Connecting Decolonization Efforts in Small Museums Through Wikidata

Toni Sant
University of Salford

Apostolos Antonacopoulos
University of Salford

Enrique Tabone
University of Salford

Abstract

The University of Salford's GLAM Lab has developed a working relationship with the Greater Manchester Museums Group (GMMG) to develop a network of art museums and other heritage institutions aiming to acknowledge their colonial heritage, and work towards decolonizing museums. The initial focus is on museums in Salford, Oldham, Rochdale, and Bolton, however, the project will refer to similar work conducted elsewhere, with the aim of developing a broader regional network that can communicate freely within the sector nationally and internationally. The Greater Manchester museums working with the Salford GLAM Lab seek engagement with decolonization efforts in the broader heritage sector, and desire ways to connect with other organizations and institutions whose histories and collections overlap with their own. This research investigates the underrepresentation and biased portrayal of colonial heritage within museum collections in Greater Manchester, UK, many of which possess items acquired through colonial activities. It explores how Wikidata can be utilized to capture and map this heritage, aiming to decolonize museum practices and foster collaboration. By leveraging Wikidata, this project seeks to enhance knowledge equity by making visible marginalized histories and contribute to a more accurate understanding of colonial legacies within Wikimedia projects and beyond.

Introduction

This research project aims to address the problem of underrepresentation and often biased portrayal of colonial heritage and embedded power dynamics within museum collections in Greater Manchester. Many museums, including those in this region with histories intertwined with the British Empire, hold collections acquired through colonial activities, including slave trading. These collections and their interpretations often reflect Eurocentric perspectives, marginalizing the voices and experiences of colonized communities and obscuring the problematic histories of acquisition.[1]

Addressing this research problem is crucial for Wikimedia projects as it directly aligns with the Wikimedia Foundation's mission to provide open knowledge that represents the diversity of the world. By focusing on the colonial heritage in Greater Manchester museums and utilizing Wikidata, this project contributes to knowledge equity by making visible and interconnected the often-hidden histories and perspectives of marginalized communities impacted by colonialism.[2] This initiative supports existing and past Wikidata projects focused on cultural heritage, European colonialism, and looted heritage, enhancing the platform's opportunities for comprehensive and unbiased historical data, ensuring that problematic aspects are not hidden or erased.[3] Ultimately, this work aims to foster critical dialogue and a more accurate understanding of colonial legacies across the Wikimedia movement and beyond.

There are challenges in presenting the history of museums accurately and ethically, and there's a need to be mindful of not reinforcing harmful past narratives. The traditional ways museums have cataloged information might have biases due to historical colonial perspectives. As our focus is on the Greater Manchester Museums Group see Annex 1 at the end of this document, which provides a brief profile of the Salford Museum and Art Gallery as one example, for context.

There are two pertinent research questions that effectively guide this research project:

1. How can Wikidata be effectively utilized to capture and map the colonial heritage of museum collections in Greater Manchester, and what are the implications of this process for decolonizing museum practices and fostering broader regional and international collaboration?

2. What are the key narratives and power dynamics embedded within the museums' essential holdings, as represented on Wikidata, and how can this data be used to facilitate critical dialogue and transformative action towards decolonizing museum spaces and knowledge production?

The first question addresses the core action of capturing the project's guiding data on Wikidata. This directly links it to the broader goals of decolonization and collaboration. It also allows for exploration of the practical challenges and opportunities of using Wikidata for this purpose.

The second question delves deeper into the content of the museums' holdings and examines the inherent power structures that shape how these holdings are presented. It emphasizes the use of the collected data to initiate critical discussions and drive tangible changes within the museums and the wider community.

Dates:
The project will run from July 1, 2025 until June 30, 2026.

Related work

This research explores the intersection of Wikidata, museum studies, and decolonization, focusing on the potential of Wikidata to map colonial heritage in Greater Manchester museums. It highlights the increasing recognition within museum studies of the need to address colonial legacies embedded in collections, including issues of acquisition, representation, and power dynamics. Decolonization in this context involves not just repatriation but a fundamental rethinking of colonial frameworks and the inclusion of marginalized perspectives.
Existing and past Wikidata projects like WikiProject Cultural Heritage,[4] WikiProject European Colonialism,[5] and WikiProject Looted Heritage,[6] align with the goals of mapping colonial heritage. By creating new Wikidata items and properties related to colonial-era artifacts and their provenance in Greater Manchester museums, this research project can contribute to a more comprehensive and accurate representation of history, challenging Eurocentric biases and amplifying marginalized voices. Previous work that informs this direction in this project include the WikiProject on The Restitution of Knowledge: A Repertory for Plunder,[7] which laid down some of the essential groundwork on which research on this topic can be developed.
The unique industrial and colonial history of Greater Manchester, heavily reliant on colonial resources, makes its museums significant case studies. While some museums in the region, like Manchester

Museum and Manchester Art Gallery, have initiated decolonization efforts, the systematic application of Wikidata to map their colonial heritage and connections within the regional context remains a gap.

The proposed research aims to address this gap by developing methodologies for using Wikidata to visualize and analyze the relationships between Greater Manchester museums, their colonial collecting practices, and global power structures. The open data approach on Wikidata can foster regional and international collaboration among museums and researchers, providing a shared platform for information exchange and joint projects.[8] Ultimately, by making detailed data about colonial heritage accessible, the project seeks to facilitate critical dialogue and transformative action towards decolonizing museum spaces and knowledge production.

Methods

A mixed-methods approach combining quantitative data analysis (via Wikidata) and qualitative analysis (through interviews and document review) will be used to provide a comprehensive understanding of the project's impact.

This methodology aims to provide a robust and multifaceted understanding of the project's impact, contributing to both academic knowledge and practical strategies for decolonizing museum practices.

Phase 1: Wikidata Data Capture and Mapping (Quantitative Focus)

The first objective of this two-phase research project is to systematically document and analyze the museums' essential holdings related to colonial heritage on Wikidata. This will be achieved through a methodology based on data collection and analysis.

Data Collection:

- Adopt/adapt a standardized schema for Wikidata entries, including relevant properties (e.g.: creator, origin, acquisition history, cultural context).
- Conduct thorough audits of museum collections, identifying objects and information related to colonial histories.
- Populate Wikidata with the collected data, ensuring accuracy and consistency.
- Develop SPARQL queries to extract and analyze data patterns and relationships.

Data Analysis:

- Quantitative analysis of Wikidata data to identify:
  - Frequency and distribution of objects from specific colonial contexts.
  - Patterns in acquisition histories and provenance.
  - Gaps and biases in existing metadata.
- Visualization of data to illustrate key findings and trends.

Phase 2: Qualitative Analysis and Stakeholder Engagement

The second objective of this two-phase research project is to explore the narratives, power dynamics, and potential for decolonization through qualitative methods and stakeholder engagement. This will be achieved through the following research methods:

Semi-structured Interviews:

- Conduct interviews with museum curators, staff, community representatives, and researchers.
- Explore perspectives on the colonial heritage of collections, decolonization efforts, and the use of Wikidata.
- Document narratives related to the objects and their histories.
- Thematic analysis of interview transcripts and documents to identify key narratives, power dynamics, and perspectives.

Document Review:

- Analyze museum archives, exhibition catalogues, and policy documents.
- Identify historical context, curatorial practices, and institutional perspectives.
- Analyze the content of the data placed on Wikidata, and the discussion pages related to those entries.

Focus Groups/Workshops:

- Organize workshops with museum staff and community members to discuss findings and develop strategies for decolonization.
- Facilitate dialogue on sensitive topics and promote collaborative action.

Case Studies:

- Create in-depth case studies of a few key objects, and the process of recording them on Wikidata; this includes the possibility for exhibition/s at the respective museums.
- Comparative analysis of different stakeholder perspectives; this too may provide an opportunity for joint exhibition across different museums.

Expected output

Expected outcomes from Phase 1:

- A comprehensive and accessible dataset of museum holdings related to colonial heritage on Wikidata.
- Visualizations of the data.
- Quantitative insights into the scope and nature of colonial collections.

Expected outcomes from Phase 2:

- Qualitative insights into the complex narratives and power dynamics surrounding colonial collections, showcasing the depth of analysis possible through Wikidata.
- Identification of best practices for decolonization work in museums.
- Recommendations for future research and collaboration.
- A report detailing the process of using Wikidata in this way, and any issues found.

Academic papers from these sets of outcomes will be developed as outputs to be effectively shared through peer-reviewed journals, such as *Archives: The Journal of the British Records Association* or the *Journal of Curatorial Studies.* As the papers are developed, they will be presented at appropriate academic conferences and possibly Wikimedia research events or broader events, such as Wikimania 2026 in Paris, France, which is scheduled to take place at the end of the period designated for this research project.

It is expected that the findings of this research will inform policies and decision making within the Greater Manchester Museums Group on the decolonization of their collections and respective exhibitions. Therefore, the research is intended to have museum directors, curators, and collection managers, as a primary audience for its findings and outputs.

It is also envisioned that the completion of this research will inform a touring exhibition from Greater Manchester Museums Group collections across different venues in the region and possibly beyond. This would be intended primarily for a non-academic audience, including educational tours for school children and the general public.

Dissemination plan summary:

- Publish research findings in academic journals and reports.
- Present findings at conferences and workshops (academic and/or Wikimedia-led)

- Develop accessible resources for museums and the public.

Risks

Assuming continued cooperation from the Greater Manchester Museums Group, the risks and challenges associated with the proposed research are relatively minimal. The following actions will ensure that potential risks are mitigated appropriately:

- Obtain informed consent from all participants.
- Ensure data privacy and confidentiality.
- Address sensitive topics with respect and sensitivity.

We are also mindful that placing potentially controversial data onto an open platform requires special attention, and we will therefore act accordingly, in line with our institutional ethical guidelines. We will also be guided by the Wikimedia Foundation's Universal Code of Conduct at all times.

Community impact plan

A robust impact plan is at the heart of this research project, focusing on engagement and adoption:

I. Direct Engagement with Museum Professionals:

- **Targeted Workshops and Presentations:** Organize workshops specifically for museum directors, curators, and collection managers within the Greater Manchester Museums Group and potentially other regional/national museum networks. These sessions will:
    - Present the accessible Wikidata dataset and its potential for their work.
    - Demonstrate the data visualizations and their utility in understanding colonial collections.
    - Discuss the qualitative insights into embedded narratives and power dynamics.
    - Share identified best practices for decolonization based on the research.
    - Provide practical guidance on how they can utilize Wikidata and the research findings in their own institutions (e.g., cataloging, exhibition development, interpretation).

- **Policy Briefs and Reports Tailored for Museums:** Create concise, actionable policy briefs and reports summarizing key findings and recommendations, specifically addressing the practical implications for museum policies and decision-making regarding exhibition development and decolonization.

- **Direct Consultation and Collaboration:** Offer opportunities for direct consultation with the research team to assist museums in applying the research findings to their specific collections and contexts. This could involve pilot projects or collaborative initiatives.

II. Engaging the General Public and Educational Institutions:

- **Informing a Touring Exhibition:** Actively collaborate with the Greater Manchester Museums Group in the

development of the envisioned touring exhibition. This will involve:
    - Providing the research data and visualizations as potential content for the exhibition.
    - Contributing to the narrative development to ensure the exhibition reflects the research findings on colonial heritage and embedded power dynamics in an accessible way.
    - Potentially offering expertise in interpreting the Wikidata information for a public audience.

- **Development of Accessible Online Resources:** Create publicly accessible online resources based on the research, such as:
    - Interactive visualizations of the colonial heritage data on Wikidata.
    - Simplified summaries of the key narratives and power dynamics identified.
    - Case studies of how the research findings can inform the understanding of specific museum objects.
    - Educational materials suitable for schools and the general public, potentially including lesson plans or activity guides linked to the touring exhibition or online resources.

- **Public Talks and Events:** Organize public talks, panel discussions, and community events to share the research findings in an engaging and accessible manner. These could be held at museums, libraries, or community centers across Greater Manchester and wherever else that is appropriate.
- **Collaboration with Wikimedia Community:** Work with local, national and international Wikimedia communities to:
    - Promote the developed Wikidata dataset and visualizations.
    - Encourage the use of this data in Wikipedia articles, Wikimedia Commons, and other Wikimedia projects to enhance public knowledge about colonial heritage.
    - Organize edit-a-thons focused on improving the representation of colonial heritage in museum collections on Wikimedia platforms.

This aspect of the community impact plan will seek support from Wikimedia UK, who have already been contacted informally about this idea. Since 2021, they have supported several decolonisation projects, such as the The Decolonising Wikipedia Network (DWN), which encourages students and staff at London universities to edit Wikipedia through the lenses of anti-racism and decolonisation. Another recent project at the University of Edinburgh aims to support decolonisation in open knowledge and education using Wikipedia and Wikidata, along with a similar project at Coventry University around the Khalili Collections, focused on Islamic art and Asian culture. WMUK has also supported multiple digital curation projects involving Wikidata mapping exercises by postgraduate researchers at the University of Salford since 2019. Their involvement in this

project builds on their established working relationship with the University of Salford's Digital Curation Lab.

III. Promoting Adoption and Use:

- **Advocacy and Networking:** Present the research findings at broader cultural heritage events and forums beyond academia to reach practitioners and policymakers.

- **Developing Training Materials:** Create and/or adapt training materials and guides to empower museum professionals and the public to navigate and utilize the Wikidata dataset.

- **Showcasing Success Stories:** Highlight examples of how museums and educators are successfully using the research outputs to inform their work and engage audiences.

- **Building a Community of Practice:** Foster a network of museum professionals, educators, and Wikimedia volunteers interested in using Wikidata for decolonizing museum collections, facilitating ongoing knowledge exchange and collaboration.

By employing these diverse strategies, the research project aims to extend its impact far beyond academic circles, fostering a more informed public understanding of colonial heritage and empowering museums to engage in meaningful decolonization efforts.

Evaluation

Evaluation of the proposed research project should be conducted primarily through the following factors:

- The quality and quantity of comprehensive open data produced for the case studies.
- The successful delivery of dissemination plans (e.g. report / publications).
- The way/s the research informs plans for the eventual decolonization exhibition/s presented by the Greater Manchester Musuems Group,
- Feedback from interested groups and direct stakeholders such as Wikimedia project editors, decolonization interest groups etc.

Budget

The University of Salford is contributing time on the project by Prof. Apostolos Antonacopolous and Dr Toni Sant from the Salford GLAM Lab in kind. Incurred expenses associated with this project proposal, as included in the proposed budget are the cost of a research assistant to work with the two main researchers on this project. The research assistant is Enrique Tabone, an experienced Wikimedian and a PhD student at the University of Salford, who will be employed part-time for the duration of this project. We have also included an allocation for travel expenses to enable team members to travel to museums as needed and disseminate the work at the end of the project. Institutional overhead is included at 15% of the total budget requested.

Please see budget/costings document attached to this proposal.

References

Erxleben, F., Pellissier Tanon, T., Auffarth, B., Gottschalk, S. & Bakhshandegi, M. (2014). Wikidata: A Free Collaborative Knowledgebase. Communications of the ACM, 57(10), 78-85.

Fauconnier, S. (2016). Wikidata in Collections: Building a universal language for connecting GLAM catalogs. Wikimedia blog. Available from: https://medium.com/freely-sharing-the-sum-of-all-knowledge/wikidata-in-collections-building-a-universal-language-for-connecting-glam-catalogs-59b14aa3214c2 [Accessed 2 April 2025].

Ramjohn, I. (2022). Decolonizing Wikipedia. In Using Open Educational Resources to Promote Social Justice (pp. 249-262). Association of College and Research Libraries.

Rother, L. Koss, M, and Mariani, F., "Taking Care of History: Toward a Politics of Provenance Linked Open Data in Museums," in *Perspectives on Data*, ed. Emily Lew Fry and Erin Canning (Art Institute of Chicago, 2022).

WikiProject TheRoK.Wikidata:WikiProject TheRoK. Available from: https://www.wikidata.org/wiki/WD:WikiProject_TheRoK [Accessed 2 April 2025].

Notes

[1] Sanders, S. R., Cope, M. R., & Frerichs, T. J. (2025). Confronting Colonial Narratives: How Destination Museum Exhibits Can Sustainably Engage with Social Justices Issues. *Tourism and Hospitality*, *6*(2), 58. https://doi.org/10.3390/tourhosp6020058

[2] Baker, J., Mahal, A. (2024). "I have always found the whole area a minefield": Wikidata, historical lives, and knowledge infrastructure. *International Journal of Digital Humanities*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42803-024-00090-5

[3] Fagerving, A. (2023). Wikidata for authority control: sharing museum knowledge with the world. *Digital Humanities in the Nordic and Baltic Countries Publications*, *5*(1), 222-239. https://journals.uio.no/dhnbpub/issue/view/875

[4] See https://www.wikidata.org/wiki/WD:WikiProject_Cultural_heritage

[5] See https://www.wikidata.org/wiki/WD:WikiProject_European_Colonialism

[6] See https://www.wikidata.org/wiki/WD:Wikiproject_Looted_heritage

[7] See https://www.wikidata.org/wiki/WD:WikiProject_TheRoK

[8] Stinson, A. (2017)Wikidata in Collections: Building a Universal Language for Connecting GLAM Catalogs. *Down the Rabbit Hole* (blog). https://medium.com/freely-sharing-the-sum-of-all-knowledge/wikidata-in-collections-building-a-universal-language-for-connecting-glam-catalogs-59b14aa3214c [Accessed 2 April 2025]

Annex 1

Salford Museum and Art Gallery Profile
(for context)

As an example of the museums involved in this research project, here's some information on Salford Museum and Art Gallery (SMAG), which is a member of the Greater Manchester Museums Group, comprising 21 venues across 10 boroughs: this is a public museum run by Salford Community Leisure, a community benefit society with charitable status, for Salford City Council (SCL), as one of two local heritage sites along with Ordsall Hall. SMAG is home to most of the City of Salford's heritage collections, which total around 100,000 objects and cover fine art, decorative art, social history, industrial history, archaeology, numismatics and costume. The museum opened in 1850, largely funded by public subscription, and with no existing collection, put out a call for collections and artefacts from the public, resulting in donations from individuals whose wealth and livelihoods were enabled by colonialism, and Salford's role within the slave trade and colonial expansion. SMAG's initial holdings included a World Cultures collection which was transferred to Manchester Museum by the end of the 1960s. SMAG is an accredited museum, and now has a robust collecting policy, focusing on Salford links and existing gaps in the collection.

Research Fund Budget for Proposal by Salford GLAM Lab	*Connecting Decolonization Efforts in Small Museums Through Wikidata (University of Salford)*		**Your local currency** *Please select your local currency in E1*	**GBP**		

Expense type	Expense details	Number of Units	Unit Price (Local)	Unit Price (USD)	Expense Total (Local)	Expense Total (USD)
Please select an Expense type	*Please describe any related details regarding this expense. The details listed below should serve as examples. You can modify them according to your needs.*	*State the number of units or requested quantity*	*Please state the cost of each Unit in your local currency*	*Please convert the cost stated in column D to the US Dollars using OANDA Currency Converter. If the local currency is US Dollars, plase copy paste column D in here.*	*The calculations are automatically generated If not, please multiply Column C * Column D*	*The calculations are automatically generated If not, please sum up as neeeded*
Personnel Support	Research Assistant required to work with main researchers, also providing project coordination	1	26,203.57	33,465.10	26,203.57	$33,465.10
Total Personnel Support			26,203.57	$33,465.10	26,203.57	$33,465.10
Data Gathering and Dissemination Activities	Present research output at academic conferenc	2	1,000.00	1,277.12	2,000.00	$2,554.24
	Present research output at Wikimania 2026	2	1,000.00	1,277.12	2,000.00	$2,554.24
						$0.00
Total Dissemination Activities			2000	$2,554.24	4,000.00	$5,108.48
Institutional Overhead (up to 15% of total budget)	Overhead	1	4,680.76	5977.89	4,680.76	$5,977.89
						$0.00
Total Institutional Overhead					4,680.76	5,977.89
Travel	Travel/visits to cultural heritage institutions	10	100	127.71	1,000.00	$1,277.10
						$0.00
Total Travel			100	$127.71	1,000.00	1,277.10
Total requested					**35,884.33**	**$45,828.57**