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Seshat: Global History Databank Publishes First Set of Historical Data

The Seshat Project
The Evolution Institute

Abstract

This short report describes the publication of the first batch of historical data produced by *Seshat: Global History Databank*. The data is available as free, open access material [here](#); see also our [website](#) for more information on the Seshat project as a whole.



Figure 1. Screen-grab of map showing regions included in first batch of data published to <http://dacura.scss.tcd.ie/seshat/>.

Seshat: Global History Databank

Seshat: Global History Databank (Seshat) has published its first batch of systematically coded, expert-vetted, and referenced historical data, which can be accessed at <http://dacura.scss.tcd.ie/seshat/>. Seshat is a large, online, open-access store of information about the human past, a groundbreaking resource that is bringing together the most current and comprehensive body of knowledge about human history available.

Previously, our collective knowledge of history remained scattered throughout various texts and isolated in the brains of individual historians. *Seshat: Global History Databank* gathers as much of this knowledge as

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possible into a single, large database that can be used to test scientific hypotheses about the evolution of human societies during the last 10,000 years. The Seshat Project works directly with academic experts on past societies who volunteer their knowledge on the political and social organization of human groups from the Neolithic to the modern period. We value our [expert contributors](#) and gratefully acknowledge the time they put into sharing their expertise with us.

Any scholar or curious individual interested in studying the human past can use the extensive, high-quality, curated information in the Seshat Databank to help tackle Big Questions in cultural and social evolution. How did humans evolve from living in small tribes to huge empires and modern states? What are the roots of inequality? Why are some countries governed well, and others poorly? There are literally hundreds of theories that have been proposed by scholars in answer to such questions. However, until recently we didn't have good data to systematically and rigorously assess them against a global sample of historical evidence. One of the aims of *Seshat: Global History Databank* is to provide a means for testing social science theories.

First Batch of Published Historical Data

The first batch of data we are making available relates to the many dimensions of social complexity (Turchin, Currie, et al. forthcoming). These variables reflect some of the fundamental aspects of human societies, such as territorial size and population, settlement hierarchies, specialized government agents, civic infrastructure, money, writing, and information systems. This first round of data publication contains information on social complexity describing states and pre-state political organizations that were located in eight regions of the world: Egypt, Italy, Hawai'i, Cambodia, Peru, Iceland, northern China, and western Africa, covering a wide temporal range from the earliest centralized societies in the fourth millennium BCE (in Egypt) all the way to the late nineteenth century (in China).

Table 1. Example of how polities in a region (Egypt) are displayed. The dates listed are when the polity occupied this region.

Duration	Polity Name
2650-2350 BCE	Classic Old Kingdom
2350-2150 BCE	Late Old Kingdom
2350-2150 BCE	Period of the Regions
2016-1700 BCE	Middle Kingdom

Seshat Project: First Set of Data. Cliodynamics 8:1 (2017)

The public website offers users the ability to scroll through each of these eight regions, exploring data on social complexity for a range of polities that occupied the region at a particular point in the past. Each of these historic polities has its own page, providing a general description of the polity to situate users who may be unfamiliar with it, then listing the social data in a scrollable table. Critically, every 'data-point' is really a complex tripartite entity, what we call a 'Seshat Fact.'

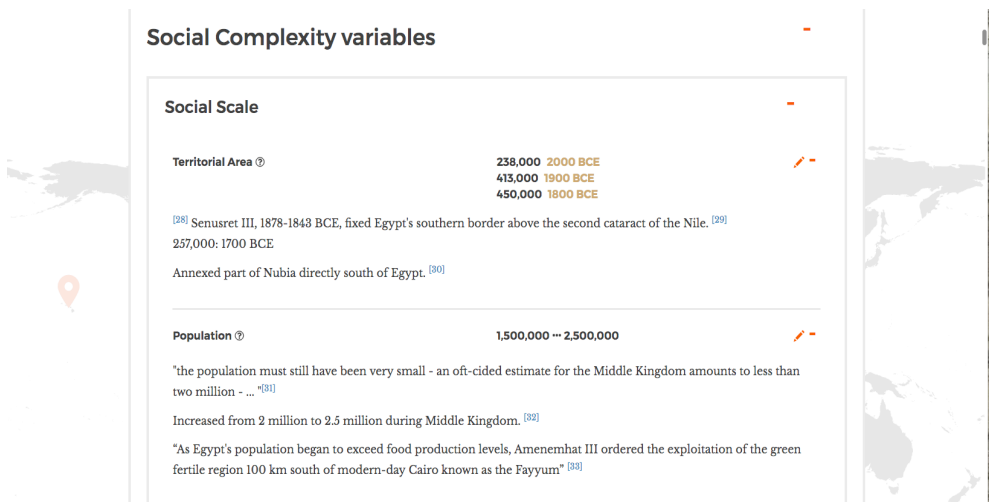


Figure 2. Screenshot showing a sample of the social complexity data concerning the Egyptian polity 'Middle Kingdom' (2016 BCE - 1700 BCE). Taken from: <http://dacura.scss.tcd.ie/seshat/polities/egmidkg.html>.

Seshat Facts contain three different, key pieces of information: 1) the variable being coded along with coded value, which offer quantifiable information concerning a very specific topic for the polity in question; 2) a descriptive paragraph, offering in easy-to-digest prose contextual or supporting information about the coded value. These descriptions cite examples or point to empirical evidence, explain why the value was coded as it was, or discuss scholarly disagreements over this topic; 3) references to pertinent literature or opinions expressed by our expert collaborators. Together, this tri-partite system makes Seshat a cutting-edge and highly useful historical resource; each datapoint provides a wealth of useful historical information, combining the benefits of having a huge pot of systematically collected and comparable quantitative data

ready for analysis, of having detailed descriptions proving qualitative nuance, and carefully collected references allowing for recovery and reduplication of the data.

Another important feature of our site is that we invite users to make comments on each of our Seshat Facts, highlighting useful scholarship we may have missed or suggesting alternate codes for a particular variable. Each user comment is assessed by members of the Seshat Team. Opening up our work in this way makes the Databank a truly dynamic entity, as we are never satisfied with what we've done, but are always looking for ways to ensure that our data is of the highest quality and reflects the current state of knowledge.

Looking Forward to the Next Batch of Data

We have published numerous articles and reports detailing the methods and procedures involved in building the Databank, as well as describing our analytical approach (Brennan et al. 2016; François et al. 2016; Turchin et al. 2012; Turchin et al. 2014; Turchin et al. 2016). The vast amount of historical information that we are compiling, however, is not meant only for our own use. From the beginning, Seshat was designed to be a resource to allow scholars, policy-makers, and other interested parties answer questions about any number of topics, at various scales, and using a wide range of different methods. The publication of this first batch of data is the culmination of years of work, but is also just the beginning. Eventually, *all* data collected by the Seshat Project for the historical societies in the World Sample (over 300 societies from 34 different areas around the world, and counting) will be made available, completely free and openly accessible. Stay tuned for our next data release!

Working With Us to Improve the Databank

We are always looking for new experts to help us out. Experts can suggest changes to published data through our editing options, or can contact project coordinator Jill Levine (jlevine@evolution-institute.org) to volunteer to review or answer our questions about unpublished data.

Seshat Team

This report was written as a collective effort by members of the *Seshat: Global History Databank*. Members of our Team can be found [here](#). The Databank is a project of the [Evolution Institute](#), a nonprofit think tank. Funding for *Seshat: Global History Databank* comes from a variety of generous donors, including the [John Templeton Foundation](#), the [Economic and Social Research Council](#), [Horizon 2020](#), and the Tricoastal Foundation. A complete list of funding is available [here](#).

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