Documenting ignorance –
keeping track of what we know we don’t know

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The importance of what we don’t know

• We seldom talk about ignorance
• Undermines our authority?
• Research *implies* ignorance
• Track of what we don’t know
• Manage, not conceal
The museum collections

- Huge variety of items
- History from mid 19th Cent.
- International scope
- Gaps in the record
- Inconsistent accounts
- Difficulties of interpretation
Some Olympian examples

- Uncertainty about use, and date
Some Olympian examples

- Incompleteness
Some Olympian examples

- Lack of precise date information
• Doubt about poster language
• Hesitant identification

Some Olympian examples
• Place of manufacture in doubt
Some Olympian examples

• Doubts about date of birth

HTTP://WWW.CIO-PAM.ORG/PAM#PARTICIPANT131288

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Typology of ignorance

- Missing data
  - Partial data, unknown information
- Imprecision
  - Approximations and inaccurate measurements
- Doubt
  - Uncertainty about the reliability of the source or the interpretation
Null points

- E.F. Codd’s 4 value logic (3VL)
  - True, False, Unknown (null)
  - Table contents and operations
  - $3 \times \text{null} = \text{null}$

- Version 2, 1990
  - Missing But Applicable
  - Missing But Inapplicable.

- Lost in translation
CIDOC Guidelines

- *sui generis* suggestions
- Date qualifiers, ‘c.’ for circa
- “Be as precise as possible when recording dates. It may be necessary to record ranges of dates or to otherwise qualify the date recorded in some way. If so, always use the same method of indicating any qualification.”
• Société des musées du Québec
• *Documenting Missing and Uncertain Information, 2004*
  – Unresearched ignorance = blank
  – Researched ignorance = ‘unknown’
  – Doubt = ‘?’ + textual note
  – Illegible = ‘[...]’
  – Imprecision = *no recommendation*
Ignorance comes in different forms
Each requires a specific approach
We need to know the extent of our ignorance to manage it effectively
There are no consistent guidelines
Let us start a conversation

Thank you!