments and texts. Each postdoctoral scholar designed a list of desirable entries that they believe will be necessary to establish the foundational data for their region in order to ensure its usefulness for the field. This list was then peer reviewed by an additional senior scholar in their region to ensure that significant entries were not overlooked. This has provided a considerable foundation of valuable data, to which additional experts have continued to contribute to ensure the inclusion of additional groups, sites, texts, new discoveries or competing theories. This will become particularly valuable for background information for museum artefacts with the forthcoming release of the "Religious Object" poll.

Through the selection of entries, the goal is to provide different examples for each major chronological and spatial shift in religious beliefs and practices. Taking ancient Egypt as an example, a broad Religious Group entry is, "Ancient Egyptian Religion in the Early 18th Dynasty" [27]. This refers to the shared beliefs and practices of individuals in Egypt from approximately 1550-1425 BCE, before and after which there are significant differences in the overall approach to the worship of specific deities, afterlife beliefs, burial practices, and in the construction and decoration of tombs and temples, for instance. A Religious Place entry that relates to this group is, "The Temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el Bahri" [28], which refers to a religious monument constructed during the early 18th Dynasty, and which provides examples of how religious practices and beliefs were materialized during this period. A related "Religious Text" entry is "The Ancient Egyptian Amduat in the Tomb of

Thutmose III" [29]. This again provides an example of a text that exemplifies the beliefs that are prominent during the early 18th Dynasty in Egypt. Each of these entries are tagged with a geographical tag that connects them to Egypt, and the dates would demonstrate that they are contemporary. Database users can therefore easily find general information about this specific community through the Religious Group poll, and quickly locate Place and Text examples.

In addition to drawing on multiple entries to investigate a single religious group, the entries on various periods, regions, and groups of the ancient Mediterranean also allow for a multi-scalar examination of numerous religious sites and practices within and between regions. The study of the multiple and intersecting communities that constitute ancient Greece provides a useful example. The region of Attica, for instance, which encompasses Athens and surrounding territories, is represented by entries on several major religious sites dating to the Archaic to Late Roman periods (ca. 700 BCE–300 CE), which can be accessed using the "Browse" feature. Coverage includes the numerous cults of the agora (city centre) of Athens [30], the temple of Hephaestus [31], the sanctuary of Demeter and Kore at Eleusis [32], and the sanctuary of the Mother of the Gods ("Metroon") [33]. The entries on the structures, beliefs, and activities associated with each of these sites alongside accompanying bibliography make this collection of entries an excellent resource for scholars conducting research on specific sites in Athens and the region as a whole.

Robust coverage over areas beyond Athens includes more understudied regions in the Greek world, such as northern Greece (Thessaly and Macedonia), with entries on the ancient Thessalians as a religious group [34], alongside particular religious places such as the sanctuary of the Mother of the Gods at Pharsalos [35], the Cave of the Nymphs at Pharsalos [36], and the sanctuaries at Pherai [37]. Regions and sites within Thessaly are rarely found as a unit outside of specialist literature, and the inclusion of more hard-to-study regions in the Mediterranean world like Thessaly will continue to make the Database an important open-access resource for researchers. Researchers can also engage in cross-regional topics, for instance the appearance of Egyptian gods in Greece, with entries on the cults of the Egyptian gods in Marathon [38], Demetrias [39], Gortyn [40], Dion [41], and Delos [42]. The "visualize" tool, as discussed previously, can be used for even broader queries. Entering one of the database questions into the query box—"Are pilgrimages present?"—and defining date ranges and a geographical area around the Mediterranean allows researchers to visualize the emergence and spread of religious rites involving pilgrimage in a given period using the timeline slider.

Beyond the polytheistic religions discussed above, the DRH contains a developing collection of entries on Abrahamic religions in their ancient and modern manifestations. These include religious places, such as the Temple-Church of Aphrodisias [43], the Kaloutsiani Mosque of Ioannina [44], and the Synagogue at Gamla [45]. Entries also cover religious groups and movements (e.g., Babylonian Rabbinic Judaism [46]; Religion in Judah [47]; the 'Abbāssids [48]), and specific texts, including numerous books of the Hebrew Bible. Notably, an earlier study by the DRH team [49] was able to use a range of expert entries to test broader top-down categories imposed on religions, including Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic Mediterranean religions. One result was a clear articulation between Mediterranean Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic religious traditions based on the presence of messianic beliefs, funerary practices, and membership requirements.

The entries in the DRH range from well-known religious places and groups (e.g., Delphi, Greece [50]), to more understudied regions, movements, texts, and peoples. Furthermore, the recruitment of a wide variety of experts to construct DRH entries and the accessibility of the DRH platform have allowed for the inclusion of voices "less typically represented in the field of religious studies" [49]. Nonetheless, lacunae still remain in

coverage, which can certainly lead to more ambiguous results in analyses. The continual recruitment of experts and the incorporation of the DRH into classroom teaching and digital literacy assignments will help to ameliorate many of these gaps. As more data is populated, we will be able to define and apply more approaches to the question of whether we can speak of a distinctly Mediterranean religiosity and explore when and how that emerges [51–55]. Specifically, to consider whether there is "something that we might call Mediterranean *religion* (in the singular)" (original emphasis) [51], p. 35. Tappenden, exploring the functionality of the DRH specifically, argues that by quantifying the presence or absence of different religious features for different religious communities throughout the Mediterranean, it will be possible "to identify commonalities and differences that cut across the usual cultural, traditional, and communal boundaries". Most significantly, the fact that the data is quantitative will allow us to base our conclusions on more than "the historian's own intuition" of commonalities and differences [51], p. 36.

Thinking of how the DRH connects to broader audiences, this question of commonalities and connections has become ever more important in the twenty-first century as we move towards more holistic and integrated historical models of human history and assess new avenues and responsibilities in bridging academic and public knowledge [56]. In their groundbreaking 2000 monograph on Mediterranean history, Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell suggest religion as one of the key factors that enabled the unity within the diversity that characterizes Mediterranean history: "The indissoluble link between religion and the movements of very numerous individuals over a great variety of distances should be apparent: it is not by any means limited to the greatest international pilgrimages. Understanding something of the relation of religion and space is essential for understanding the way in which cultural unities have developed in Mediterranean history" [57] p. 459. While this emphasis of mobility and connectivity has certainly made an impact in academic circles, resulting in veritable paradigm shifts in terms of how we conceive of human history, it is vital to bring these shifts into pedagogy and broader public discourses. The DRH offers one inroad to accomplishing these aims, particularly through the pedagogical packages described above.

At the time that Tappenden was writing, the DRH was still in its infancy, and there was not enough data to begin this type of analysis; however, at the time of writing this chapter, there are currently 1788 published entries representing 411,695 discreet answers. More recent projects have been able to use this data to explore a variety of challenges. One such project, for instance, investigated a taxonomic view of the "Religious Group" entries in the database [49]. The authors explored how different clusters of the data emerged, and how this might be used to examine both regional similarities and differences in religious beliefs and practices, and also how the scholars were thinking about different religious questions. Such projects can help not only in considering the philosophy of religion, but will also be of interest to the scholars of history and archaeology working in specific global regions.

In relation to pedagogy, however, these encompassing approaches remain challenging, and are often only addressed at the level of the graduate seminar. At the undergraduate level, approaches to the ancient Mediterranean religion tend to remain siloed in deceptively neat cultural packages (e.g., "Greek Religion", "Roman Religion"). Students at this level often lack the opportunities to question these artificial boundaries. In the recent decade, however, there has arisen a fruitful questioning among scholars and educators of these assumptions about cultural boundedness and purity in the ancient Mediterranean—particularly concerning the cultural supremacy afforded to the Greeks and Romans [58,59]. Teaching beyond such boundaries has become essential, and the potential to use the DRH to teach students to think cross-culturally about religion is immense.

4. Conclusions

The Database of Religious History is an ambitious undertaking that aims to provide a significant tool created by and for experts on religious history, while also serving as an open-access resource for students and an interested public. By following a standardized format and encouraging the use of standardized language, the project designers aim to remove significant region and discipline-specific barriers. As an online resource, the DRH can also be updated as critiques and new questions arise. Most recently, this has inspired the creation of the forthcoming Object Poll, adding to the currently available selection of Group, Place, and Text polls. This selection is designed to encourage the cooperation of historians, archaeologists, philologists, curators, and other scholars, as we work towards a better understanding of the incredibly complicated and diverse topic of world religions. Each entry adds to the qualitative and quantitative information that allows for such large-scale investigations as Mediterranean religiosity—a significant focus for the current efforts of database staff. In addition to serving as a research tool, the DRH also provides valuable pedagogical materials that have been designed to encourage digital media literacy, to train students with the valuable skills that they will need to succeed in today's global society.

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Notes

1 One of the authors (Monroe) serves as the DRH project co-director, and all authors have served in editorial capacity for the project.
2 Another recent discussion of the database has also discussed how it and other databases are contributing to cultural evolutionary analyses [1].
3 In fact, the loose definition has served the project well in the past by enabling experts with knowledge of entries that might have fallen outside the initial conception of a "group" by the editors to contribute the project and expand our own definitions; for instance, the entry 'Supreme Master Ching Hai World Society' was categorized by the expert as a "transnational cybersect" [14].
4 For a discussion of the philosophy behind the selection of "Religious Group" as a defining category see ([7], p. 323).

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