

The Powell-Cotton Museum Electronic Database

The [Powell-Cotton Museum](#) (PCM) collections database was not conceived until November 2013, incredibly late in the day for the computerisation of museum collections data. In July 2013 Dr. Inbal Livne was appointed Head of Collections at the PCM and began investigating the best way to record the Museum's collections data to be both compliant with [SPECTRUM](#) standards and useable for museum staff, most of whom at that time used computers in a limited capacity and had very limited knowledge of museums standard collections database.

Following discussions with colleagues at other small museums, Dr. Livne took the decision to create a database, rather than buy an off the shelf model, such as Modes or Adlib. The reasons for this were as follows:

1. ready built systems are quite complicated, take a large amount of training to use and understand properly and need to be used regularly to keep the user familiar with the process. In 2013 the PCM only had one member of staff who was likely to use the system regularly and most volunteers who might have assisted with data entry had limited IT skills or were not confident using computers. The Museum needed an intuitive system that could be used by volunteers who might use it irregularly.
2. Off the shelf systems are expensive and many require add-ons to capture all the data needed when you have a very varied collection. This is fine for national museums, but these systems would swallow 10-15% of the Museum's annual collections budget.

In the autumn of 2013 Dr. Livne (Head of Collections and Engagement at the PCM) and Alison Petch (Registrar at the [Pitt-Rivers Museum](#), now retired), using [Filemaker](#) software, built the PCM collections database, based on the Pitt-Rivers system (which uses the same software). In terms of available object data and how it had been filed, there were many similarities between the two museums. The PRM had been using the system successfully for many years, so it was tested.

The PRM however, does not have natural history collections, so those areas had to be added, which were based (in 2013) largely on the fields used within the [Natural History Museum](#) London's records management system. In the last 18 months (Jan 2018 to present) the PCM has had a natural history curator and has been able to adjust the system to better suit the collection, as neither Dr. Livne nor Ms. Petch are zoologists.

There are currently over 4000 records on the system, created since November 2013 for collections spanning ethnography, zoology, archaeology and archives. This is only a fraction of the collection and most data is still stored in hard copy form. The PCM has focused on entering data for objects on display and key collections such as the primate collection.

*Dr Inbal Livne, Head of Collections and Engagement, Powell-Cotton Museum
September 2019*

Powell-Cotton Museum Electronic Database fields in Making African Connections

In order to create a database searchable across three museum collections, the fields in the Powell-Cotton Museum Electronic Database were mapped to the [Dublin Core Metadata Element Set \(v1.1\)](#).

The table below shows the names of the fields in the PCM Electronic Database that are used in the Making African Connections Digital Archive, which Dublin Core element they correspond to, and which order they appear. Note that one of the features of Dublin Core is that all elements are repeatable and optional. This means two things:

- That if a field is blank in the PCM Electronic Database, the element will disappear in the corresponding page on Making African Connections.
- That some elements appear more than once and (with one exception) without the name of the source field in the PCM Electronic Database appended.

The table below is intended to help users understand the provenance of metadata, particularly in cases where the merging of fields has created a lack of clarity. If further assistance is required, please contact one of the [Making African Connections project team](#).

PCM Electronic Database Field	Dublin Core Element
Short Description	Title
Maker	Creator
Keywords	Subjects
Classes	
Longer Description	Description
Date Made	Date
Materials	Format
Processes	
Dimensions	
Weight	
Accession Number	Identifier
Previous Numbers	
Other owners	Source
Field Collector / Archaeologist	
Date collected	
Region	Coverage <i>Note that the 'Cultural Groups' field is appended with 'Cultural Group:'.</i>
Country	
Continent	
Longitude & Latitude	
Cultural Groups	

Full documentation of the metadata mapping process using in Making African Connections is available on our [GitHub page](#).

*Dr James Baker, Senior Lecturer in Digital History and Archives, University of Sussex
September 2019*