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Diego Mantoan

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Head office Università Ca' Foscari Venezia | Venice Centre for Digital and Public Humanities | Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici | Palazzo Malcanton Marcorà | Dorsoduro 3484/D, 30123 Venezia, Italia | magazen@unive.it

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Table of Contents

Analysing Trends in the Digitization of Cultural Heritage

The Impact of Digital and Public Humanities on Museum Studies and Art Historical Matters

Diego Mantoan 5

No- and Low-Tech Entry Points to Campus and Community Digital Humanities

Constanza López Baquero, Clayton McCarl, Maya Blackin,
Rook Breede, Janaya Ferrer, Britney Griffith 23

Content Analysis of Travel Literature: A Journey Through Time to Jerusalem

Johnny Yosef, Gila Prebor 49

The Transduction of the Archive as an Embodied Space

Giacomo Alliata, Sarah Kenderdine 83

Fonti e archivi digitali per lo studio della Resistenza: stato dell'arte, limiti e opportunità

Vincenzo Colaprice 101



Analysing Trends in the Digitization of Cultural Heritage

The Impact of Digital and Public Humanities on Museum Studies and Art Historical Matters

Diego Mantoan

Università degli Studi di Palermo, Italia

1 A Short Trip and Brief Recap in Digital and Public Art History

The moment deserves some celebration, as our journal reaches its sixth birthday, one that is particularly grounded in the mutual achievement of our interdisciplinary editorial board with *magazén - International Journal for Digital and Public Humanities*. Indeed, after reaching SCOPUS classification in recent years, which disseminated our articles to an international scholarly community, we are proud to announce that the Italian national evaluation board for scientific research (ANVUR) reached an extraordinary decision labelling *magazén* as a first-class journal (Classe A) in the fields of art history and museology (10/B1), while for other fields the classification results are still pending. It is important, though, to locate art history in the interdisciplinary field of digital and public humanities, which encompasses most innovative scientific approaches towards tangible and intangible cultural heritage objects and artefacts including written, oral and performative heritage and traditions, as that is the general scope of our journal. Throughout all our past issues we explicitly highlighted the strong connections and overlap of

This paper was discussed and shared with the co-editor Franz Fischer and the vice editor Barbara Tramelli who, as usual, acted with the author as curators of *magazén*'s issue 1 of 2025, with the precious support of the Journal Manager Elisa Corrà and the extended help of the journal's editorial board.

art and museum studies with textual scholarship, literary studies, archival studies, history and archaeology. Hence, in this moment of celebration, it is very clear to us that digital art history is one pillar of a wider domain made of various disciplines that are referred to in *magazén* articles.

Not by chance, just as we were closing this article, another extraordinary accomplishment was announced to us: SCOPUS just entered *magazén* in Q1 for Literature and Literary Theory, somehow making the Italian academic classification system look outdated with regard to interdisciplinary scholarship. In fact, we have not been awarded excellence in the literary field in Italy so far, though we hope this might only be a question of time. Still, it shows us how a suitable sector for digital and public humanities must still be carved out. Together with the certification of our endeavour's quality due to these scientific indexes, we are also very proud of our journal's numbers that are soaring among scholars, since the downloads of most papers published go into the hundreds, while the online views come even in the thousands. This convinced us, together with our publisher Edizioni Ca' Foscari, to kick-start *magazén*'s publication on a rolling basis, which will start with the second issue of 2025, in order to adapt even more to the best standards in academic publishing and offer our authors an ever timely dissemination of their scientific outputs. Hence, we decided that this issue's opening editorial should truly become a paper devoted to an investigation into the domain of digital and public art history, as well as museology, given that we apparently hit the nail on the head with our work over the past five years. The next issue, coming out on a rolling basis and of which we can offer a preview with one paper already in this summary, will certainly open with a longer reflection on literature and literary studies as a domain in the digital and public humanities, given our recent Q1 ranking in SCOPUS.

This is not, though, about bragging around or shoulder-tapping, but rather about investigating what emerges in the trail of papers that we were able to publish in our short history, particularly thanks to the engagement and attentiveness of all the art historians who, together with me, are involved in our journal's making. In fact, the quality of contributions was surely nurtured by the work of and constant discussion with Barbara Tramelli acting as vice editor, Stefania De Vincentis as reference point at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Carolina Fernández-Castrillo as our international liaison, with the constant support of Paolo Berti. We were lucky enough to have the backing of experts with a strong interdisciplinary profile and international reputation involved over the years in the various activities of the Venice Centre for Digital and Public Humanities, such as Erma Hermens (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge) and Chiara Zuanni (Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz) in the journal's Advisory

board, as well as Lisa Dieckmann (prometheus) and Rebekah Rhodes (Colección SOLO) in the Advisory Board of our book series. This paper is an acknowledgment of this group's yearly efforts in the search for relevant contributions in art history and the wider GLAM sector, which every time came as a welcome discovery of emergent methodologies in the digitization of cultural heritage, as well as of analysis of its impact on the public sphere.

Based on the novelty of the methodological approach or on the wide impact in terms of views and downloads, several papers we hosted stand out for their relevance with regards to digital instruments for art historical research, the digitization of cultural heritage, and theoretical reflections on digital culture. As far as the theoretical perspective is concerned, I would like to highlight the contribution of Stoyan V. Sgourev, which constitutes an example of synergies obtainable in data collection and digital analysis between sociological and historical research, that led him to focus on gender and country of origin of the students of Antoine Bourdelle in late nineteenth century Paris as key factors in the acceleration of artistic innovation (Sgourev 2020). Of paramount relevance, then, for its wide reach of readers is the paper by Trilce Navarrete and Elena Villaespesa on the spread of digitized artworks by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, which shows how digital cultural consumption can expand the user base when positioned outside of the expected art context, enabling new forms of hedonic and utilitarian engagement with cultural heritage (Navarrete et al. 2020). Eventually, the media archaeological approach in Carolina Fernández-Castrillo's article on generative AI came as an early scholarly consideration – compared to today's wide amateurish outbursts on the subject – which strongly pointed at reconsidering the (wo)man-machine co-creation stance as the base of the auratic experience of the artwork in the age of neural networks (Fernández-Castrillo 2023).

Along these lines, a series of other interesting papers we published over the years explored the quality assessment of digital elevation models (Hnila et al. 2021), the automatic coloration of b&w ethnographic photos thanks to AI (Fagioli 2021), the impact of social media on museum narratives (Finocchi et al. 2022), and the use of online metrics in the GLAM sector (Charlesworth et al. 2023). We further hosted a strain of case studies from around the world, reaching from Keio Museum Commons in Japan (Miyakita et al. 2022) to the Archive of Ettore Sottsass Jr. in Italy (Scotti et al. 2022), from the animated mapped projections of Iberian murals (Farré Torras et al. 2024) to North American sound archives of Feminist art history (Martini et al. 2024), from the reconstruction of ecclesiastical spaces in seventeenth century Warsaw (Szuba 2022) to the creation of a comprehensive database for Lebanon's contemporary art system (Bellan 2022). Early results convinced us in launching a special book

series with our publisher, *Disclosing Collections*, devoted to studies, catalogues and data in the arts and the humanities, which already earned SCOPUS classification. Our individual efforts further led us to publish extensive books and monographs that place the process of digitization and public dissemination of cultural heritage within a solid scientific framework that straddles museology, art history, and digital and public humanities. On this path we laid volumes on the digitization of museum archives in the case of Modern Art with the Museo Mario Rimoldi of Cortina (Mantoan 2023a), on how to encompass the complexity of contemporary digital ecosystems through the megadungeon approach (Berti et al. 2023), on the indexing of early modern printed images in the case of Lyon in the Renaissance (Tramelli 2024), as well as on the instruments for cataloguing and sharing digital museum collections (De Vincentis 2023).

Such a trail of editorial activities over a relatively short time span truly gave us an insight in the making of digital and public art history, especially as referred to the digitization processes in museums and the display of art, which somehow came to follow the scientific standards and best practices asserted by scholars in the early days of the new millennium (Drucker 2003). Hence, the following paragraphs shall critically reflect on the evolutionary context of museums in recent years given the impact of digital and public humanities, in order to ponder what changes have occurred in archival systems and digitization for art collections, both conceptually and practically (Dupré et al. 2020).

2 The Evolving Digital and Public Context in the Museum Sector

It would greatly trivialize the long and profound process of change that swept through the museum – one of the most stable and identity-defining institutions of Western society, born out of the Enlightenment and then rising to become the backbone of the bourgeois era – if one were to think the digital and public transformation that took place in this institution over the past two decades is simply a matter of hiring an IT specialist to create an attractive website and a trendy influencer to manage social media communication, perhaps even just to cope with the past pandemic emergency (Finocchi et al. 2022, 265). Indeed, the advent of the digital age and, even before that, the spread of the managerial model in the museum sector led not only to a radical rethinking of museology, but also to a change in the role and function of the museum itself (Parry et al. 2021, 17). Despite its dependency on unstable public or private funds, the museum sector in Western countries has proven unsuspectingly dynamic in the quest

for digitization of cultural heritage and opening digital collections to the public.

Since the beginning of the new millennium, there has been a spread of digitization practices in museums to innovate research and accessibility tools, particularly for the creation of databases which are accessible to the public as with the vast investments made by major collections such as the Tate in the UK and the MoMA in the USA (Beaulieu et al. 2016). Italy, despite having fewer financial opportunities, has also seen a growing commitment in this area, as in the case of three Venetian pillars of contemporary art like the Venice Biennale, the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, and the Francois Pinault Foundation (Mantoan 2023a, 14-18). What seems to have driven the evolution of this domain is also a desire to emulate such outstanding examples of digital infrastructure for artistic heritage through tailor-made database solutions, which spread rapidly involving even smaller organizations that saw the digitized archive as a comprehensive solution for tracking, categorizing, and disseminating their collections (Mantoan 2021, 165-6). This proactiveness in the museum sector boosted a growing number of scholarly contributions reflecting on the concept of a digital archive or analysing various case studies,¹ though quite rare remain publications that dig deep into the structural logics and digitization processes concretely implemented in the creation of databases for the art sector (Mantoan 2021; Bellan 2022).

The changes in the field are paramount so much that the International Council of Museums (ICOM) had to chase this institution's evolution by feverishly debating on a new definition that would fit our globalized and multi-identity society (Sandahl 2019, 2-5). As a matter of fact, faced with the developments brought about by the possibility of digital access to cultural heritage and openness to different cultural sensibilities – ethnic, religious, gender-based, community-oriented, etc. – the museum had to find a new focus that was no longer represented solely by the objects it preserved. Of course, physical or intangible objects remain a cornerstone of the museum, but they no longer figure as an exclusive characteristic in ICOM's definition of this institution, since it is now an established fact that their meanings depend on the interpretive framework within which they are placed (Akker et al. 2016, 132). In this context, art museums were especially affected by the fluidity of the new paradigm, since the objects – or, sometimes, non-objects – they exhibit are extremely subject to the continuous need of meaning-making with the target audience as highlighted by the institutional critique already in the 1990s (Baker et al. 2002, 207).

1 Bernardi et al. 2017; Berry 2017; Cocciolo 2014; Duranti 1995; Elragal et al. 2017; Fuchsgruber 2019; Knifton 2015; Reed 2017.

If we want to define the nature of the museum in contemporary society, we are therefore inevitably faced with different concepts that depend on the perspective from which we look at this institution, to the extent that we must arrive at a symbiotic vision suspended between fixity and fluidity, local and global, physical and virtual (Holo et al. 2016, 1-8). Proceeding with a schematization model that focuses on the body and essence of the museum [fig. 1], we can first start by considering the objects a museum preserves, thus looking at it as a container for cultural heritage. However, if the museum is thought of as an environment in which meaning-making occurs, we are highlighting its function as an authority inside a specified knowledge domain. Further, if the museum is seen through the audience's lens, it translates into a place that reifies an experience with participatory potential. Eventually, when the museum is transposed into the digital sphere it reveals its nature as a platform for multiple relations – as diverse as the users are – that turns it into the knot of an even more extensive network of interconnected knowledge (Winesmith et al. 2020, 1-9).

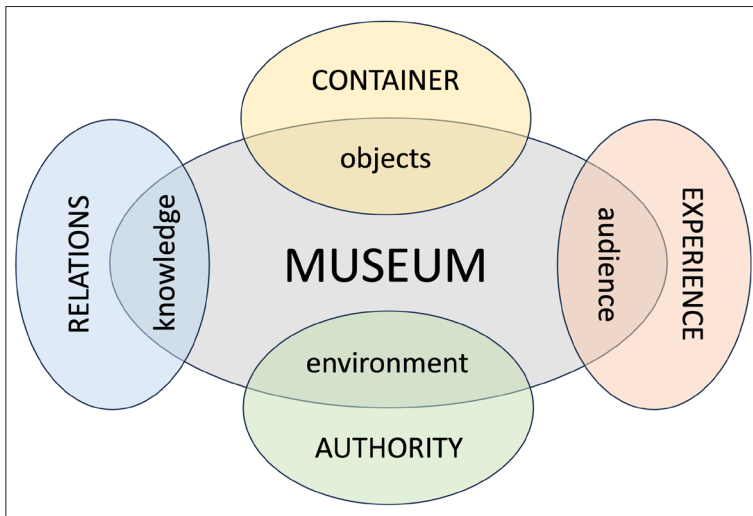


Figure 1 Schematization model for the museum's definition according to four different perspectives based on the museum's resources (objects, environment, knowledge, and audience) and on its diverse functions or roles (container, authority, relations, and experience). Designed by the author

In addition to this shift in the definition and function of the museum, digital transformation has also brought about a radical change in the habits and modes of consumption of cultural heritage. From an audience perspective, digital access to cultural content has in fact made millions of interrelated data available in an almost indistinct

manner, thus leading in the first place to a substantial convergence between institutions that were originally different, such as museums, archives and libraries (Marty 2010, 1-5). In effect, for a user logging on remotely, these organizations serve a similar function and are closely interconnected, as they provide digitized resources whose use depends on the specificity of the audience accessing them and not on the nature of the institution making that heritage available. Moreover, digitization has disrupted the main channels through which the audience sources cultural content, as these no longer coincide necessarily with those of the institutions that preserve a given heritage. Indeed, recent studies show how cultural heritage in the digital age is predominantly accessed through portals such as online encyclopedias, if not even social media, putting museums in the complicated position of asserting their scientific and social authority through intermediaries – that is, by providing data and images that feed such autonomous circuits with the most correct and updated information possible (Navarrete et al. 2020, 242).

Therefore, each museum today must raise questions about its own community of reference – both in presence and online, local and global – and about the tools with which to develop its digital resources in full awareness of the fact that it is simultaneously redesigning its entire approach to the public. If online consumption of cultural heritage is not the prerogative of museums alone, the new and formidable challenge in the digitization of art collections is not just a question concerning image or communication. Rather, it deals with an existential question, one of significance and of role, which needs to be investigated from the outset in order to provide answers to the museum's positioning in relation to its place, its time, and its communities of reference when creating and sharing knowledge.

3 The Museum Matrix Balancing the Digital and Public Dimensions

Since the start of the new millennium, it appears so far that museums have found various ways to address the challenge of digitizing the heritage they hold, while watching out for a new set of relations with its diverse audiences. Indeed, several case studies of pioneering institutions show how projects involving the digital acquisition and dissemination of a museum collection fuelled the methodological considerations of the burgeoning branch of digital and public humanities over the past decade. In this respect, the primary aspect analysed in much scholarly literature is the museum object, rather than the museum as an institution, because of the ontological transformation they undergo when entering a collection. As a matter of fact, museum objects have traditionally been removed

from their physical context and original meaning to be relocated within a container that categorizes them as specimens in a broader narrative wielded for educational or identity purposes (Ames 1999, 41-51). The entire Western museum system, as it emerged from Enlightenment and then consolidated in the long nineteenth-century, is set towards the preservation and study of objects extrapolated from their context of origin and understood abstractly as individual elements of a more general body of knowledge. However, this excision neutralizes the relational dimension within which these artefacts arose and operated in an integrated way in the meaning-making of the society that generated and used them, thus transforming the museum object into a sample of institutionalized knowledge, almost as detached illustrations in a history book (Mantoan 2023b, 98-9).

The paradigm shift needed to fully embrace the relational functions offered in the digital realm is thus to recognize that scientific knowledge is no monolithic and unchanging entity. Rather, knowledge is processual and ever-changing: it is the evolutionary result of society, which makes the museum object not the aseptic representation or mere illustration of a larger corpus, but the living actor participating in the social construction of relationships and meanings that gradually distinguish a given culture from other cultures. It is precisely the transition of the museum object from physical index to a multidimensional digital extension that can offer the museum an opportunity to bring out the richness of meanings, viewpoints and narratives that invests cultural heritage, thus highlighting its embeddedness in the social fabric of collective experience (Srivasanan et al. 2010, 736-8). Digitization certainly favoured within the museum the paradigm shift from objects taken as “specimens” of a larger body of knowledge to objects thought of as “embedded” within a larger, dynamic cultural, and discursive system. However, to fully embrace this transition it is paramount that the museum promotes an interconnected and open creation of knowledge that contrasts the normative imposition from above, which is archetypical for the institutionalized form of Western museums (Mantoan 2023b, 97). This means developing a dialogic character that transforms the museum into a space for shared meanings that does not necessarily involve a hierarchical relationship between the institution and the audience (Kester 2015, 157). It is a discursive and dialogic type of knowledge, as the one theorized by Jürgen Habermas, that arises from the ability to create provisional consensus without the need to reach a final definition of meaning and thus allowing the coexistence of different opinions, levels of knowledge and forms of life in the public sphere (Habermas 1989, 47).

Not by chance, over the past few years a large body of scholarly literature has studied the digital transition in museums by adopting a dual perspective, that is, by observing how the implementation

of IT solutions went hand in hand with the attempt to introduce participatory practices. In doing so, they attempted to overcome the dichotomy between real objects and digital objects in favour of an assessment of the quality of the 'engagement' achieved with and through cultural heritage in a digital and public dimension (King et al. 2016, 94-6). In particular, there are two axes around which the scholarly analysis of museums in the age of their digitization hinges: the first concerns the location of the museum's digital and public activities, whether on-site or online, while the second concerns the control over the production of cultural contents, which balances between the museum's solipsistic authority and an extended audience participation (Marty 2008; Srinivasan et al. 2009; Karp 2014; Taylor et al. 2017). Placing these two axes as the ordinate and abscissa of a diagram, we obtain a matrix divided into four fields that is useful for analysing and framing the digital and public evolution of museums since the inception of the new millennium [fig. 2].

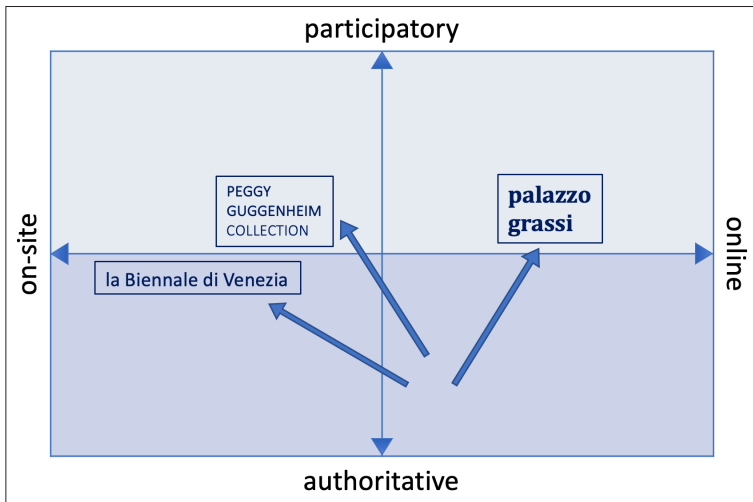


Figure 2 Museum matrix for the analysis of its digital and public evolution (designed by the author). The example shows how three major Venetian institutions in the contemporary art field evolved over the past three decades in relation to their content presence (on-site or online) and public engagement (authority or participation). See Mantoan 2023a

Regarding the first axis, the one in balance between on-site and online, recent digital evolution in the museum sector shows how there have been two distinct stages: first, a simple extension of museum activities on the web, as in the case of transferring the contents of the overall catalogue to the institutional homepage, and at a later stage, the introduction of technological solutions not originally developed for the museum sector, such as the creation

of virtual visiting environments drawing on the experience of 3D videogames (Karp 2014, 157-62). It is precisely the encounter with the consumption habits of the digital public that highlighted the relevance for museums to increasingly thinking of their IT services from a visitor-centred approach, and not as merely a repurposing of self-referential or prepackaged content (Marty 2008, 81-99).

With regard to the second axis, the one in balance between an authoritative and a participatory polarity, the difficulty for museums to fully embrace the inclusiveness of the socio-technological practices inherent in the digital domain still remains evident, often avoiding to question their role as an irrefutable institution in the cultural field and thus failing to become a platform for discussion open to contributions from various constituencies (Srinivasan et al. 2009, 265-78). The evolutionary path of most museums thus favoured a use of new technologies simply to reach a broader and more heterogeneous audience, mistaking a communication goal for a democratization outcome, which instead would presuppose a more sincere public participation in rethinking cultural content and even more so in experimenting practices of collective creation (Taylor et al. 2017, 408-20).

4 Digital Collections and Three Open Issues for Digital and Public Humanists

Parallel to the rapid evolution in the museum field previously illustrated, analytical interest has also grown in recent years towards art archives with the development of digital collections. The institutional paradigm of the archive itself has been challenged by the proliferation of databases and, above all, by the different logic and dimensions brought forth by relational digitization, radically changing our understanding of what an archive is.² In this regard, three main axes can be recognized around which academic reflection on art archives in the era of their digitization is hinged: first, there is a need to make both a conceptual and practical distinction between an archive in the traditional sense and a database (Gorzalski 2016, 167); second, there is a need to investigate the question of the reliability of materials and sources made accessible through online collections (Fuchsgruber 2019, 93); and finally, there is a need to assess the procedural and professional changes in the field due to the coexistence of two functions, the traditional archivist and the data manager (Cocciolo 2016, 124).

2 Cocciolo 2014; Knifton 2015; Bernardi et al. 2017; Berry 2017; Elragal et al. 2017; Reed 2017; Fuchsgruber 2019; Tramelli 2024.

With regard to the definitional aspect, by now the terms archive and database are widely used as synonyms, which is due to the widespread diffusion of digitization projects in the humanities, so much so that the archive concept has expanded beyond the original limits that characterized it as a predetermined collection within a circumscribed physical space (Theimer 2012). However, a fundamental difference remains between a physical archive and a digital repository, since the latter usually combines primary and secondary sources, as well as to sources from various collections that are historically distinct and geographically apart (Kramer 2014). For this very reason, from a digital humanities perspective, whatever the physical and organizational constitution of an archive, the latter is considered simply a selective, ordered, and searchable collection of materials made available for research activities (Gorzalski 2016, 167). The real advantage of a digital repository lies precisely in the addition of secondary sources, cross-thematic references, external links, and research tools that enable the achievement of research objectives capable of going beyond the limitations of a physical archive in the traditional sense (Palmer 2004, 352). Therefore, the added value does not come from the simple digitization of objects and documents, but rather from the “contextual mass” retrieved during this process and conveniently related to primary sources (Bernardi et al. 2017, 188).

Turning to the second consideration, about the problem of the reliability of digitized sources, it is paramount to avoid the risk that digital objects lose all reference to their physical location and the context in which they are placed in the real world, such as the specific archival fonds or envelopes, or kinship or proximity to other fonds and envelopes in the same physical archive (Gorzalski 2016, 170). To avert this loss of information it is necessary that all data referring to an object or document should always be acquired following the procedures in use in traditional archives and thus transforming the digital copy into a so-called “authoritative file” (Duranti 1995, 6). Of course, one must be aware that any archive, both digital and physical, is nothing more than an intentional reconstruction of reality; that is, a historical representation necessarily oriented by the scientific and sometimes ideological approach of its creator (Sternfeld 2011, 547). Already with the choice of taxonomy and metadata in the construction of a database one is in effect employing a powerful rhetorical tool, revealing the curatorial process behind the creation of a collection and hinting at its capacity to create meaning (Bernardi et al. 2017, 192). Especially in the field of art, any form of archival insight holds cultural, social, and even financial significance that can impact the accessibility, reputation, and value of the artwork or artist being examined (Cook 2001, 26; Reed 2017, 121).

The third area to be explored concerns the friction at

organizational level that often results from the clash between old and new professionals within the archive, especially with reference to their respective areas and objects of expertise (Berry 2017; Gorzalski 2016). Indeed, longtime archivists in charge of physical collections were gradually joined by data managers or even database developers who were given full powers over the digital repositories (Cocciolo 2016, 124). These two figures possess different skills and, moreover, they adopt divergent procedures and concepts in terms of archival practices. In the most traditional sense, the archivist preserves materials accumulated in a collection to freeze their contents and, in so doing, arrest time, while the data asset manager acquires a digital representation of materials to transpose their contents and set them in motion through dynamic relationships over time (Berry 2017, 104). In other words, the archivist's approach focuses on the pieces of the collection to ensure their long-term preservation, whereas digitization flips the perspective in favour of the end user by focusing on the necessary technological migrations of the entire database, rather than of individual records (Cocciolo 2014, 239). Such organizational issues make it essential for each digitization project to have a comprehensive strategic plan from the beginning, in order to reformulate data handling policies, data acquisition procedures, and analog-to-digital transfer processes (Berry 2017, 106). Indeed, a digital collection needs constant care and development, as well as widespread implementation that holds the entire staff of an institution accountable, not just the archivist and data asset manager (Cocciolo 2016, 126-8). The run-up to digitization in the museum sector, more generally, and in the field of digital collections, more specifically, thus passes through a careful management of the human resources engaged in these processes, which suggests that the analysis of the precise organizational context is the real starting point of a proper digital and public humanities project.

5 Another Journal Issue Diving into the Digital and Public Humanities

As usual, let me close with a summary of the papers collected in the first issue of 2025, as they span wide between various disciplines and different methodological approaches.

To start with, Constanza López Baquero, Clayton McCarl, Maya Blackin, Rook Breede, Janaya Ferrer, Britney Griffith offer a survey of four projects at the University of North Florida to involve diverse populations both on campus and off in active roles requiring little or no technology or specialized technical abilities. In doing so, the paper shows how the digital humanities can engage students and off-campus communities with scholarly activity in new ways, reaching

into extracurricular and public spaces and enabling non-specialists to participate not just as consumers but also creators.

Next, Johnny Yosef and Gila Prebor examine the depiction of Jerusalem in Jewish travel literature spanning eight centuries (twelfth-nineteenth centuries), focusing on 33 Hebrew travel narratives analysed through qualitative and computational methods. By employing “distant reading” and “close reading,” the study explores changes in descriptive approaches, content categories, and the influence of broader historical, cultural, and ideological contexts.

Giacomo Alliaia and Sarah Kenderdine focus on how interactive and immersive technologies can enable new modes of access to collections of born-digital material in situated contexts. Drawing on Gilbert Simondon’s concept of transduction and Mark Johnson’s philosophy of embodiment, they frame the archive as an embodied space where interpretative paths emerge through interaction and embodied cognition.

Vincenzo Colaprice examines major digital archives and databases related to the Italian Resistance that significantly increased since the 1990s, thus assessing their impact on historical research and public memory. While these initiatives enhance accessibility and foster research democratization, they also present methodological challenges, including information overload and decontextualization, which need standardized approaches to interoperability.

As announced, the last paper I am introducing here already counts as the first of our second yearly issue, hence functioning as a nice preview of how *magazén* will switch to the best practice of rolling basis publication. Most conveniently with the scope of this introductory paper, the next issue will thus open with Ulrike Henny-Krahmer, Fernanda Alvares Freire, and Erik Renz who investigate the role of lecture series in the development of Digital Humanities as a field of research within the European context over the past decade. Employing quantitative data analysis and a social network analysis approach, they explore how lecture series conducted across European institutions serve to connect institutions, researchers, disciplines, and research topics.

With such curiosity and sense of responsibility, we also engaged over the past five years in a scientific endeavour that led *magazén* to become a reference point in the scholarly community. We could not have wished as much at the start of our journal and we shall try to keep track of the developments in the field of digital and public humanities as best as we can. Heartfelt thanks go to the broader editorial board, to our advisory board members, to all professionals involved at our publishing house – particularly Massimiliano Vianello, Mariateresa Sala, and Ludovica Baldan – and, of course, to the many authors scattered around the world that accompanied us on this path.

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No- and Low-Tech Entry Points to Campus and Community Digital Humanities

Constanza López Baquero, Clayton McCarl, Maya Blackin
Rook Breede, Janaya Ferrer, Britney Griffith
University of North Florida, USA

Abstract The digital humanities (DH) can engage students and off-campus communities with scholarly activity in new ways, reaching into extracurricular and public spaces and enabling non-specialists to participate not just as consumers but also creators. Many DH activities, however, are difficult to adapt or scale to allow for broad participation, often due to limitations in technology and training. This article examines the approaches taken by four projects at the University of North Florida to involve diverse populations both on campus and off in active roles requiring little or no technology or specialized technical abilities.

Keywords Public humanities. Digital humanities. Outreach. Pedagogy. Digital editing. Oral history. Community art. Local history.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Campus and Community Digital Humanities. – 3 Digital Oral History. – 4 Community Art. – 5 Document Transcription and Basic Markup. – 6 Impact and Challenges. – 7 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

One of the greatest promises of the digital humanities (DH) is the potential to engage students and off-campus communities with scholarly activity in active ways that allow for meaningful personal experiences. Digital scholarship can extend into extracurricular and public spaces in a manner that more traditional academic work often cannot and enables non-specialists to participate not just as consumers, but also as creators. Many types of digital humanities activities, however, are difficult to scale or adapt in a fashion that allows for broad participation. Projects often face limitations in terms of technology, such as when specific devices or software are needed. Participants may also encounter challenges in gaining needed skills in the compressed time frames in which digital project outreach often takes place.

This article examines how four projects based at the University of North Florida (UNF) involve on- and off-campus communities in active roles that require little or no technology or specialized abilities. The first, *Voces y Caras: Latinx Communities of North Florida*, uses oral history to highlight the experiences and contributions of local Latino communities, and the second, the *Embroidering for Peace and Memory*, employs needlework as a vehicle for advocacy and collective expression. The last two, *Editing the Eartha M.M. White Collection* and *coloniaLab*, are digital editing projects that host workshops involving the transcription and basic TEI-XML markup of documents related to local history. By utilizing activities that present minimal technical and logistical barriers, these projects allow diverse groups to contribute in ways that are impactful and enduring. Through this study, we seek to demonstrate that creating low- and no-tech entry points to digital projects can provide opportunities for participants to see their relationship to academic work in new ways and to discover a sense of belonging within communities built around collaborative processes of knowledge production.

We begin by framing our thoughts in the context of discussions about public and digital humanities, focusing on how the projects under consideration seek not only to connect with communities, but also to construct them. We then examine digital oral history, collective art, and participatory editorial work as approaches that can enable non-specialist populations on and off campus to contribute to digital projects. We conclude with thoughts on the benefits of making participation in digital projects accessible to broad publics.

While the project outreach discussed in this article has taken place within the U.S. academy and in the state of Florida more specifically, the approaches involved are generalizable to other geographical and cultural contexts. Developing accessible entry points to digital projects is a strategy that can function in a broad

variety of situations where access to technology represents an obstacle, participants have little experience with the humanities, or communities have historically been underserved by educational and cultural institutions. Building low-barrier methods to engage participants can be useful in diverse settings in which overcoming divisions and building a sense of solidarity and trust are priorities.

The projects examined here are also relevant beyond the scope of Florida and the U.S. because they exemplify how efforts that are local in focus can speak to larger audiences through the use of digital platforms. By concentrating on the thoughts, experiences, and perseverance of specific groups, such projects can resonate with other communities in distant places worldwide. By largely limiting their scope to local concerns, these projects offer unique opportunities to find points of connection across geographical space and cultural boundaries.

Lastly, we believe that this study can speak to a global audience by promoting alternative voices from the United States. By highlighting the perspectives of immigrants, minorities and young people, the projects examined here break down stereotypes at a time when political leaders in the U.S. are pursuing abrupt and radical change in the nation's role on the public stage. As the U.S. withdraws from decades-old partnerships and alters its relations with people around the world, projects like those highlighted here offer an opportunity to show that people in the U.S. remain committed to notions of equality and justice.

The authors of this article are the two professors who lead the four projects. They are joined as co-authors by four students who have held leadership roles in the outreach activities discussed and whose experiences have helped shape the ideas expressed here.

2 Campus and Community Digital Humanities

Public humanities and digital humanities are areas of practice that have much in common. Both are inherently interdisciplinary, with the former involving non-academic constituencies, who as Carin Berkowitz and Matthew Gibson point out, are “not tied to disciplines” (2022, 71), and the latter being, by definition, a space in which the tools and materials of different types of scholarly inquiry are brought together. Unlike traditional academic fields, public humanities and digital humanities are defined not by their objects of study, but rather by their ethos of praxis. Both are things that one actively ‘does’ – an idea conveyed in the titles of two recent edited volumes on these topics: *Doing Digital Humanities*, edited by Constance Crompton, Richard J. Lane, and Raymond Siemens (2016); and *Doing Public Humanities*, edited by Susan Smulyan (2021).

In their introduction to the 2023 collection *The Palgrave Handbook of Digital and Public Humanities*, Anne Schwan and Tara Thomson describe public humanities and digital humanities as two “modes of scholarship and practice” (4) that are “increasingly intertwined” (1). As their review of recent literature (3-5) makes clear, over the last decade numerous scholars have analyzed the ways that these scholarly modalities overlap, examining the objectives and challenges that are common to both. From such reflections have emerged two formulations that have become increasingly common: ‘public digital humanities’ and ‘digital public humanities.’

Both terms refer to scholarship that involves technology and publics outside of academia, but each does so from a different perspective or starting point. ‘Digital public humanities’ suggests a movement of more traditional public humanities practice into digital spaces, while ‘public digital humanities’ points to digital scholarship that prioritizes connections with non-academic communities. In many contexts, such a distinction may not be useful, particularly as scholars with no background in either of these fields can conduct scholarship that is both public and digital. Such a differentiation, furthermore, is likely to have little relevance for those outside the academy.

In whatever way we understand these terms, Sheila Brennan cautions that neither should be taken to refer to digital scholarship that is public only in the sense of being available online. Instead, according to Brennan, ‘digital public humanities’ and ‘public digital humanities’ signal approaches to scholarly work that “place communities, or other public audiences, at their core” (384). These two terms, in other words, do not reference only the public character of the products of digital scholarship, but instead the role that the public plays in the conceptualization and execution of that work.

In an article about reframing the public humanities – not necessarily those which are digital – Berkowitz and Gibson express a similar idea: “Too often when scholars have talked about public versions of disciplines they have meant merely that their wisdom would be understood by or distributed within a public”. To Berkowitz and Gibson, the ‘public’ in ‘public humanities’ points to something more related to equity and agency: “In its more radical form [...], the public humanities ask instead for the academy to give up its ownership of knowledge creation”. To these authors, “the best versions of the public humanities – the real ‘grassroots’ humanities – are created by publics, not merely for them” (2022, 73).

Within the broad area of public and digital scholarly practice, we highlight a few specific approaches to engaging diverse publics through campus-based projects. We have termed this work ‘campus and community digital humanities’ because it takes place in both those settings. The projects discussed in this article have involved

participation both on campus and beyond, not only by students but also members of the public.

To the second term, ‘community,’ we also attribute an additional layer of meaning, as all the outreach we describe in this article is not aimed only at engaging with communities but also constructing them. This involves not only conducting scholarship in the public sphere using digital tools but doing so in ways that emphasize the connections and discoveries made by those involved. The activities we describe are informed by ideas about learning as a student-centered, active, and collaborative process and are designed largely to enable collective discovery and the development of relationships and connections.¹

The potential for such engagement by so many individuals is due, in part, to the way these projects engage collaborators through activities that present minimal barriers related to skills and technology. Those who seek to become more deeply involved with the technological aspects of the projects have opportunities to do so, but little or no experience with specific tools and research methods is required for initial participation. Contributors can connect with the ideas that the projects represent and become part of the communities that have evolved around them in ways that are simple and often serendipitous.

This type of scholarly work is perhaps particularly relevant in a social context in which many feel a sense of disconnection. Since long before the COVID-19 pandemic, a mental health crisis has been unfolding on college campuses (Kadison, DiGeronimo 2004; Singh et al. 2022), and societies around the world are seeing increasing levels of loneliness and social isolation, particularly among young people (Batsleer, Duggan 2021; Morese et al. 2021). While the scholarly approaches we discuss in this article are in no way imagined to serve as a type of formal therapy, the potential benefits to individuals of engaging with projects like those discussed here, and feeling oneself to be part of the community that surrounds them, should not be overlooked.

The reflections in this study pertain to digital projects involving undergraduates at a mid-size regional public university. While the material is not specific to that context, the type of low-barrier community-focused efforts we describe may have particular relevance at similar institutions, where faculty may find they need to do “DH on a shoestring”, as Danica Savonick (2022) has put it,² and where

1 Sabine Hoidn summarizes many such ideas (2017, 23-59).

2 The four projects here have benefited from generous but modest support from various units at UNF, including the DHI and CIRT, but in general have operated with minimal resources. The faculty involved have been compensated to the extent that they have built this work into their teaching and service responsibilities but have not received direct remuneration beyond modest stipends from the DHI for supervising student interns.

the logistics of student life can complicate the ability of many to feel a sense of belonging and integrate into the life of the university. At UNF, the majority of students live off campus, most work at least part time, and many are non-traditional students who have family and professional commitments in addition to their studies. In this context, the opportunities for connection like those described in this article are perhaps especially valuable.



Figure 1 *Voces y Caras* participants following their public presentation. 2023. Photograph. University of North Florida, Jacksonville (FL). Courtesy of the authors

3 Digital Oral History

Led by Dr. Constanza López Baquero, *Voces y Caras: Latinx Communities of North Florida* is an oral history project in which students at UNF design and record interviews in Spanish with Latino residents of Jacksonville and surrounding areas. The project reflects a growing interest in using oral history to examine the experiences of Latino communities in the United States, a tendency perhaps best illustrated by the founding in 1999 of the Voces Oral History Center at the University of Texas at Austin, an initiative dedicated to “recording, preserving and disseminating the stories of Latinas and Latinos in the U.S. and weaving the many perspectives into our historical narrative at the national, state and local levels”.³ Interest in this type of work is also evident in the scholarship that the journal *US Latina and Latino Oral History Journal*, a companion project of the Voces Oral History Center, has published since its founding in 2017.⁴

3 Voces Oral History Center, “Mission Statement”. <https://voces.moody.utexas.edu/>; “Who We Are”. <https://voces.moody.utexas.edu/who-we-are>.

4 “US Latina and Latino Oral History Journal”, <https://utpress.utexas.edu/journals/us-latina-latino-oral-history-journal>.

Two of the most prominent projects focused on oral history and digital storytelling in the context of U.S. Latino populations are the *Bracero History Archive* and *Humanizing Deportation*.⁵ A collaboration between Brown University, the University of Texas at El Paso, the Smithsonian Institution, and George Mason University, the *Bracero History Archive* collects the stories of those who participated in the Bracero guest worker program (1942-64). The construction of the digital archive commenced in 2007, based on material that the Institute of Oral History at the University of Texas at El Paso began gathering in 2002 (Leon 2017). *Humanizing Deportation* was founded in 2017 at the University of California, Davis, and involves scholars at several institutions, including Tecnológico de Monterrey, Universidad de Guadalajara, and Universidad Autónoma de Chihuahua. The project serves as “a platform for migrants to share personal experiences regarding borders, migration and repatriation” (Irwin 2020).

Like the *Bracero History Archive* and *Humanizing Deportation*, *Voces y Caras* seeks to document stories related to migration and the experiences of Latinos in the U.S. Unlike those projects, however, *Voces y Caras* does not organize its content around a specific historical or political context. Instead, the project focuses on the oral history of migration in a particular geographical region, Northeast Florida. In this sense, it aligns with other projects that explore the experiences of Latino communities in places in the U.S. where they may be unseen or undervalued, such as *Oral Narratives of Latin@s in Ohio*, hosted by the Center for Folklore Studies at The Ohio State University (Foulis 2018, 123); and *New Roots: Voices from Carolina del Norte!*, based at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (Gill et al. 2019; Vos et al. 2016).⁶

Another distinguishing feature of *Voces y Caras* is the way it functions not only as a public digital humanities project but also a pedagogical experience. In this sense, *Voces y Caras* has aspects in common with the work of other scholars who have used oral history as a method for teaching in courses about Latinos in the U.S. Elena Foulis (2018), for instance, describes a service-learning course at The Ohio State University in which Spanish majors conduct interviews with members of the local Latino community. In another example,

⁵ *Bracero History Archive*, <https://braceroarchive.org>; *Humanizing Deportation*, <http://humanizandoladeportacion.ucdavis.edu>.

⁶ *New Roots: Voices from Carolina del Norte!*, <https://newroots.lib.unc.edu>; *Oral Narratives of Latin@s in Ohio*, <https://cfs.osu.edu/archives/collections/ONLO>.

Matthew Simmons taught an Introduction to Oral History course at the University of Florida focused on farmworkers in that state.⁷

Voces y Caras focuses on using oral history as a tool for working with a specific population of students: heritage speakers of Spanish. The student contributors are participants in SPN3351 Communication and Communities for Heritage Speakers, a course offered each spring that focuses on effective oral communication in Spanish. The students are bilingual and bicultural, and most have grown up in Florida. Their own experiences, and those of their families, provide a foundation for the work they do with *Voces y Caras*, which involves thinking critically about a range of issues related to migration, marginalization, and stereotypes, as well as the power of collective effort, solidarity, and creative production.

The students select their interviewees, who are members of their families, local businesspeople and professionals, civic leaders, and others. The conversations address the interviewees' experiences of immigration, their lives in the United States, and their hopes for the future. Their stories demonstrate the strength and resilience of local Latino communities and highlight the contributions that those populations make to the social, cultural, and economic life of North Florida.

As a digital oral history project, *Voces y Caras* has utilized technology from the beginning. The interviews are recorded and edited using digital tools and are accompanied by digital photographs of the interviewees. The finished product occupies a digital space, with the interviews and photographs published online through a WordPress website hosted by the Center for Instruction and Research Technology (CIRT) and the Digital Humanities Institute (DHI) at UNF.

The project is not exclusively digital, however, but also occupies physical spaces. The preparatory work involved in creating the interviews takes place in a classroom, where the students learn to write questions, develop strategies for conducting successful interviews, and reflect on the cultural and social settings in which Latinos live in North Florida. Although not necessarily visible in the finished products, these processes are fundamental parts of *Voces y Caras*, the meaning of which lies not only in the interviews produced but in the process of self-discovery in which students engage.

⁷ University of Florida Samuel Proctor Oral History Program [2018], "Our Summer B Intro to Oral History Course Will Focus on FL Farmworker History", <https://oral.history.ufl.edu/2018/04/10/our-summer-b-intro-to-oral-history-course-will-focus-on-fl-farmworker-history> (last access 29/03/2024).



Figure 2 Spanish major Nomaris Oquendo Aponte discusses her interview at the public presentation of *Voces y Caras*. 2023. Photograph. University of North Florida, Jacksonville (FL). Courtesy of the authors

Beyond the classroom interactions that shape and define the project, *Voces y Caras* hosts two annual, in-person events. Each spring, the students present their interviews at a public ceremony attended by their families, the interviewees, and members of the campus community [figs 1-2]. This event takes place in Spanish and is a rare occasion in which a physical area on campus is transformed into a space of dignity and pride for Latino communities, from both on and off campus, groups that are not always recognized for the important roles they play in the life of the university and the region.

In a similar way, each fall *Voces y Caras* provides visibility to Hispanic communities through an exhibit for Hispanic Heritage Month. For many years, this took the form of a display in glass showcases in the Thomas G. Carpenter Library. The exhibit featured photos and quotations from the interviews, along with traditional arts and crafts from Hispanic countries. Beginning in the fall of 2023, this event has been a multi-media installation in the art galleries at UNF, featuring images of the interviewees projected onto the walls with short-throw projectors, the voices of interviewees heard through sound domes, and artwork by Latino students and alumni.

Despite the centrality of technology to the project, *Voces y Caras* has always operated with a minimalist approach that suits the challenges involved in gathering the interviewees' stories. In most cases, bringing individuals to campus to record in a controlled studio

environment is not practicable or possible. Such a setting might also prove intimidating for some interviewees or, at a minimum, interfere with the spontaneity that makes many of the interviews so unique and engaging. Portable professional recording gear for student check-out has also not always been available.

To carry out the field recordings, therefore, the students use their own phones, a deliberately simple approach that offers many benefits. Employing their own devices eliminates the difficulties of ensuring students' access to equipment, as well as the need for training in its use. Students are able to focus their efforts on the content of the interviews without getting caught up in technical complexities or worrying about possible mistakes. The informal nature of the recording setup allows both interviewers and interviewees to converse without the intimidation or distraction that can accompany more formal or involved recording situations. By removing technical obstacles, students are better able to focus on the connections they seek to create with the interviewees and capture the candid and intimate exchanges that make the *Voces y Caras* recordings so powerful.

After recording their interviews, students employ tools to edit and caption the videos that likewise present minimal barriers. To edit, they either use programs already available on their devices, including iMovie and Garageband, or download free applications like Audacity. In general, the students face few challenges with these tools, and the editing process has become easier as new free technologies have become available. In order to make the videos accessible and increase their usefulness as a pedagogical tool, students generate and correct captions in Canvas Studio or YouTube, platforms that likewise require minimal training.

4 Community Art

Embroidering for Peace and Memory is a collaborative community art project in which participants embroider messages and designs on pieces of white cloth [fig. 3]. Led by López Baquero, the project draws on ideas about needlework as a form of protest, particularly by women, and the notion of craftivism, the intersection of 'crafting' and 'activism' (Greer 2014; Sanders-Bustle 2022). Embroidery as a means of resistance and social communication has a long history in Latin American and around the world and is a subject that has drawn the attention of scholars in recent years, particularly in the context of the #MeToo movement and the COVID-19 pandemic (Boonstra 2022; de la Garza et al. 2022; Segalo 2022). *Embroidering for Peace and Memory* is also informed by ideas about art and social action, as well as collective creation as protest, topics that have also been the

subject of much recent scholarship (Levine 2020; Garrido Castellano 2021; Shipley, Moriuchi 2023).



Figure 3

Mechanical engineering student Jonathan Fitzgerald with his embroidery piece. 2023. Photograph. University of North Florida, Jacksonville (FL). Courtesy of the authors

Since 2012, *Embroidering for Peace and Memory* has been an annual week-long event at UNF that is open to the entire campus community. From 2012 through 2021, the embroidering sessions were held on The Green, an open space that is centrally located on UNF's campus and by which many students, faculty, and staff pass on their way to class or the university's cafeteria, located nearby. In 2022, the event was held in a different space, an area between buildings known as Peace Plaza, also a location with a high volume of foot traffic. In 2023, the sessions were held in the Language and Culture Lab, a space just off The Green operated by the Department of Language, Literatures and Cultures, with the final day at the Ogier Gardens, an organic garden on campus operated by students.



Figure 4 Embroidery pieces displayed on campus. 2023. Photograph. University of North Florida, Jacksonville (FL). Courtesy of the authors

In all these spaces, a central component of the event has been the display of selected pieces completed in previous years. They are hung with clothespins from cords stretched across open expanses [fig. 4]. In this sense, the week-long event is both a hands-on workshop and an art exhibition. The installation of the cords and embroidering pieces redefines the locations in which the project takes place and temporarily claims that space as a zone for creativity and free speech that cannot always be found on campus, particularly in recent years, given political changes in Florida and the impact they have had on institutions of higher learning.

In addition to the open sessions, *Embroidering for Peace and Memory* has also engaged students enrolled in specific classes. Faculty from several disciplines have taken their students during instructional time to learn about and participate in the project, and others have invited the project into their classrooms. Most notably, in the fall of 2022, the project was co-sponsored by the Hicks Honors College and over 200 students enrolled in the first-year honors colloquium were invited to participate, following a class presentation by López Baquero, who at that time was a faculty fellow with the Honors College.



Figure 5 Detail of the *Voces y Caras* exhibit designed and installed by Rook Breede in the Thomas G. Carpenter Library. 2023. Photograph. University of North Florida, Jacksonville (FL). Courtesy of the authors

From 2022 to 2024, graphic design major Rook Breede was an intern with the project. In 2022, Breede assisted López Baquero in organizing and running the workshops. Breede introduced participants to the history and goals of the project, helped them to design their pieces, and taught them a basic approach to embroidery. In 2023, Breede took charge of leading the week-long event, overseeing the majority of the embroidery sessions, designing and installing a related exhibit in UNF's Thomas G. Carpenter Library [fig. 5], and representing the project at digital humanities symposia at UNF and the University of Florida (López Baquero and Breede 2022, 2023) [fig. 6].

Breede's work also involved helping to update and maintain the *Embroidering for Peace and Memory Digital Archive*, the website where the project publishes selected items. Breede photographed the embroidery pieces, added the photos to the project's Omeka website, and created Dublin Core metadata for each. In many cases, that metadata includes the participants' reflections on the meanings of their creations and the motivations behind them. Breede also organized the items into a set of thematic collections and added tags that enable users to explore the archive based on other factors. In doing so, she continued the work on the digital archive begun by previous student intern Rebecca Weiner.



Figure 6 Dr. Constanza López Baquero and Rook Breede present on the Embroidering for Peace and Memory Digital Archive at the Seventh-Annual UNF Digital Projects Showcase. 2022. Photograph. University of North Florida, Jacksonville (FL). Courtesy of the authors

While designing the embroidery pieces and carrying out the embroidering itself are low- or no-tech activities, they do, of course, require specialized skill. To make this activity accessible to all participants, therefore, the project provides a minimalist approach that involves sketching out a design on paper, replicating that in pencil on the cloth, and implementing it using a basic stitch that can be learned quickly. In some cases, participants' designs consist only of text, which is relatively simple to develop and carry out. Some contributors engage in more sophisticated work, both in terms of design and execution, but by placing the emphasis on content over presentation, the project has created a route to participation that nearly all students have found accessible.

The project allows large numbers of students to engage in a type of collective creative production and activism that most have never experienced previously. Students embrace the opportunity to express their viewpoints in a way that is visible and lasting. In this sense, the public participation that is central to *Embroidering for Peace and Memory* is not only a way to build the collection but is also an end in itself. The project is an ongoing lesson in art and activism that each year touches the lives of numerous students, many of whom encounter the project entirely by chance.



Figure 7 Student leaders of transcription and editing workshops at the Florida Undergraduate Research Conference: Britney Griffith, Maya Blackin, and Janaya Ferrer. 2024. Photograph. University of North Florida, Jacksonville (FL). Courtesy of the authors

5 Document Transcription and Basic Markup

Directed by Dr. Clayton McCarl, *Editing the Eartha M.M. White Collection* and *coloniaLab* are digital editing projects based at UNF that have experimented with engaging the public in the online publication of archival materials related to local history. The projects do so through workshops both on and off campus that give the public the opportunity to contribute to the transcription of archival texts, as well as sometimes the basic markup of those materials. The workshops are conducted primarily by student leaders, who also represent the project at conferences and other events [fig. 7].

Involving the public in the creation of document transcriptions is a form of outreach pursued by numerous projects focused on archives and digital editing. This frequently takes the form of “transcribathons”, scheduled events at which the public contributes, either in person or online, to the transcription of documents. Prominent examples include the events hosted by *Early Modern*

Manuscripts Online and the *Early Modern Recipes Online Collection*.⁸ These projects often use FromThePage, an online platform through which institutions can upload document images and coordinate the transcription process.⁹ The Scripto plug-in for Omeka is another popular tool for crowd-sourced transcription.¹⁰

While the outreach work described here has much in common with these efforts, the term ‘transcribathon’ does not completely apply to the public-facing activities of *Editing the Eartha M.M. White Collection* and *coloniaLab*. ‘Transcribathon’ is typically used to refer to a single or periodic event that is relatively high-profile and focused on engaging large publics at one time. *Editing the Eartha M.M. White Collection* and *coloniaLab* conduct their efforts on a smaller scale and in an ongoing fashion. More importantly, ‘transcribathon’ generally conveys the notion of achieving a certain amount of labor.¹¹ In the case of *Editing the Eartha M.M. White Collection* and *coloniaLab*, however, neither productivity nor the accomplishment of a predetermined amount of transcription is a goal.

These differences are perhaps a function of the place from which *Editing the Eartha M.M. White Collection* and *coloniaLab* are articulated. Transcribathons are often organized by libraries and archives, who own the materials and have an interest in producing transcriptions to increase their discoverability and usefulness. They are also coordinated by editorial projects that focus on a defined amount of material. *Editing the Eartha M.M. White Collection* and *coloniaLab* are both distinct in the sense that neither seeks to complete the transcription of a specific body of texts, but rather are focused on exploring the processes involved in using transcription and digital editing as methods for teaching and community building.

Since 2016, *Editing the Earth M.M. White Collection* has been producing online versions of documents held in Special Collections and University Archives in UNF’s Thomas G. Carpenter Library. The materials relate to the life and work of Eartha M.M. White, a businesswoman, philanthropist, and activist who is a major figure in the twentieth-century history of the North Florida region. Her papers are key to understanding American life in Jacksonville and the surrounding area over the nearly century-long span of her life and are a rich source of information about African American religious,

⁸ “Transcribathon”, *Folgerpedia*, Folger Shakespeare Library, <https://folgerpedia.folger.edu/Transcribathon>; “Transcribathons”, *Early Modern Recipes Online Collection*, <https://emroc.hypotheses.org/transcribathons>.

⁹ FromThePage, <https://fromthepage.com/landing>.

¹⁰ “About”, Scripto, <https://scripto.org/#about>.

¹¹ See Merriam Webster’s definition of *-athon*: an “event or activity lasting a long time or involving a great deal of something”.

commercial, and social institutions during that time. They likewise represent a major resource for studying the role that women played in the civic life and activism of African American communities.

The project began in the context of a summer digital editing course in 2016. Two years later, the project ran its first small-scale workshop series with the assistance of student intern Susan Williams. In 2020, that workshop format was expanded into a series of weekly open workshops led by intern Lyn Hemmingway, events that took place in the offices of the UNF Digital Humanities Institute. As the student leader of the project, Hemmingway continued that workshop series in a virtual format in the spring of 2021.

The format was further developed in 2023 by Hemmingway's successor, Janaya Ferrer, who helped to create a model for offering transcription workshops in the community. The first of those off-campus events took place as part of The Justice Sessions, a speaker series organized by the UNF Department of English. The second was part of the annual conference of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, and the third was part of a birthday celebration for White held at Eartha's Farm and Market, an urban agriculture initiative operated by the Clara White Mission, the social service agency that Eartha M.M. White founded and named for her adoptive mother in the early twentieth century.¹²

In the spring of 2024, student intern Maya Blackin experimented with a different workshop model, running walk-up transcription sessions on a varying schedule held in the Thomas G. Carpenter Library. These events took place in an open study area on a non-quiet floor and offered the advantage of taking *Editing the Eartha M.M. White Collection* directly to students. Through this format, a broader range of individuals was able to discover the project with very few potential barriers to their initial participation. The students were already in the library, had elected to be in an area where they could interact with others, and in some cases, welcomed the break from their studies that participation in the project provided.

While *Editing the Eartha M.M. White Collection* is about publishing archival materials online, it has been from the beginning also about pedagogy and direct person-to-person outreach. The project was born out of an interest in doing digital editing with students, and over the years has transformed itself into a laboratory for pursuing a student leadership model for digital editing projects. This model is reflected in the work of Wilson, Hemmingway, Ferrer, and Blackin, who have assumed the primary responsibility for designing, promoting, and

¹² "AboutEFAM", Eartha's Farm & Market: A Clara White Mission Initiative, <https://earthasfarmandmarket.org/about-us>; "Clara White Mission", Clara White Mission, <https://clarawhitemission.org/about>.

leading the workshops. They have also selected the documents to be edited and worked with Special Collections to acquire the necessary digital images.



Figure 8 Participants transcribe documents at a birthday celebration for Eartha M.M. White. 2023. Photograph. Eartha's Farm and Market, Jacksonville (FL). Courtesy of the authors

All the workshops involve familiarizing participants to White's life and work, explaining the history of the White Collection at UNF, and guiding participants in the basics of reading the documents. The transcription workshops take a minimalist approach, limiting participants' activity to the reading and typing on a device, or writing by hand on paper, the contents of the documents. The workshops that involve editing introduce participants to TEI-XML and an approach to conducting the basic markup of the documents.

In both cases, the workshops are designed to serve as meaningful experiences for those who will participate only one time, as well as those who may continue to attend subsequent sessions or contribute outside the context of those events. For the on-campus workshops, participants are invited to begin at any point in the semester, and they take on no specific time commitment. Many, however, became regular contributors, attending the workshops week after week. The community workshops are assumed to be the only contact most participants will have with the project, and so are self-contained events, although the project encourages attendees who are interested to stay in touch and continue working on documents, either at on-campus events or remotely.

In the case of both types of workshops, participants generally handle short items that can be completed in a session of 60-90 minutes. These typically are handwritten letters and speech notes

of one or two pages. Participants who elect to work on devices can also choose event programs, brochures, and other typewritten or printed material. Although optical character recognition could be used to digitize some such materials, having participants type from scratch often takes less time and effort than cleaning up OCR scans, and allows for interacting with the document in ways that are often more satisfying. Repeat attendees are given longer documents that require multiple sessions to prepare.

The editing workshops present some demands in terms of technology, as participants need to be able to access an XML editor. The project has traditionally used either oXygen or VS Code installed locally on the computers in the DHI's lab, and some repeat participants have chosen to install VS Code, which is available at no cost, on their own laptops. Since no other specialized software is needed, the technical obstacles to participation, in terms of hardware and software, are relatively minimal.

The need to understand and use TEI-XML represents a more significant potential barrier, but in practice, the student workshop leaders have found that their peers generally do not struggle with this aspect of the project. Most can quickly grasp the purpose, nature and syntax of TEI-XML, and, with few exceptions, have been able to carry out markup using the reduced set of structural and semantic elements employed in the workshops.



Figure 9 Dr. Tru Leverette Hall, Susan Swiatosz, Dr. Clayton McCarl, Dr. David Jamison, and Janaya Ferrer at a transcription workshop led by Ferrer during the conference of the Association for African American Life and History. 2023. Photograph. Jacksonville (FL). Courtesy of the authors

The transcription workshops can be carried out entirely without digital devices. Participants are provided with color printed images of the documents, which can also include QR codes for those who choose to view the images online. Although transcribing handwritten documents by hand may not seem to make sense, workshop leaders have, in fact, found that this indeed is a productive approach. The challenge for participants is generally the reading of the handwriting in the originals. As long as they write that text in a fashion that is not difficult for the workshop leaders to later type into the respective XML documents, real, meaningful work is indeed accomplished. Because these events do not make access to the internet mandatory, they can be held in locations where wi-fi is not available or reliable.

Although they are not required for the transcription workshops, digital devices can be incorporated in a fashion that presents few barriers. The project has been able to provide iPads, borrowed from CIRT and the DHI at UNF, on which participants can create their transcriptions. Workshop leaders have found that even users who have little experience or confidence with digital technology are able to employ the iPads for this purpose. Some participants have also chosen to transcribe on their own phones.

The outreach and public engagement described here are not ancillary activities of *Editing the Eartha M.M. White Collection*, but instead, a central component of what the project seeks to represent. The community workshops honor the memory and legacy of White's own activism and solidarity and connect participants today with that history. In this way, the project's output has not only been digital versions of archival texts, but also the formative experiences it has created for diverse publics. While the TEI-encoded documents may someday become part of a more formal *Eartha M.M. White Digital Archive*, for now, the name – *Editing the Eartha M.M. White Collection* – expresses the notion that the project is not just about creating a digital resource, but also about the collaborative processes that can go into the construction of that resource.

Like *Editing the Eartha M.M. White Collection*, *coloniaLab* is a digital editing project that was born with the dual mission of producing editions and exploring the pedagogical possibilities of that work. Prior to 2019, student contributions mainly consisted of individual interns working on relatively large-scale projects. In 2019, a group of students on a study abroad trip to Colombia assisted in the transcription and basic markup of a legal case related to the history of slavery in the Antioquia region. The following academic year, students in upper-level literature and culture courses contributed to the creation of a digital edition of a census of enslaved persons from the 1840s in Antioquia, work they completed in place of writing a more traditional final paper.

Following the success of the public transcription workshops started by *Editing the Eartha M.M. White Collection*, McCarl began experimenting with transcription, instead of transcription and markup, as a more basic entry point to the project. He ran one-day transcription workshops in intermediate Spanish courses as a preliminary experiment, and in the fall of 2023, began a weekly open workshop, co-led by intern Britney Griffith, largely following the model used by *Editing the Eartha M.M. White Collection*. In the spring of 2024, McCarl and Griffith continued that series in a virtual format, making it accessible to a broader range of students.

These *coloniaLab* workshops have focused on documents related to the Spanish colonial history of North Florida. They belong to the collection at the Library of Congress known as the East Florida Papers, a set of administrative records that passed to the United States when Spain relinquished Florida in 1821. The *coloniaLab* workshops have dealt with a subset of materials that comprise correspondence between the governors of Spanish Florida, and their military commanders in outposts along the St. Johns River, on Amelia Island, and at the Matanzas Inlet, south of St. Augustine. They are short documents of usually 1-2 pages that typically deal with specific needs and concerns. Depending on the level of the participant, they can often be transcribed entirely in one sixty-minute session.

Like the workshops run by *Editing the Eartha M.M. White Collection*, these events are designed to be meaningful even for those who choose to participate only once. Each session, therefore, involves a brief explanation of the documents and their context in the history of North Florida, as well as a high-level introduction to reading and transcribing the items. The project leaders then work with new participants to guide their experience and help them get started. Those who choose to contribute repeatedly work with more autonomy, consulting as needed the documentation and resources on the *coloniaLab* website. As participants' level of fluency in Spanish can vary, having participants work together to read and transcribe the documents is often a productive approach. Following the events, the student leader types any paper transcriptions and marks all the documents in TEI-XML, which McCarl reviews and publishes on the project website.

Prior to 2024, *coloniaLab* worked primarily with documents in Spanish, but the project has begun involving non-Spanish speakers in its work by engaging them in the markup of English translations. In a spring 2024 course on Latin American digital humanities, for instance, all course participants contributed to the Florida series of *coloniaLab* by marking up either Spanish transcriptions of original documents or English translations of others that had previously been published in Spanish. This approach not only allows broader participation in the project's work but also makes the published documents more accessible to a wider public.

6 Impact and Challenges

The impact of these approaches is difficult to measure in quantitative terms, other than by one straightforward measure: numbers of participants. By this standard, we believe all four projects discussed in this article have made significant achievements. Since 2012, over 200 students and an equal number of community members have recorded interviews for *Voces y Caras*.¹³ Approximately 700 individuals have contributed to *Embroidering for Peace and Memory* since that same year.¹⁴ Since 2016, 75 students and 25 community members have contributed to *Editing the Eartha M.M. White Collection*, and 122 students have participated in the work of *coloniaLab*.¹⁵

While such figures reflect only one way of measuring project impact, we believe they hold particular significance. In each instance, these projects were able to connect students and community members with ongoing collective efforts and provided experiences through which they became active contributors to meaningful, lasting community resources. At a time when many in the United States and around the world question the relevance of the humanities and higher education more broadly, we believe the value of such constructive encounters is best measured in the transformative impact they have on individuals.

Given the emphasis these projects place on broad-based participation, the primary challenge faced by leaders often relates to time. Finalizing the work done by students and community participants involves varying amounts of intervention by project leaders. In cases where these projects take place in the context of courses, a portion of that effort can potentially be built into a faculty member's teaching load. In a similar fashion, some of the labor involved in these outreach efforts can possibly be framed as university or community service. In general, however, undertaking endeavors like those described in this article frequently implies an investment of time that goes beyond the strict expectations of one's terms of employment. The feasibility of such activity may depend greatly on project leaders' professional and personal circumstances, which for many in academia today are characterized by increasing precariousness.

13 "Collaborators" [2025], *Voces y Caras: Latinx Communities of North Florida*, <https://vocesycaras.unfdhi.org/collaborators>.

14 Because of the nature of this project, participation is inherently difficult to track, but since 2012 over 700 embroidery pieces have been produced, with most participants creating only one.

15 "Credits" [2025], *Editing the Eartha M.M. White Collection*, <https://unfdhi.org/earthawhite/credits>; "Reconocimientos" [2025], *coloniaLab*, <https://colonialab.org/reconocimientos>.

The political implications of this work represent another challenge that cannot be overlooked in the current political climate in the United States and elsewhere. To varying degrees, the projects described in this article promote inclusivity, encourage the appreciation of difference, denounce injustice and recover the stories of marginalized groups. Such priorities may be viewed with suspicion and potentially bear negative consequences in certain institutional contexts. The protections that faculty could once take for granted are increasingly uncertain, and the long-term viability of projects like those we describe here therefore may be in question.

7 Conclusions

The first two decades of this century saw active debates around the nature and scope of the digital humanities. The ‘hacking’ versus ‘yacking’ distinction and the notion of ‘big tent’ DH are two examples of ways scholars framed these controversies.¹⁶ Although defining the digital humanities remains an elusive task, scholars seem less concerned today with the urgency of doing so or less convinced that arriving at a definitive answer is possible or desirable. Judging what is and is not digital humanities based on technological or methodological approaches is today likely to be seen as a suspect and exclusionary activity.

Over the past decade, however, a more pressing matter related to inclusion has emerged: the need to diversify the digital humanities not only in terms of approaches but also voices and representation. In recent years, organizations and publications have made deliberate and laudable efforts to expand their reach into new communities and highlight scholarship from beyond Anglophone and Western European contexts. These efforts have not been fruitless, but the question that Tara McPherson posed in the title 2012 chapter “Why Are the Digital Humanities So White?” has certainly not been rendered irrelevant.

Working against such efforts toward inclusivity is the fact that the digital humanities remain, in the United States, at least, largely the domain of exclusive educational institutions. Danica Savonick (2022) points to the way that students are most commonly exposed to the digital humanities at “elite, private and/or research-intensive institutions”. Faculty at non-elite institutions have less access to support for DH work in research and teaching, and as a result their students have fewer opportunities to discover digital methods and tools. In this way, a largely closed cycle of privilege within the

¹⁶ For a few examples of scholarship related to such efforts at definition, see Fitzpatrick 2012; Nowvickie 2016; Svensson 2012.

digital humanities is maintained, while in the educational spaces where the most diverse populations of students could engage with the digital humanities, the field is almost entirely absent. To truly achieve diversity of perspective, DH must engage with undergraduate students at all types of institutions, as well as the off-campus communities in which those undergraduates live.

Bringing in new voices and perspectives requires not only expanding DH into less privileged environments but also promoting DH as a tool for building relationships and creating communities. DH cannot be something that only happens in English classrooms or in the context of faculty and graduate-level research. It also cannot be only the “intersection between technology and the humanities”, or a neutral collection of ideas about collaboration and innovation. To truly diversify, DH must also be about the building of relationships and the creation of communities in which new generations of students and future practitioners can find themselves recognized and their concerns represented. Democratizing DH in this way is, arguably, a step toward truly revolutionizing the humanities and the way we conduct scholarship in the twenty-first century more generally.

The methods discussed in this study illustrate a few ways to construct low-barrier interfaces into broad-based collaboration on digital scholarship. In each case, the emphasis is not on technology but on content and context, and while participants’ contributions ultimately become part of online resources, the relationships and connections that are built through these experiences are ends in themselves. By involving diverse publics in activities that are both accessible and meaningful, these approaches enable participation by populations that might not otherwise ever encounter the digital humanities.

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Content Analysis of Travel Literature: A Journey Through Time to Jerusalem

Johnny Yosef

Bar-Ilan University, Israel

Gila Prebor

Bar-Ilan University, Israel

Abstract This study explores Jewish travel literature from the twelfth to the nineteenth century, with a focus on depictions of Jerusalem. Combining distant and close reading methods, it analyses content categories and patterns to uncover recurring themes in the portrayal of the city. Utilizing digital tools such as CATMA, Voyant, and Dicta, the study applies computational techniques to generate and examine categories that would be difficult to identify manually. Through tagging and processing, the analysis offers a nuanced view of how Jerusalem has been represented across centuries, providing a unique historical perspective through digital humanities methods.

Keywords Content Analysis. Digital Humanities. Travel Literature. Distant reading. Voyant Tools. Jerusalem.

Summary 1 Introduction. –2 Research Questions. –3 Methodology. –4 Findings and Discussion. –5 Century-By-Century Analysis: Tracing the Evolution. –6 Summary and Conclusions.



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1 Introduction

Travel literature is a dynamic and multifaceted genre, encompassing diverse forms of written accounts such as fiction, non-fiction, poetry, prose, diaries, and descriptions of places. In the context of Jewish travel literature, these writings serve as windows into historical, cultural, and spiritual landscapes, fulfilling purposes like documenting journeys, guiding future travelers, and preserving sacred memories (Borm 2004; Campbell 1991; Thompson 2011). This study examines how Jerusalem – a city revered by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – was depicted in Jewish travel literature from the twelfth to the nineteenth centuries, employing qualitative and quantitative tools from the digital humanities.

Jerusalem's unique role as a holy city transcends its geographical boundaries, symbolizing both universal spirituality and deeply personal devotion. While pilgrimage to Jerusalem was no longer obligatory in Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple, the city's significance endured through prayers, rituals, and literary descriptions (Cohen-Hattab, Shoval 2015; Limor, Reiner, Frenkel, 2014). These texts provide a lens into the challenges faced by travelers, from hazardous sea voyages to threats of robbery and harsh weather. Notably, these journeys also reflect the resilience and spiritual determination of the pilgrims, even when some did not survive the perilous routes.¹

These changes reflect not only the evolving nature of Jewish pilgrimage but also broader transformations in Jewish society and its relationship with Jerusalem. Particularly notable is the transition from the restricted access and limited descriptions during the Crusader period to the more extensive accounts during Mamluk and Ottoman rule, demonstrating how political contexts shaped both the physical access to Jerusalem and its literary representation.

2 Research Questions

This study examines 33 Hebrew travel narratives written by Jewish travelers between the mid-twelfth and late nineteenth centuries, aiming to understand how Jerusalem was depicted across different periods and literary styles. The research addresses two primary questions:

1. How did the nature and content of Jerusalem's descriptions evolve over the centuries? This includes analyzing stylistic, categorical, and quantitative aspects such as: geographical

¹ Schiller 1994; Yaari 1976; Kashani 1981; Rainer 2014.

descriptions, depictions of specific places, accounts of events, portrayals of individuals, personal experiences and emotions and religious experiences.

2. To what extent can these changes be attributed to factors such as: Shifts in political circumstances and access to the city, the evolving nature of Jewish religious experiences, developments in travel writing conventions and the diverse backgrounds and origins of the travelers.

By addressing these questions through a comparative analysis of travelers and time periods, this study seeks to uncover the various dimensions and perspectives reflected in the descriptions of Jerusalem. This approach enhances our understanding of how literary representations of the city changed in response to broader historical, cultural, and religious transformations.

3 Methodology

3.1 The Research Corpus

The research corpus comprises 33 digitized travel accounts from Avraham Yaari's *Travels of Eretz Israel* (1976), spanning from Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela's voyage in 1170 to Theodor Herzl's journey in 1898. This edition, available in the Hebrew Books database,² was selected based on several criteria: comprehensive coverage of the target time period; consistent editorial principles across all texts; availability in digital format and representativeness of different Jewish communities and geographical origins.

3.2 Corpus Preparation and Description

To prepare the corpus for analysis, the following steps were undertaken:

1. conversion: PDF images were converted into machine-readable text using Abbyy FineReader 15;
2. manual verification: OCR errors were meticulously corrected, with particular attention to: Hebrew diacritical marks, place names and proper nouns and historical terminology;
3. segmentation: the text was divided into individual journey accounts;

² This edition is available in the Hebrew Books database. <https://hebrewbooks.org/about>.

4. standardization: spelling variants were standardized to ensure accuracy in computational analysis.

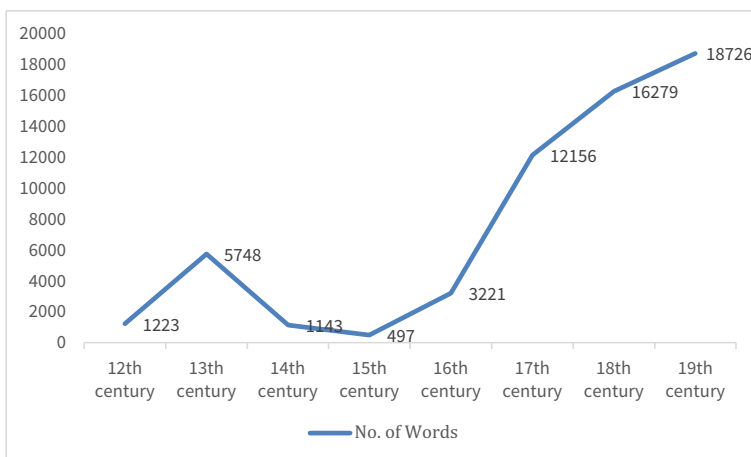
The distribution of these journeys across centuries reveals distinct patterns [tab. 1]. In the early period (twelfth-seventeenth centuries), there is a consistent average of two to three texts per century, characterized by relatively concise descriptions, with the thirteenth century being a notable exception showing longer descriptions. The later period (eighteenth-nineteenth centuries) shows a significant increase in the number of journeys, with seven journeys in the eighteenth century and eleven in the nineteenth century, accompanied by a substantial rise in the volume and detail of descriptions.

The temporal distribution of words counts relating to Jerusalem [graph 1] highlights a clear evolutionary pattern. While descriptions remain relatively brief throughout the sixteenth century, a marked increase in textual volume begins in the seventeenth century, reaching its peak in nineteenth-century narratives. This progression reflects both the increasing accessibility of Jerusalem and evolving literary conventions. A detailed listing of all journeys, including dates, origins, and word counts, is provided in Table 1, illustrating the breadth and depth of the corpus.

Table 1 Travelers and Journeys

Journey no.	Year	Starting place	Passenger	No. of words
1	1170	Tudela, Spain	Rabbi Binyamin Modela	729
2	1180	Regensburg, Ashkenaz	Rabbi Petachiah of Regensburg	250
3	Second half of the twelfth century	Ashkenaz	Rabbi Yaakov ben Netanel	244
4	1218	Muslim Spain (Granada or Toledo)	Yehuda Alharizi	1456
5	1267	Girona, Spain	Rabbi Moshe Ben Nachman (Nachmanides)	4,292
6	Early fourteenth century	Spain	Anonymous student of Nachmanides	950
7	1322	Spain	Ishtori Haparchi	193
8	1441	Malaga, Spain	Rabbi Yitzchak v. Alfra	69
9	1473	Crete, Greece	An anonymous Cretan man	6

Journey no.	Year	Starting place	Passenger	No. of words
10	1481	Volterra, Italy	Meshullam of Volterra	422
11	1521-23	Pizarro, Italy	Rabbi Moshe Basula	2,335
12	1563	Pizarro, Italy	Elijah of Pissarro	453
13	1567	Yemen	Zechariah Yahya Alchahari	433
14	1641-42	Crimea, Ukraine	Shmuel Ben David	2,268
15	1650	Prague	Rabbi Moshe Poriat from Prague	8,594
16	1654-55	Crimea, Ukraine	Moshe ben Eliyahu Halevi the Karaite	1,294
17	1699-1706	Siemiatycze, Poland	Rabbi Gedaliah of Simiatic	9,588
18	1753-73	Jerusalem	Rabbi Chaim Yosef David Azulai (Hida'a)	165
19	1764-1765	Zaluzha, Ukraine	Rabbi Simcha, son of Rabbi Yehoshua Mazalazitz	123
20	1769	Ashkenaz	Rabbi Moshe Yerushalmi	2,891
21	1785-86	Crimea, Ukraine	Benjamin son of Elijah the Karaite cases	3,262
22	1798-99	Jibuzhka, Ukraine	Rabbi Nachman of Breslav	250
23	1824	Vilnius, Lithuania	Rabbi David Debit Hillel	2,436
24	1833-34	Kaminitz, Belarus	Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kaminitz	1,104
25	1839	Livorno, Italy	Moshe and Yehudit Montefiore	3,025
26	1847	Paltican, Romania	Benjamin the II	1,594
27	1870-71	Krakow, Galicia (Poland)	Shimon Berman	1,206
28	1871	Jerusalem	Joshua Yellin	213
29	1876	Jerusalem	Rabbi Rahamim Yosef Opletka	730
30	1881-82	Yemen	Rabbi Shalom Alshikh	1,074
31	1889	Mohilev, Belarus	Mordechai ben Hillel HaCohen	5,463
32	1891	Squire, Ukraine	One of the people	387
33	1898	Budapest, Hungary	Theodor Herzl	1,494



Graph 1 Distribution of word count relating to Jerusalem descriptions by century

3.3 'Distant Reading' and 'Close Reading'

This study employs the complementary methods of 'distant reading' and 'close reading', as developed by literary scholar Franco Moretti in his exploration of 'world literature' (2000; 2013). Close reading involves a detailed and in-depth examination of complete texts, adhering to traditional literary analysis methods. However, this approach focuses on a limited literary canon, which may not capture broader patterns. Conversely, distant reading involves extracting and analyzing text units outside their immediate context to uncover overarching trends and structures. While this method sacrifices some of the text's inherent richness, it enables the study of literature as a system.

Although the corpus in this study consists of 58,993 words - a relatively small size by Moretti's standards - distant reading proves invaluable in visualizing and analyzing how Jerusalem was depicted over 700 years of Jewish travel literature. The integration of distant and close reading allows for a holistic analysis, balancing detailed textual insights with a broader, systematic perspective (Münz-Manor 2021).

3.4 Research Tools

To support this dual methodology, the study utilizes several digital humanities tools:

1. CATMA (Computer Assisted Textual Markup and Analysis, available at <https://catma.de/>) is a web application designed to support flexible workflows in text annotation, analysis, and visualization. It offers a user-friendly interface for creating tag sets, making it highly effective for qualitative analysis. In this study, CATMA facilitated tagging and categorizing textual elements, enabling systematic qualitative and computational analysis.
2. Voyant Tools (available at <https://voyant-tools.org/>) is an open-source platform for quantitative text analysis and visualization. The Cirrus tool within Voyant was used to generate word clouds that highlight the most frequently occurring terms in the corpus. To enhance accuracy, a Hebrew-specific stop word list was adapted to exclude function words and improve term frequency analysis.³ A unique challenge in Hebrew grammar is the use of attached prefixes (e.g., 'habayit' for 'the house' or 'babayit' for 'in the house'), which can create ambiguity in text analysis. This issue was addressed using advanced linguistic tools, as described below.
3. Dicta (available at <https://dicta.org.il/>) provides machine learning and natural language processing tools tailored for Hebrew texts. In this study, Dicta's automatic vocalization and morphological analysis tools improved the accuracy of word clouds and frequency calculations, compensating for the complexity of Hebrew's grammatical structure. For instance, these tools are distinguished between different forms of the same root, ensuring a more reliable analysis.

3.5 Text Analysis

Following the preparation of the corpus, we conducted a two-pronged text analysis, combining qualitative content analysis and computational techniques using CATMA and Voyant Tools. These methods provided complementary insights into the evolution of Jerusalem's descriptions.

3 See HebrewStopWords: <https://github.com/gidim/HebrewStopWords>.

3.6 Qualitative Content Analysis

Category development method – to structure the qualitative analysis, we employed a combined deductive-inductive approach (Shakedi 2003; 2014; Bauer 2011):

1. Deductive Framework: based on theoretical insights from travel literature and pilgrimage studies (Limor, Reiner 2005; Turner, Turner 2011), we developed a thematic framework comprising three core categories: Object Descriptions: Physical and geographical depictions of Jerusalem, Experiential Descriptions: Personal and emotional interactions with the city and Historical Descriptions: Accounts tied to Jerusalem's past.
2. Inductive Refinement: using open coding on 20% of the corpus, we identified emerging patterns and themes, formulated preliminary categories, and iteratively refined them based on additional data.

The resulting category tree [fig. 1] combines theoretically derived structural elements with data-driven insights, providing a comprehensive framework for analyzing Jerusalem descriptions across centuries.

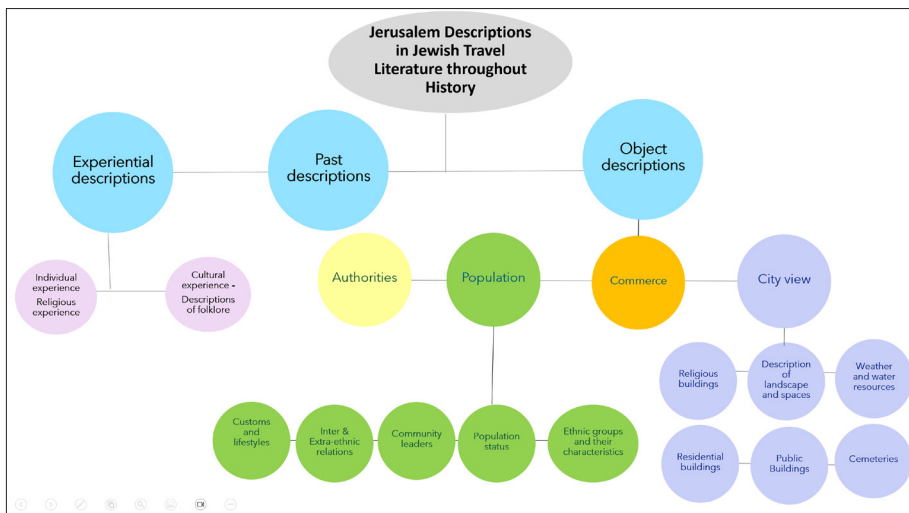


Figure 1 Category Tree

3.7 Computational Analysis

The computational analysis complemented the qualitative approach, focusing on two distinct levels:

1. Data Layer Analysis (Voyant Tools): uploaded texts into Voyant's web-based interface for quantitative mapping of word prevalence by century. Visualized patterns using word clouds to highlight key terms and trends.

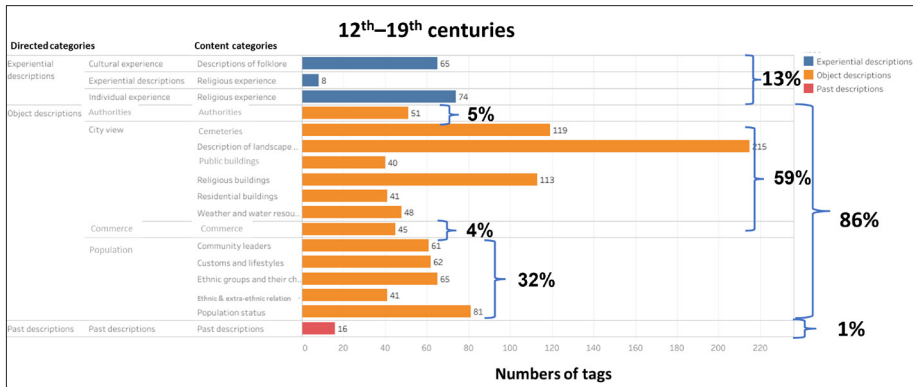
2. Metadata Layer Analysis (CATMA): applied qualitative content analysis categories through tagging, Mapped category frequency across individual texts, historical periods, and the entire corpus, Identified absent categories and examined relative frequencies to account for variations in text length.

To ensure consistency, category frequencies were normalized as percentages rather than relying on absolute counts, enabling meaningful comparisons across texts and time periods.

4 Findings and Discussion

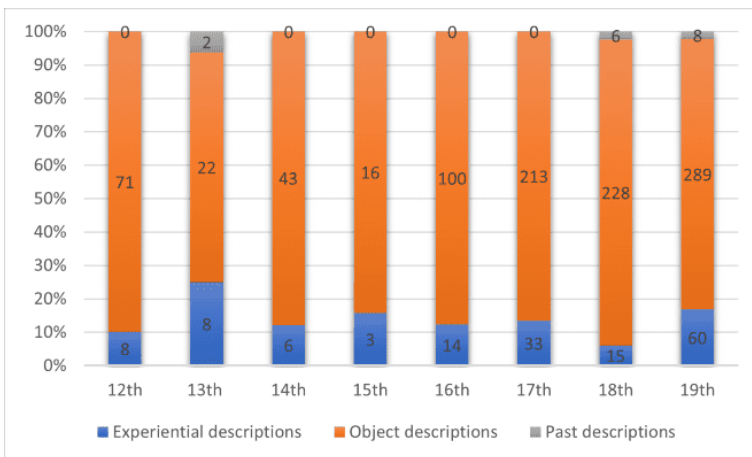
4.1 A Comprehensive Analysis Across Generations (Twelfth-Nineteenth Centuries)

Our analysis of Jewish travel literature about Jerusalem, spanning eight centuries, reveals systematic changes in both content and descriptive approaches. Based on a computational analysis of 33 travel narratives, distinct patterns emerge in how Jerusalem was perceived, experienced, and documented. As shown in graph 2, object descriptions overwhelmingly dominate, accounting for 86% of all tags. These emphasize tangible and physical elements such as cemeteries, landscapes, public buildings, and religious structures, reflecting a strong focus on infrastructure and material aspects of life. In contrast, experiential descriptions, representing 13% of the tags, highlight limited attention to cultural, social, or personal experiences, while historical descriptions, comprising just 1%, underscore a preference for contemporary observations over retrospective accounts [graph 2].

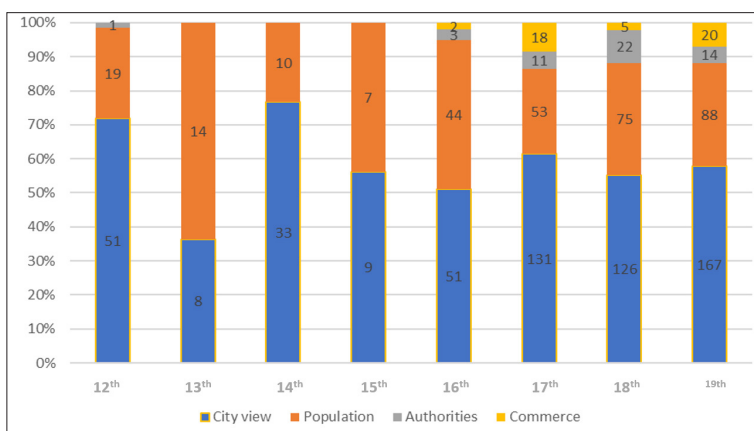


Graph 2 Division into Directed and Content Categories, twelfth-nineteenth centuries

Building on this quantitative analysis, Graphs 3 and 4 provide further insights into how descriptions of Jerusalem are distributed across three main categories: 'object descriptions', 'historical descriptions', and 'experiential descriptions'. The majority of tags fall under 'object descriptions', which emphasize physical features and infrastructure, followed by 'experiential descriptions', while 'historical descriptions' remain marginal [graphs 3-4]. These three primary categories are further divided into 16 content subcategories. For instance, the 'object descriptions' category encompasses 'city view', 'commerce', 'population', and 'authorities', with additional distinctions within 'city view' and 'population' [graph 1].



Graph 3 Summary of Directed Category Performances, Twelfth-Nineteenth Centuries



Graph 4 Summary of Directed Category 'object descriptions', Twelfth-Nineteenth Centuries

As demonstrated in graph 4, 'city view' consistently dominates over most periods, except for the thirteenth century. This subcategory provides detailed accounts of Jerusalem's sacred spaces, cemetery, prayer and worship buildings, the Temple Mount complex, and other prominent features. Descriptions of the population explore customs, lifestyles, inter-ethnic relations, community leaders, and demographics, offering a glimpse into Jerusalem's social fabric. However, the 'commerce' and 'authorities' subcategories are significantly underrepresented until the sixteenth century, when they begin to feature more prominently, reflecting evolving interests in economic and administrative aspects.

Over time, the descriptive focus shifts, revealing a gradual enrichment in both scope and detail. Holy places, consistently central to the narratives, are elaborated upon with additional details about access, local customs, and associated traditions. For example, recurring references to prayer at the Golden Gate appear across centuries, showcasing continuity in certain practices. From the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, descriptions become increasingly detailed, encompassing a broader range of topics, such as residents' occupations, market activities, goods, food preparation, residential architecture, and water sources, as well as landscapes, gardens, and orchards.

By the nineteenth century, descriptions adopt a more literary and sentimental tone, often influenced by Zionist themes. These writings, predominantly from Ashkenazi visitors and immigrants, incorporate personal impressions and religious experiences, offering a nuanced view of Jerusalem's physical appearance and cultural life. A pivotal transformation occurs around the 1830s, coinciding with improved

equality among Jerusalem's population. This period sees a shift toward more personal, literary styles of writing, reflecting broader societal changes and the emergence of Zionist ideals.

4.2 Authorial Background and Perspectives

The travel narratives demonstrate significant evolution in authorial background and perspective across the studied periods [graph 5]. In the early period (twelfth-fifteenth centuries), accounts come predominantly from Sephardic writers, exemplified by Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela from Spain and Meshullam of Volterra from Italy. Their accounts reflect the prominent role of Spanish and Italian Jewish communities in maintaining connections with Jerusalem during this period.

In the sixteenth century, authorial diversity increased, as seen in the accounts of Moses ben Mordecai Bassola and Eliyahu of Pissarro from Italy. Zechariah Dhahiri from Yemen introduced a unique contribution to the genre with his rhyming prose (maqama), reflecting the influence of Yemenite literary traditions. This period demonstrates how different Jewish cultural traditions began contributing to the documentation of Jerusalem.

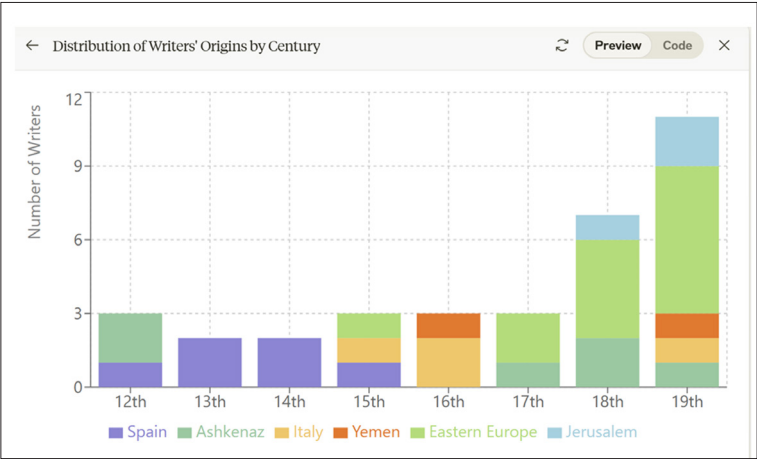
A significant shift occurs in the seventeenth century, marked by the emergence of multiple perspectives: Karaite accounts from Shmuel ben David and Moshe ben Eliyahu Halevi of Crimea, alongside Rabbi Moshe Poryet from Prague, representing Ashkenazi tradition. This diversification of voices enables richer documentation of inter-communal relations and varying religious perspectives within Jerusalem's Jewish community.

The eighteenth century shows further transformation, with accounts predominantly from Ashkenazi and Eastern European writers, such as Rabbi Gedaliah of Simatitz and Rabbi Moshe Yerushalmi, though maintaining some diversity through figures like Chaim Yosef David Azulai (Hida), who was born in Jerusalem. This shift reflects broader changes in Jewish migration patterns and the growing connection between Eastern European communities and Jerusalem.

The nineteenth century accounts, including those of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Mekminitz, Mordechai Ben Hillel HaCohen, and ultimately Theodor Herzl, demonstrate the dominance of Ashkenazi voices, particularly those associated with early Zionist thought. However, this period also includes diverse perspectives such as those of Judith and Moshe Montefiore, maintaining the multi-vocal nature of Jerusalem documentation.

This evolution in authorial background parallels broader changes in Jewish demographics, mobility patterns, and ideological developments. The shift from predominantly Sephardic to

increasingly Ashkenazi authorship, along with the integration of Karaite perspectives, provides crucial context for understanding how Jerusalem was perceived and documented across different Jewish communities and traditions.



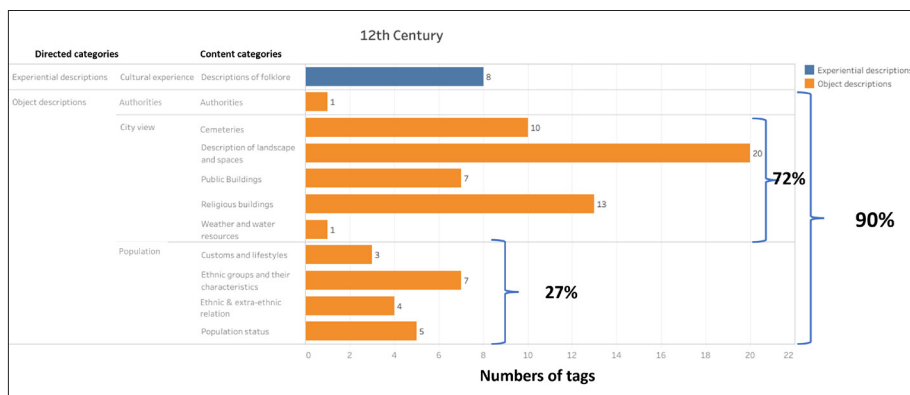
Graph 5 Distribution of writers' origins by century

The comprehensive analysis of descriptions of Jerusalem in Jewish travel literature from the twelfth to the nineteenth centuries reveals significant changes in approaches and content. While early descriptions focused primarily on physical elements such as buildings and infrastructure, there was a gradual increase in attention to social and cultural aspects, particularly in the nineteenth century. These trends reflect an expansion in historical documentation influenced by demographic, cultural, and technological factors. Additionally, the cultural diversity and backgrounds of the authors shifted significantly, from Sephardic dominance in the early periods to the growing inclusion of Ashkenazi, Karaite, and other regional traditions. This process highlights the dynamic evolution of the relationship between Jewish communities and Jerusalem, as reflected in the increasingly nuanced portrayals of the city across generations.

5 Century-By-Century Analysis: Tracing the Evolution

5.1 The Twelfth Century: The Beginning of Literary Documentation

The twelfth century marks the inception of comprehensive Jewish travel literature about Jerusalem, a period characterized by Crusader rule and significant restrictions on Jewish presence in the city. Three travel narratives from this period, totaling 1,223 words, have survived (Travels 1-3 in Table 1). A computational analysis of the tagging layer reveals 79 tags distributed across 11 content categories, with the vast majority (90%) falling under ‘object descriptions’ and only a minority (10%) under ‘experiential descriptions’ [graph 6].



Graph 6 Division into Directed and Content Categories, Twelfth Century

The dominance of object descriptions reflects the writers’ primary focus on the city’s physical space. Within this category, urban landscape descriptions account for 72%, population descriptions 27%, and references to authorities merely 1%. The landscape descriptions primarily focus on Jerusalem’s mountains, with the Mount of Olives and Mount Zion receiving particular attention. Benjamin of Tudela describes the magnificent views of the Dead Sea and the Land of Israel from Mount Zion, while Petachiah of Regensburg emphasizes the impressive view of the Temple Mount and the Gate of Mercy from the Mount of Olives (Rainer 2014).

A central religious practice described during this period is the ‘Rounding of the Gates’ – a prayer route that involved circling the gates of the Temple Mount or the city walls, observing mourning customs, and offering prayers for its reconstruction. Descriptions of religious buildings and cemeteries occupy a significant portion of the narratives, with particular emphasis on the Western Wall, the Temple

Mount, and the Muslim structure at the site of the Temple. The Golden Gate is described as a significant focal point for Jewish prayer.

The historical context of Crusader rule is clearly reflected in the descriptions. The hostility toward Jews and Muslims, which culminated in the destruction of the Jewish community during the Crusader conquest (Rainer 2014; Yaari 1976), is evident in the population descriptions. However, the Hospitaller Hospital established by the Crusaders is also mentioned, serving Jews and Muslims despite being primarily intended for Christian pilgrims.

The automatic analysis of the text layer reinforces the focus on the city's physical description [fig. 1]. The most frequent words include 'Mount' (16 occurrences), 'Gate' (15), 'Tomb' (16), 'House' (15), and 'King' (15), reflecting the intensive engagement with urban space and sacred sites. In contrast to later periods, there is a notable scarcity of experiential and personal descriptions, as well as limited reference to community life and social aspects.

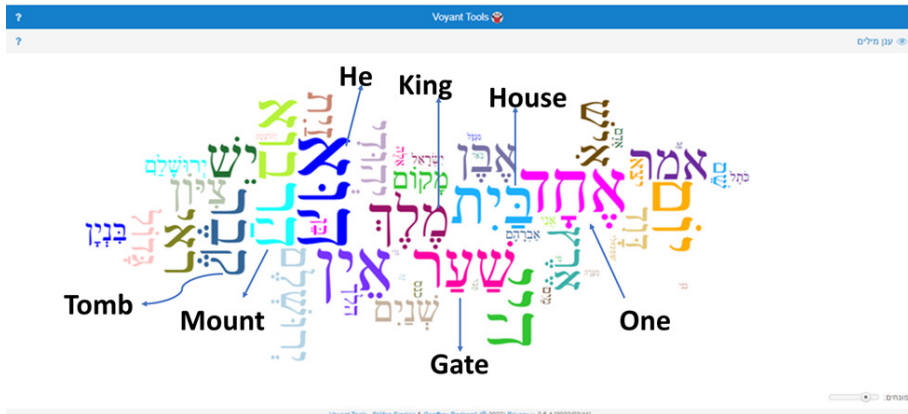


Figure 2 Word Cloud – Twelfth Century

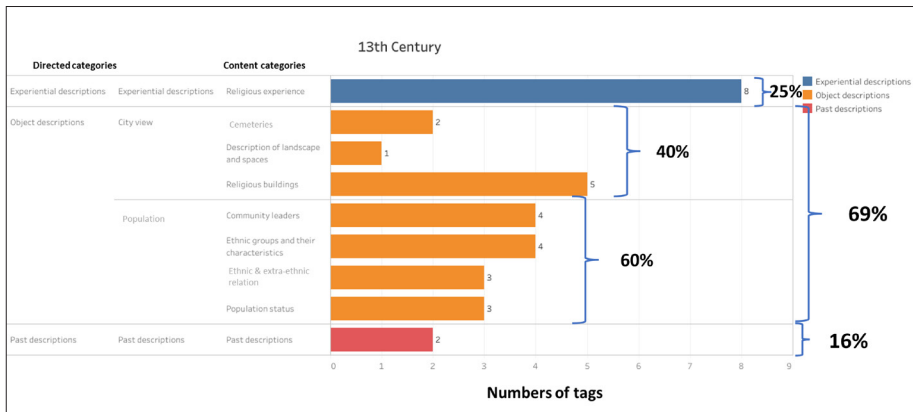
Within the 'Object Descriptions' category, two other prominent program categories emerge: 'Description of Religious Buildings' (17%) and 'Description of Cemeteries' (13%). The travelers provide detailed accounts of significant locations along the 'Rounding the Gates' route, including the Temple courtyard, the Temple Mount, and the Western Wall area. The descriptions also include references to the Pool of Siloam and the Kidron River in the Jerusalem Valley, demonstrating the writers' attention to the city's water sources and topographical features.

It is important to note that our understanding of this period is limited by several factors: first, the paucity of available sources; second, the restrictive influence of Crusader rule on documentation

possibilities; and third, the dominant religious focus that may have come at the expense of documenting other aspects of city life. As shown in the word cloud analysis [fig. 2], the emphasis on physical and religious elements dominates the narrative vocabulary of this period, setting a baseline for comparing the evolution of travel literature in subsequent centuries.

5.2 The Thirteenth Century: Transition and Revival

The thirteenth century presents a significant shift in Jerusalem's documentation through two notable journey descriptions (Travels 4-5 in Table 1), both written in rhyming prose. Analysis of the tagging layer reveals 32 tags across 9 content categories, with a distinctive distribution: 69% under 'object descriptions', 25% under 'experiential descriptions', and 6% under 'past descriptions' [graph 7].



Graph 7 Division into Directed and Content categories, Thirteenth Century

Al-Harizi's journey (Journey 4) serves as a crucial historical source, documenting the revival of Jewish settlement in Jerusalem following the transition from Crusader to Muslim control during the Ayyubid rule (Shur 1980). His account provides valuable insights into the coexistence of Jews and Muslims during this period, offering detailed observations of internal ethnic relations within the Jewish population. In contrast, Nachmanides' account (Journey 5), dispatched to Spain in 1267, coincides with the beginning of Mamluk rule in Jerusalem and aims to encourage Jewish settlement in the Holy Land (Sabag-Montefiore 2013).

Within the 'Object Descriptions' category, a notable shift occurs from the previous century, with population descriptions now

dominating at 60%, while city view descriptions decrease to 40%. This shift reflects a growing emphasis on social and demographic documentation. The automatic analysis of the text layer reveals this changing focus, with religious and spiritual terms becoming more prominent: 'God (Elohim)' (45 instances), 'house' (36 instances), 'soul' (30 instances), 'God (Ha-Shem)' (28 instances), 'Israel' (26 instances), and 'Heaven' (16 instances) [fig. 3].



Figure 3 Word Cloud –Thirteenth Century

Both travelers provide vivid accounts of their religious experiences upon encountering Jerusalem, particularly expressing sorrow when visiting the destroyed Temple site and other holy places. Their emotional responses represent a new layer of documentation that goes beyond mere physical description, introducing a more personal and experiential dimension to the travel literature.

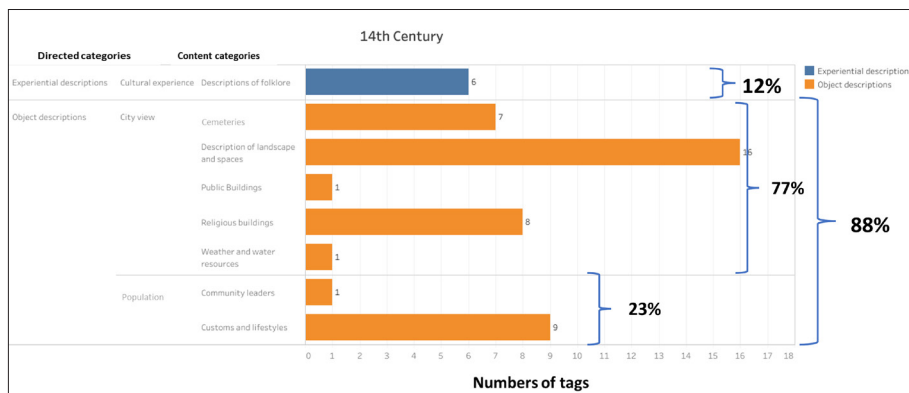
The shift from Crusader to Muslim rule marks a significant turning point in the nature of Jewish presence in Jerusalem. The accounts suggest that Muslims demonstrated greater tolerance toward Jewish settlement compared to their Crusader predecessors, although internal conflicts and economic hardships continued to challenge the community. Nachmanides' detailed description of the impoverished state of the Jewish population he encountered provides valuable insights into the social and economic conditions of the period.

The thirteenth century narratives thus represent a crucial transition in the documentation of Jerusalem, moving from

primarily physical descriptions to a more nuanced approach that encompasses social, religious, and experiential dimensions. This evolution in descriptive focus sets the stage for the more complex and multifaceted accounts that would emerge in subsequent centuries.

5.3 The Fourteenth Century: Evolving Pilgrimage Patterns

The fourteenth century corpus presents two contrasting narratives (Travels 6-7 in Table 1): a detailed 950-word account by an anonymous student of Nachmanides, and a concise 193-word description by Ishtori Haparchi. The computational analysis reveals 49 tags distributed across eight content categories, maintaining a similar pattern to previous centuries with 88% classified as ‘object descriptions’ and 12% as ‘experiential descriptions’ [graph 8].



Graph 8 Division into Directed and Content Categories, Fourteenth Century

The anonymous student’s account dominates the period’s documentation, contributing significantly to the ‘City View’ category, which comprises 77% of all objective descriptions. This narrative introduces several innovations in the documentation of Jerusalem, most notably the first mention of the ‘tearing ceremony’ – a ritual mourning practice performed upon seeing Jerusalem. The student’s systematic documentation follows a clear pilgrimage route, beginning from the northern approach to Jerusalem and proceeding through various significant sites.

Of particular interest is the students’ description of Jerusalem’s agricultural landscape, noting city gardens irrigated by the Shiloah waters extending to the Pool of Siloam. The account includes a novel observation about Muslim beliefs in the healing properties of the Shiloah waters, representing an early documentation of interfaith

practices at sacred sites (Limor, Reiner, Frenkel 2014). This attention to local customs and beliefs marks a significant evolution in the travel literature genre.

The description of the Temple Mount compound demonstrates increased detail compared to previous accounts, introducing new elements such as the Foundation Stone, Muslim customs surrounding it, and the network of caves beneath. This level of detail suggests greater access to sacred sites during this period, possibly indicating improved relations with local authorities.

Ishtori Haparchi's briefer account, while less detailed, provides valuable insights into contemporary pilgrimage practices. His observation that Jews traveled to Jerusalem during festivals "but not due to heartache, I mean: to multiply heartache" (Yaari 1976) offers a unique perspective on the emotional and religious complexities of Jerusalem pilgrimage during this period. This comment also provides indirect evidence of the improved conditions for Jewish visitors compared to the Crusader period.

The automatic analysis of the text layer reveals the continuing prominence of physical landmarks in the narratives, with 'house' (31 instances), 'mountain' (24 instances), 'road' (20 instances), and 'Jerusalem' (19 instances) among the most frequently occurring terms [fig. 4].



Figure 4 Word Cloud – Fourteenth Century

This word frequency pattern aligns with the predominant focus on city views and physical descriptions, while also reflecting the increased attention to movement and accessibility within the city.

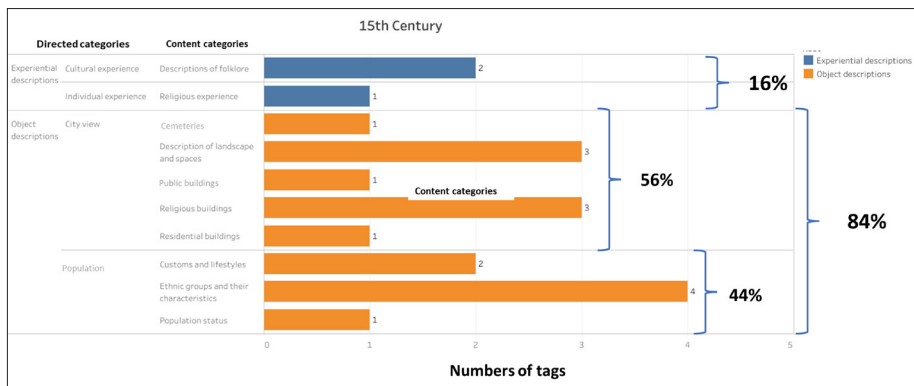
The fourteenth century narratives thus represent a crucial development in Jerusalem travel literature.

This period is characterized by a more systematic approach to documenting pilgrimage routes, the introduction of new religious

practices and customs, and a heightened focus on interfaith interactions. Sacred sites receive more detailed attention, and experiential elements are increasingly integrated into descriptions that remain largely centered on physical aspects. This period sets the stage for the more complex narratives that would emerge in subsequent centuries, establishing patterns of documentation that would influence Jewish travel literature about Jerusalem for generations to come.

5.4 The Fifteenth Century: Shifting Perspectives under Mamluk Rule

The fifteenth century presents three travel descriptions (Travels 8-10) [tab. 1], comprising the most concise documentation period with only 497 words total. Analysis of the tagging layer identifies 19 tags across 10 content categories, with 84% categorized as 'object descriptions' and 16% as 'experiential descriptions' [graph 9]. Within the object descriptions, there is a more balanced distribution between city view (56%) and population description (44%) than in previous centuries, suggesting a gradual shift toward greater attention to social dynamics.



Graph 9 Division into Directed and Content Categories, Fifteenth Century

Rabbi Yitzchak Alpra's journey from Málaga, documented in a letter to Rabbi Simeon ben Zemah Duran (Rashbatz) in Algiers, provides valuable insights into the interconnected nature of Jewish communities during this period. His account emphasizes the networks linking Jerusalem's Jewish community with those in Syria, Egypt, and Iraq, while also highlighting the prevalent poverty in Jerusalem. This focus on inter-community relationships represents a new dimension

in the travel literature, moving beyond purely local observations.

The most comprehensive account of this period comes from Meshullam of Volterra, a member of a prominent Italian banking family. His narrative is particularly significant for its detailed documentation of the journey from Egypt to Jerusalem via Gaza and Hebron, offering a broader geographical context than previous accounts. Meshullam's observations about the absence of walls in Jerusalem during the Mamluk period provide important historical documentation of the city's physical condition.

Of particular significance is Meshullam's demographic analysis, noting approximately 250 Jewish families alongside 10,000 Muslim families. This quantitative approach to population description marks an evolution in documentation methods. When compared with accounts from the Crusader period, these numbers suggest significant growth in the Jewish community, reflecting the relatively greater tolerance under Muslim rule than under Crusader Christian governance (Schur 1980).

The anonymous traveler from Crete, while providing limited information about Jerusalem itself, offers valuable insights into peripheral communities such as Kfar Kana, contributing to our understanding of the broader Jewish settlement pattern in the Holy Land during this period.

The automatic analysis of the text layer reveals a significant shift in emphasis. The most frequent terms reflect a balance between physical descriptions of the Temple Mount ('house' with 12 instances, 'Temple' with 8 instances) and references to contemporary social conditions, particularly regarding Muslim-Jewish relations (with 'Ishmaelite' appearing 14 times). This linguistic pattern [fig. 5] suggests an increasing integration of social and political awareness into the traditional religious-physical description framework.

The fifteenth-century accounts reveal significant advancements in Jerusalem travel literature, emphasizing inter-community relationships and networks, providing more detailed demographic documentation, and offering broader geographical contextualization. A growing focus on Muslim-Jewish relations and the inclusion of quantitative population data further characterize this period. These shifts reflect the changing political realities under Mamluk rule and the evolving methodologies of travel documentation, laying the groundwork for the more comprehensive narratives that would emerge during the Ottoman era.



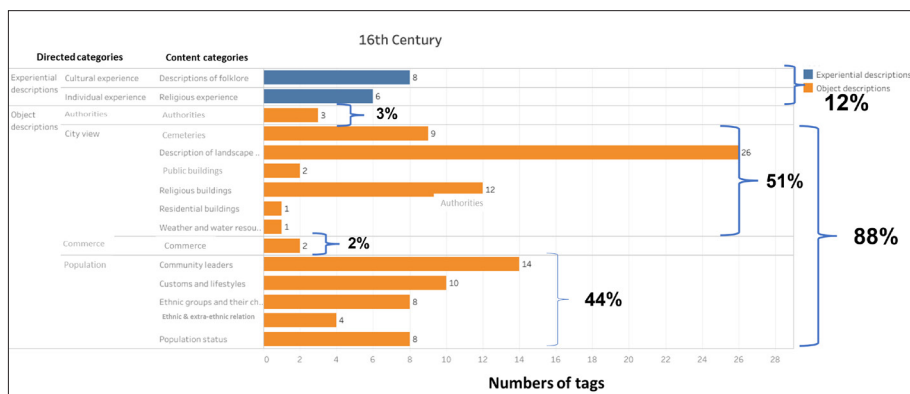
Figure 5 Word Cloud – Fifteenth Century

5.5 The Sixteenth Century: New Perspectives in the Early Ottoman Period

The sixteenth century represents a significant transition period, marked by the beginning of Ottoman rule that would span four centuries and bring substantial changes to Jerusalem and the Holy Land. Yaari's collection features three journey descriptions from this period (Travels 11-13 in Table 1): accounts by Moses ben Mordecai Bassola and Eliyahu of Pissarro, both Italian Jews, and a unique rhyming prose (*maqama*) narrative by Zechariah Dhahiri from Yemen, representing a diverse geographical and stylistic range.

The period coincides with Sultan Suleiman's reign (1520-1566), an era of significant development and reconstruction in Jerusalem, most notably the rebuilding of the city walls. The subsequent decline in Ottoman administration after Suleiman's death would have lasting implications for Jerusalem and pilgrimage practices (Schur 1980).

Quantitative analysis of the tagging layer reveals 114 tags distributed across 15 content categories, with 88% categorized as 'object descriptions' and 12% as 'experiential descriptions' [graph 10]. Within the object descriptions category, the distribution shows increasing complexity: 51% relate to city view, 44% to population, 3% to trade, and 2% to authorities, reflecting a broader scope of observation than in previous centuries.



Graph 10 Division into Directed and Content Categories, Sixteenth Century

Moses ben Mordecai Bassola's account stands out for its comprehensive approach. As rabbi of the Jewish community in Pissarro, Italy, he provides detailed information about local regulations, customs, religious practices, and public leadership structures. His systematic documentation of the predominantly Sephardi Jewish community offers valuable insights into inter-communal relations, noting particularly positive interactions between Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews. This attention to community dynamics represents a significant evolution in travel literature.

Elijah of Pissarro's journey narrative, though interrupted by plague, provides important documentation of health conditions during this period. This inadvertent focus on public health issues adds a new dimension to our understanding of daily life in sixteenth-century Jerusalem.

Rabbi Zechariah Dhahiri's maqama-style account introduces a distinctive literary approach to travel documentation. His focus on the Jewish community, religious experiences, and encounters with significant figures like Joseph Karo enriches our understanding of both the social fabric and intellectual life of the period.

The automatic analysis of text frequencies reveals telling patterns, with terms like 'one' (47 instances), 'house' (42 instances), and 'day' (40 instances) dominating the discourse [fig. 6]. This word distribution suggests a shift toward more temporally organized and quantitatively precise documentation.



Figure 6 Word Cloud – Sixteenth Century

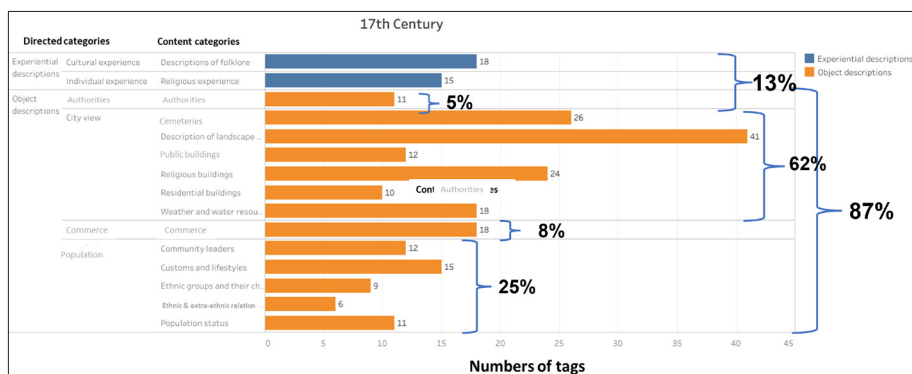
The sixteenth-century narratives stand out for their detailed documentation of Ottoman administrative changes, nuanced descriptions of inter-communal relations, and integration of public health observations. These accounts also demonstrate heightened attention to economic conditions and trade, alongside a notable literary sophistication in travel writing. This period represents a pivotal transition in travel literature, moving toward more comprehensive and systematic documentation of Jerusalem's physical, social, and economic landscapes. The focus on administrative and economic aspects reflects the shifting political dynamics under Ottoman rule and the growing sophistication of travel documentation practices.

5.6 The Seventeenth Century: Diversification of Perspectives Under Ottoman Rule

The seventeenth century marks a significant shift in Jerusalem travel literature, introducing accounts from previously unrepresented communities. Three primary narratives emerge during this period (Travels 14-16 in Table 1): accounts by two Karaite Jews from Crimea, Shmuel ben David and Moshe ben Eliyahu Halevi, and Rabbi Moshe Poryet from Prague. This diversification represents a notable departure from the previous dominance of Sephardic narratives from Italy, the Balkans, and Yemen, while highlighting the special connection between Jerusalem's Karaite community and their Crimean counterparts.

The period's documentation is particularly rich in detail, reflected in the quantitative analysis of content categories and tags. Analysis reveals 246 tags distributed across 15 content categories within

the 'object descriptions' directed category, showing a complex distribution: 62% pertaining to city view, 25% to population, 8% to trade, and 5% to authorities [graph 11]. This distribution suggests a more comprehensive approach to urban documentation than in previous centuries.



Graph 11 Division into Directed and Content Categories, Seventeenth Century

Shmuel ben David's account, the first of the century, provides unprecedented insight into the Karaite community's experience in Jerusalem. His narrative introduces new elements to the travel literature genre, including the first documentation of a tax requirement for Jerusalem entry, significantly paid to a rabbinical Jewish tax official. This detail reveals complex interrelationships between different Jewish communities and Ottoman administrative structures.

The author provides detailed descriptions of the Karaite quarter, including their 'Holy Courtyard', synagogue, and residential areas, while also documenting the financial support flowing from the Crimean Karaite community to their Jerusalem counterparts. His praise for Sultan Suleiman's contributions to Jerusalem's development, particularly regarding city walls and water sources such as Ein Rogel and Hezekiah's Pool, offers valuable historical context for urban development under Ottoman rule.

Rabbi Moshe Poryet's account, chronicled in *Darchei Zion*, represents a significant departure in travel literature's purpose and focus. Written explicitly as a practical guide for future pilgrims, it provides detailed information about markets, goods, prices, and daily life considerations. His warning about the prohibition of wearing green clothing, reserved for Muslims, and detailed descriptions of dress codes and time-restricted movements under Turkish rule offer valuable insights into the social regulations of the period.

Moshe ben Eliyahu Halevi's later account, while more limited in scope, provides important documentation of the Karaite community's decline over the fourteen years since Shmuel ben David's visit. His descriptions maintain focus on traditional elements – holy places, landscape, and cemeteries – while adding unique details about the Golden Gate and local traditions.

The automatic text analysis reveals shifting emphases in the period's documentation, with terms related to physical structure ('house' – 155 instances, 'Jerusalem' – 131 instances, 'Land' – 79 instances, 'Gate' – 66 instances) balanced by religious terminology ('Sabbath' – 58 instances, 'Torah' – 47 instances, 'Prayer' – 47 instances) [fig. 7]. This linguistic pattern reflects the period's integration of practical and spiritual concerns in travel documentation.

The seventeenth-century narratives mark a significant evolution in Jerusalem travel literature, distinguished by the introduction of non-Sephardic perspectives, detailed accounts of inter-communal relationships, and practical guidance for future travelers. These writings also offer comprehensive documentation of social regulations and a thoughtful integration of administrative and religious concerns. This period sets new paradigms for travel documentation, shaping the genre for subsequent centuries while offering rich insights into Jerusalem's intricate social and religious fabric under Ottoman rule.

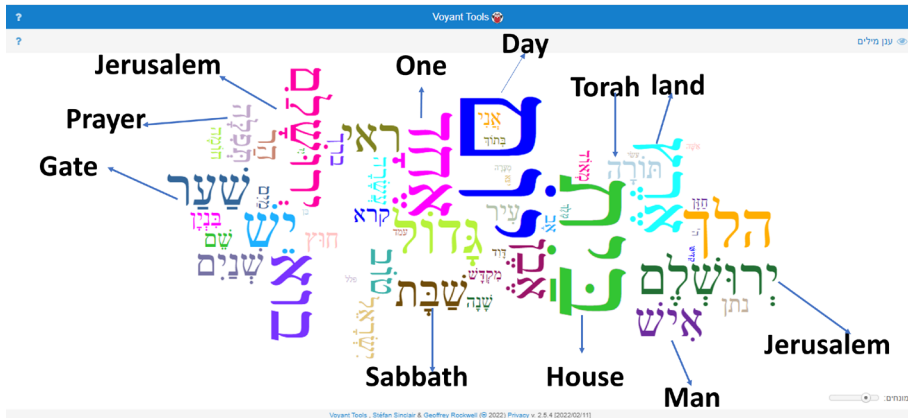
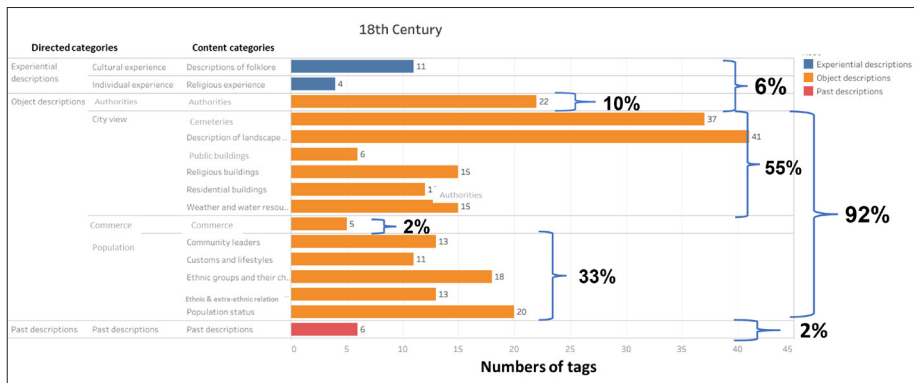


Figure 7 Word Cloud – Seventeenth Century

5.7 The Eighteenth Century: Intensified Documentation in a Period of Change

The eighteenth century marks a significant expansion in Jerusalem travel literature, with six detailed accounts (Journeys 17-22, Table 1) representing diverse perspectives. These narratives, predominantly from Ashkenazi and Eastern European writers, signal a shift from the previously dominant Sephardic voice. With the exception of Chaim Yosef David Azulai (Hida), a Jerusalem-born rabbinical emissary, all travelers originated from Ashkenazi or Eastern European communities. Rabbi Gedaliah of Simatitz provides the most extensive account at 9,588 words, while Rabbi Moshe Yerushalmi and Binyamin Ben Eliyahu the Karaite contribute approximately 3,000 words each.

Quantitative analysis reveals 249 tags across 16 content categories, with a distribution pattern of 92% 'object descriptions', 6% 'experiential descriptions', and 2% 'past descriptions' [graph 12]. This distribution demonstrates both continuity with earlier periods and new emphases in documentation focus.



Graph 12 Division into Directed and Content Categories, Eighteenth Century

Eighteenth-century travel accounts are distinguished by their heightened focus on authorities, population dynamics, ethnic groups, and inter-ethnic relations, representing 43% of all tags. Rabbi Gedaliah's meticulous documentation sheds light on the challenges faced by Jerusalem's Jewish community under Ottoman rule, including complex relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims, burdensome taxation systems such as burial site fees, strict regulations governing clothing and public behavior, and restrictions on movement and positioning in public spaces. Economic hardships are a recurring theme, with particular attention to the Ashkenazi community's struggles, exacerbated by language barriers stemming

from limited proficiency in Arabic and Turkish, which curtailed their economic opportunities.

Both Rabbi Gedaliah and Rabbi Moshe Yerushalmi frame their accounts as direct appeals for financial support to assist the beleaguered Ashkenazi community. Similarly, Binyamin Ben Eliyahu documents comparable economic difficulties within the Karaite community, further emphasizing the widespread financial struggles that defined Jewish life in Jerusalem during this period. These writings provide valuable insights into the interplay of social, economic, and cultural forces shaping inter-communal relations under Ottoman rule.

A significant shift in access to holy sites emerges during this period. New restrictions prevent non-Muslims from entering the Temple Mount, and Jewish access to the Western Wall becomes contingent upon tax payment. Despite these limitations, the accounts maintain detailed documentation of these sites, suggesting the development of alternative observation points and information networks.

The period's descriptions demonstrate particular attention to Jerusalem's climate and its impact on daily life, agriculture, and water resources. Rabbi Simcha Mazalazitz's emphasis on rainwater as a crucial drinking source provides valuable insights into the city's environmental challenges.

Linguistic analysis reveals significant shifts in terminology and focus. Words associated with Muslim and Ottoman authority, such as 'Ishmael' or 'Ishmaelite' (104 instances), feature prominently, often in contexts referring to governance structures ('Ishmael's kingdom', 'King of Ishmael'). The frequency of water-related terminology aligns with the period's heightened attention to environmental concerns [fig. 8].

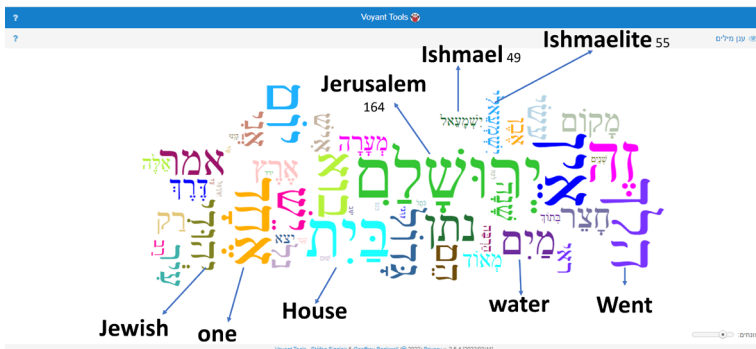


Figure 8 Word Cloud – Eighteenth Century

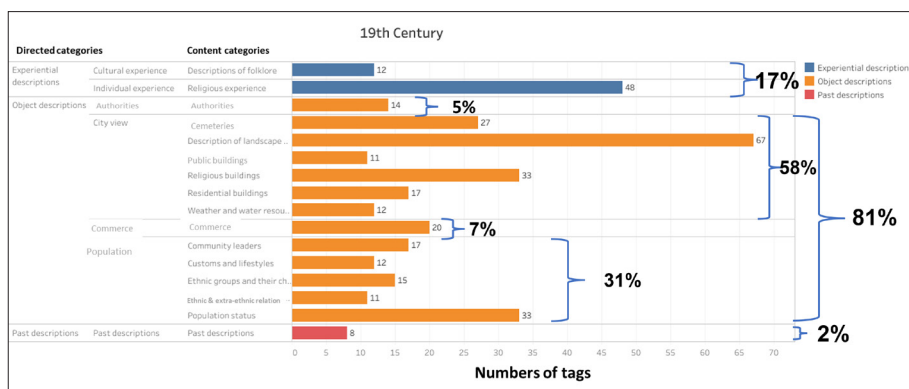
The eighteenth-century accounts mark a significant evolution in Jerusalem travel literature, distinguished by their detailed

documentation of regulatory systems and restrictions, an increased focus on economic hardships and community survival, and heightened attention to environmental factors and resource management. These narratives also chronicle changes in access to holy sites and demonstrate an explicit use of travel writing as a means of fundraising and advocacy. These developments reflect the shifting political landscape under late Ottoman rule and the growing sophistication of travel documentation, as writers began to use their accounts not only as descriptive tools but also as instruments for community support and advocacy.

5.8 The Nineteenth Century: National Revival and Modernization

The nineteenth century represents the final and most extensively documented period in the corpus, marked by significant demographic shifts and the emergence of new ideological frameworks. Yaari's compilation includes eleven travel accounts from this period, reflecting both traditional pilgrimage patterns and emerging nationalist perspectives. The period coincides with increased Jewish immigration to Jerusalem, including students of the Vilna Gaon and early Zionist pioneers, fundamentally altering the city's Jewish character.

Quantitative analysis of the tagging layer reveals a distribution pattern of 81% 'object descriptions', 17% 'experiential descriptions', and 2% 'past descriptions' [graph 13]. While maintaining the primacy of object descriptions seen in earlier centuries, the increased proportion of experiential descriptions suggests a shift toward more personal and subjective documentation styles.



Graph 13 Division into Directed and Content Categories, Nineteenth Century

Rabbi David D'Beth Hillel's account exemplifies the period's more systematic approach to documentation. His narrative begins with a historical overview of Jerusalem, including Temple traditions, before proceeding to detailed descriptions of the city's physical infrastructure – walls, gates, and markets. His attention to the city's diverse population reflects the period's demographic expansion and increasing complexity of inter-communal relations.

The journey of Judith and Moshe Montefiore marks a significant departure in travel literature's purpose and scope. Their account, focused on philanthropic efforts and settlement initiatives, represents the first systematic documentation of mass Jewish settlement possibilities in Palestine. Their writing style, less descriptive and more personally engaged, reflects the emerging integration of traditional religious attachment with modern nationalist aspirations.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Mekminitz's account, while maintaining traditional elements such as prayers at the Western Wall and visits to holy tombs, introduces new attention to urban development and community organization. His documentation of city gates, holy places, and population dynamics provides valuable insights into Jerusalem's transformation during this period.

The final decades of the century witness accounts by prominent Zionist figures including Mordechai Ben Hillel HaCohen, Ahad Ha'am (Asher Ginsberg), and Theodor Herzl. Their narratives, while maintaining attention to Jerusalem's physical spaces and religious significance, introduce explicit discussion of national revival and settlement possibilities. This ideological framework represents a significant evolution in travel literature's purpose and perspective.

The automatic analysis reveals the growing prominence of nationalist terminology, with words like 'Land', 'Israel', 'Jewish', and 'Zion' featuring prominently in the period's vocabulary [fig. 9]. This linguistic shift reflects the broader transformation of Jewish discourse about Jerusalem from purely religious to national-political frames of reference.



Figure 9 Word Cloud – Nineteenth Century

The nineteenth-century accounts reveal significant advancements in Jerusalem travel literature, blending traditional religious perspectives with emerging modern national ideologies. These narratives showcase more systematic documentation methodologies, a growing focus on settlement possibilities and urban development, and broader consideration of demographic and social dynamics. Additionally, they mark the emergence of explicitly political frameworks for describing Jerusalem, bridging the gap between traditional pilgrimage accounts and modern political-national documentation.

This period reflects broader transformations in Jewish relationships with Jerusalem and Palestine, illustrating the shift from purely religious frameworks to ones infused with national and political aspirations. While maintaining continuity with traditional documentation patterns established in earlier centuries, these accounts provide valuable insight into the modernization of Jewish discourse about Jerusalem.

As the final period in the corpus, the nineteenth century highlights how travel literature evolved beyond mere documentation of physical and social realities. It became a medium for expressing and promoting new ideological frameworks and aspirations, particularly those tied to settlement and the broader Zionist movement.

6 Summary and Conclusions

This research presents an in-depth analysis of Jerusalem's depiction in Jewish travel literature across eight centuries, from the twelfth to the nineteenth century. Through quantitative and qualitative analysis of 33 travel accounts, significant patterns and trends in the city's documentation were revealed.

In the early period, under Crusader rule, descriptions focused primarily on physical and religious elements, such as landmarks and holy sites. These limitations reflected the challenges of access and travel during that period. With the transition to Ottoman rule, documentation expanded and enriched, influenced by changing political realities, inter-communal dynamics, and evolving Jewish migration patterns.

Quantitative analysis revealed a consistent emphasis on 'object descriptions', particularly city views, demographic dynamics, and religious structures. However, experiential and historical narratives gained prominence over time. Simultaneously, the range of authorial voices and perspectives expanded – from Sephardic dominance in early periods to the inclusion of Ashkenazi, Karaite, and other voices, especially from the seventeenth century onward.

A significant shift occurred in the nineteenth century, when narratives reflected not only traditional religious themes but also emerging nationalist ideologies. This change marks a transition from pilgrimage-focused descriptions to those supporting Jewish settlement and modernization. These transformations highlight how Jerusalem's portrayal reflected broader historical, cultural, and ideological changes in Jewish communities.

The main conclusion is that Jewish travel literature serves as a rich historical source documenting the evolving relationship between Jewish communities and Jerusalem. The interaction between religious devotion, social reality, and emerging national aspirations demonstrates how the city's representation adapted to changing contexts while maintaining its enduring symbolic significance. This corpus illustrates the diverse ways in which literature both reflects and shapes cultural and ideological transformations.

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The Transduction of the Archive as an Embodied Space

Giacomo Alliata

Laboratory for Experimental Museology, EPFL

Sarah Kenderdine

Laboratory for Experimental Museology, EPFL

Abstract Following the mass digitization of archives and the growing production of born-digital material, we explore how interactive and immersive technologies can enable new modes of access to these collections in situated contexts. Drawing on Gilbert Simondon's concept of transduction and Mark Johnson's philosophy of embodiment, we examine the trichotomy participant-system-spectators, framing the archive as an embodied space where interpretative paths emerge through interaction and embodied cognition. This interdisciplinary discussion is grounded in two interactive installations we have developed at the Laboratory for Experimental Museology (EPFL), which serve as case studies to illustrate our arguments.

Keywords Transduction. Digital Archives. Embodiment. Access. Interaction

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Archive as an Embodied Space. – 3 Gilbert Simondon's Concept of Transduction and its Relevance. – 4 Unpacking the Different Layers of Transduction. – 5 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

Audiovisual (AV) archives constitute some of the most significant mnemonic records of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As complex media objects, AV materials capture the multi-layered dimensions of culture through the interplay of audio and visual channels, providing a rich and embodied account of past events, everyday life, and cultural practices. Their unique capacity to convey both explicit and implicit aspects of human experience situates AV archives as critical sources for understanding contemporary history and collective memory. In recent decades, the large-scale digitization efforts undertaken by cultural heritage institutions (Thylstrup 2019), ranging from galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAM sector) to public and private broadcasting companies such as the Radio Télévision Suisse or the British Broadcasting Company (RTSArchives 2018; Wright 2017), have dramatically increased the availability of AV collections. Alongside these digitized holdings, the proliferation of born-digital audiovisual materials has further contributed to the exponential growth of such archives. Traditional methods of curation are inadequate for these vast archives, necessitating computational techniques to develop new modes of access beyond conventional interfaces and textual search mechanisms (Colavizza et al. 2021; Fossati 2012; Kenderdine et al. 2021). These developments in the archival world are paralleled by the “immersive turn” of the museum (Kidd 2018), consisting of the increased adoption of interactive and immersive technologies enabling situated, experiential encounters with digitised cultural collections (Shehade, Stylianou-Lambert 2023).

In this contribution, we propose a novel theoretical framework for the interactive exploration of digital archives within immersive spaces, drawing on the work of French philosopher Gilbert Simondon and his concept of ‘transduction’, a process by which potential is actualised into concrete form through ongoing structuration (Simondon 2005). Since archives cannot speak for themselves (Derrida 1996), interpretation becomes a critical act shaped by the dynamic interplay between the participant, the system, and the surrounding spectators (Reeves 2011). We adopt Simondon’s notion of transduction as a conceptual lens to grasp how meaning and form emerge not from static content, but from embodied engagement and relational processes unfolding within immersive environments.

We illustrate our argument by drawing on two installations developed at our laboratory. The first, *Dancing Through Time* (Alliaia, Kenderdine 2024), uses the Linear Navigator (LN), a 4K touch screen mounted on a twelve-metre motorised rail, to explore a collection of dance recordings from the Prix de Lausanne archive, an important dance competition for young dancers. The 1,500 videos are ordered

chronologically and revealed dynamically as the screen moves on the rail [fig. 1].



Figure 1 Two visitors engaging with *Dancing Through Time* by interacting with the 4k touch screen of the Linear Navigator on its rail



Figure 2 Visitors in the Panorama+ watching a silent film of the Mutoscope and Biograph Collection immersed in the virtual world of the vertical strips of the *BiographScope*

The second, *BiographScope* (Alliata et al. 2024), uses the Panorama+, an omnidirectional stereoscopic large space, to immerse visitors in a collection of silent films from the end of the nineteenth century, from the Mutoscope and Biograph Collection of the Eye Filmmuseum. In this installation, the analogue films are represented by digital

reproductions of the original strips of frames that can be selected and played [fig. 2].¹

2 The Archive as an Embodied Space

With systems such as the Linear Navigator or the Panorama+, “embodied metaphors” rooted in our bodily experiences and interactions with the world are operated (Johnson 1987). Digital collections are spatialized and mapped to real space, radically changing how one engages with the archive. In *Dancing Through Time*, the 1,500 dance performances are distributed chronologically along the rail of the LN, metaphorically representing the axis of time. By moving the screen on its rail and thus literally walking through time, the whole archive can be explored fifteen performances at a time [fig. 3]. Similarly, because of the omnidirectional nature of the Panorama+, in the *BiographScope* visitors physically orient themselves within the collection of silent films thanks to both egocentric and allocentric perspectives (Kenderdine 2015, 34). By entering the immersive space, they are thus subjected to the embodied metaphor of stepping into the archive, engulfing themselves in the archive and inhabiting it. It is precisely this metaphor of inhabiting the archive that has led us to consider the archive as an ‘embodied space’ in its architectural sense because, as Novak (1991) argues, “a space modulated in a way that allows a subject to enter and inhabit it is called architecture” (279). Consequently, we have named systems that provide a spatial navigation of a digital archive ‘Spatial Navigation Systems’.

Adopting an architectural perspective offers some interesting venues of thought. In his seminal work *The New Vision*, Hungarian artist and photographer László Moholy-Nagy argues that space “must be tested by the means by which space is grasped, that is, by sensory experience” (1928, 57).² Similarly, Austrian art historian August Schmarsow argues that “bodily movement through space rather than stationary perception of form [is] the essence of architecture” (Schwarzer, Schmarsow 1991, 50). These assertions strongly suggest that only embodied beings can experience space, highlighting the relevance of Johnson’s philosophy (2015). As argued in Kenderdine (2015), we believe the dimensions of the body proposed by Johnson (2008) can serve as the basis for

1 Note that both installations are the subject of dedicated publications (Alliaia, Kenderdine 2024; Alliaia et al. 2024), delving into the technical details, the design process and their formal evaluation through user studies. Hence, in this contribution, they will only be used as examples.

2 It is likely that his wife Lucia Moholy contributed to these writings, as she reported in her own accounts of the artist (Forbes 2016).

an 'embodied framework' to capture how visitors can explore digital archives with Spatial Navigation Systems.

First, the *sensorimotor body* refers to our corporeal existence, emphasising kinaesthetic perception and proprioception (Kwon, Iedema 2022; Sheets-Johnstone 2011). This sensory awareness is essential to experiencing the archive as a space to be inhabited and navigated. Drawing from enactivist theories (Thompson 2010), this dimension foregrounds spatial cognition of the archive as an emergent, sensorimotor process. Compared to Johnson's original framework (2008), we then introduce an additional dimension: the *interactive body*, which foregrounds the participant's agency and acknowledges that visitors are not merely perceiving the installation but actively shaping their own trajectory through the archive. In *BiographScope*, for instance, the visitor dynamically reveals the contents of the collection by moving through the virtual space. They make intentional choices, selecting which strips of frames to play and whether to activate or mute the sonification of the silent films. These decisions are performed in a public setting, under the gaze of others, leading to the next dimension: the *social body*. This dimension acknowledges the role of interpersonal dynamics in shared environments such as museums, where interaction is both performative and relational (Reeves 2011). Then, the *cultural body* addresses how cultural contexts shape bodily experience – from gestures to interpretative frameworks – and highlights the influence of personal and collective histories on how visitors engage with the archive (Drucker 2022b; Falk, Dierking 2016). Finally, drawing from Johnson (2015), we include the *affective body*, which foregrounds the emotional dimension of embodied experience. This aligns with recent scholarship in museology emphasising the affective turn in exhibition design to foster deeper visitor engagement (Agnew 2007; Kidd 2015).



Figure 3 Close up of the Linear Navigator showing the main interface of *Dancing through Time*, in which fifteen dance performances are visible at any time. Selecting one of the vertical slits opens the full video view

In both installations, only a fraction of the whole collection is visible at any given time. In *Dancing Through Time*, the Linear Navigator screen reveals fifteen items at once. In *BiographScope*, the number of visible items varies, but new film strips gradually appear as visitors move through the Panorama+’s virtual world. This partial visibility is not a technical constraint but a curatorial choice that foregrounds the exploratory nature of access, where the archive is progressively revealed through embodied interaction. On one level, the sheer volume of material precludes an all-encompassing, total view of the archive. On another, this spatial structuring enacts a shift from external observation to internal inhabitation: visitors no longer survey the archive from the outside but encounter it step by step, from within.

We term the interpretive trajectories that emerge from this experience ‘archival paths’. These are not algorithmically generated sequences or pre-linked narratives, but conceptual constructs that arise as each participant navigates the space, making situated selections shaped by proximity, motion, and curiosity. The archive is not experienced as a fixed structure but as a contingent field of potential, co-shaped by interaction.

This metaphor draws inspiration from the ‘architectural path’: the sequence of spatial impressions a person experiences while walking through a building. In architecture, meaning is not delivered all at once but unfolds through bodily movement and perceptual progression. The Swiss French architect Le Corbusier popularised this idea with his concept of the “promenade architecturale” arguing that “architecture must be walked through and traversed [since] a chimerical man with the eye of a fly and vision simultaneously circular [...] simply does not exist” (Corbusier 1961, 45). Long (2016), however, argues that such a concept was already present in the revolution operated by Viennese modern architects at the turn of the twentieth century. Indeed, building on Schmarsow’s radically new conceptualisation of architecture at the turn of the twentieth century (Schwarzer, Schmarsow 1991), Viennese architects experimented on how space could be navigated and inhabited, highlighting the crucial role of movement in creating an “affective path” (Long 2016, 50), echoing the affective body in our framework.

Although our archival path draws inspiration from these architectural ideas, there is a crucial difference between Le Corbusier’s and Long’s ideas of a path and our proposition. The former is predetermined by the architect, whose goal is to create an implied itinerary within the building to guide its inhabitants with more or less freedom, while the latter is emergent throughout the interactive encounter and depends on the situated context and the visitor interacting with the system who thus becomes an active

co-creator of the experience, a “participant” operating in front of spectators (Reeves 2011).

In summary, in this contribution we are framing access to large digital archives using Spatial Navigation Systems, interactive and immersive technologies that spatially structure digital content into embodied spaces in a situated context, as an experience akin to traversing an architectural building. Through the participant’s interactions under the gaze of spectators, unique perspectives on the collection emerge, which we have termed ‘archival paths.’ In the remainder of this contribution, we mobilise the work of French philosopher Gilbert Simondon and his concept of ‘transduction’ to capture the intricate relationships governing the trichotomy of participant, system, and spectator.

3 Gilbert Simondon’s Concept of Transduction and its Relevance

Gilbert Simondon addresses his concept of ‘transduction’ in several texts (2005; 2015; 2019). He primarily defines it as an “operation through which an activity propagates gradually within a domain, by founding this propagation on a structuration of the domain that is realized from one place to the next” (Simondon 2005, 32). It is the process by which concrete realities are actualised from a field of virtuality, an infinite reservoir of potentialities. Crucially, however, the ‘virtual’ is understood here not as a representational simulation, as in Virtual Reality, but as a dynamic field of potential, where meaning emerges through interaction.

This understanding is consistent with modern shifts in archival theory, which increasingly characterise archives not as static repositories of fixed meaning, but as dynamic and fluid entities shaped by interaction, interpretation, and recontextualization. As Cook’s genealogy of archival paradigms demonstrates, the archive has evolved from a juridical site of evidentiary preservation to a participatory space of collective memory-making and community stewardship (Cook 2013). The most recent, community-oriented paradigm sees archiving as an interactive and dialogical process, where authority is distributed and significance is co-constructed. Moreover, as Brunow (2017) and Paalman et al. (2021) argue, digital audiovisual archives demand performative practices of access leveraging spatial, affective, and embodied forms of engagement to activate them.

In this light, we propose to understand the digital archive as a transductive field – open-ended and contingent – where archival paths are not predetermined but co-emerge through acts of navigation, interpretation, and embodied encounter. The shift is

thus not simply from analogue to digital, but from static storage to activated potential, where archives become spaces of transformation rather than containers of fixed memory.

The mobilisation of transduction in this context aligns with De Assis's (2017) reading of Simondon in music performance. Citing Jacques Garelli, he highlights transduction's emphasis on "a logic of creation" (De Assis 2017, 698). This processual nature, defined as "an activity [that] propagates gradually" (Simondon 2005, 32), contrasts with the Aristotelian hylomorphic view of archives as static repositories, opposed by current debates on the communal (Cook 2013) and performative (Brunow 2017; Paalman et al. 2021) turns of the archive. Instead, transduction foregrounds the emergence of new interpretations through interaction (the archival paths), echoing Gumbrecht's (2004) shift from a culture of meaning to one of presence. Since Simondon prioritizes events over fixed meaning, we can view archives as fluid systems where individuation continuously generates new relationships. Lastly, De Assis (2017) applies Deleuze's idea of conceptual 'thickness' to transduction, noting its multiple interpretations across Simondon's work.

Following De Assis's approach, in the next section, we will therefore resort to unpack, layer after layer, the thickness of Simondon's transduction, applying it to analyse the exploratory act of a participant navigating an archive by engaging with a Spatial Navigation System in a situated context. Because of the embodied nature of the metaphors that these systems operate, we will weave Johnson's bodily dimensions (Johnson 2008; 2015) throughout these different layers. We will thus conclude that the different elements of the interactive experience assemble in a complex chain of transductive and interpretative processes, echoing the argument proposed in Rodríguez-Ortega 2024.

4 Unpacking the Different Layers of Transduction

4.1 The Spatial Navigation System as a Transducer

At its core, a transducer mediates between potential and actual energies. Simondon illustrates this with the example of a continuous electric relay, which modulates energy flow based on external information (De Assis 2017, 699). In this context, the interface functions as a transducer, facilitating engagement between visitors and the digital archive. Reading this first interpretation of transduction, the interface immediately comes to mind, that which digital humanist scholar Johanna Drucker describes as "a site of between-ness, of negotiation or exchange across thresholds and boundaries" (Drucker 2022a, 1). Conventional perspectives on the interface describe it as

“the boundary or contact surface for human-computer interaction” (Woletz 2018, 102), focusing on the input and output devices.

Spatial Navigation Systems expand this definition, operating as an ‘embodied interface’ that not only integrates physical movement into digital interaction but establishes it as an essential component of the cognitive interpretation of the digital archive.³ In *Dancing Through Time*, the necessity of proximity due to the touch inputs of the LN further reinforces this embodiment: participants must stay close to the screen, moving as it moves and often being accompanied by other visitors shadowing the interaction. A similar principle applies to the Panorama+, where visitors in the *BiographScope* reorient themselves to embrace the entire 360-degree display. The system fosters an embodied metaphor of being ‘inside’ the archive rather than viewing it externally. This spatial immersion is further reinforced by a multi-channel sound system, intensifying the sensory experience (Blessner, Salter 2007).

In both installations, proprioceptive and kinaesthetic awareness are essential to engagement, resonating with architectural theories that emphasize movement as central to spatial perception (Moholy-Nagy 1928; Schwarzer, Schmarsow 1991). While *Dancing through Time* was installed in Beaulieu, Lausanne, for the Prix de Lausanne 2024, the logs of visitors’ interactions were recorded. They showed that, over the week of the Prix, participants walked an average of 8.83 ± 0.92 m. The embodied nature of these interaction modalities echoes Massumi’s (2002, 135) statement that “the body, sensor of change, is a transducer of the virtual”.⁴

This engagement, however, extends beyond direct interaction, as both participants and spectators interpret the audiovisual outputs of the system – what is displayed on the screen, what is heard through the sound system, and what is perceived through movement within the immersive space. As Rodríguez-Ortega (2024) argues, human subjects (as physical bodies) first physiologically transform light and sound waves received from the system. Then, they cognitively interpret these visual and aural outputs as meaningful cultural signs within their specific social and contextual framework (Falk, Dierking 2016), as it resonates with their cultural bodies and echoing Drucker’s (2022b) notion of the “social subject”.

Beyond this, however, we argue that visitors also engage in a second layer of cognitive interpretation shaped by their sensorimotor

3 Stockinger (2015) aptly reflects that digital media are only a “potential cognitive resource” that must be transformed “in order to become a user or a user community relevant one” (58).

4 Massumi, like Simondon, uses the term ‘virtual’ as a field of potentials, rather than in the sense associated with Virtual Reality.

body. As they navigate the system, they do not only decode individual elements but also construct meaning through embodied metaphors, enacting them through physical movements and mapping the archive spatially as they move through it. Simultaneously, the system itself offers a structured yet open-ended space for interpretation, where each new state builds on previous interactions. What has already been seen, what remains visible in the visitor's field of view, and what other materials are in proximity all contribute to the archival path's emergence. As Massumi (2002) describes in his discussion of hypertext, systems with a high "quotient of openness" (138) allow meaning to emerge relationally, shaped by both the structural affordance of the system and the interpretive actions of the visitors.

In sum, the Spatial Navigation System functions as a transductive interface, structuring interaction between the archive's potentialities and the participant's agency and shaping visitors' interpretative processes as they enact embodied metaphors. Rather than merely mediating, it reconfigures both system and participant, shaping their evolving relationship. Indeed, as Anna Munster (2006) observes, technology articulates a dual movement of constraint and enablement, shaping how participants can function within specific contexts.

The system dynamically updates in response to participants' manipulations, and participants, in turn, adjust their decisions based on these changes, generating emergent archival paths. This continuous interplay leads directly to the next layer of transduction: its processual nature.

4.2 Transduction as a Temporal Process

Transduction is inherently processual, unfolding "gradually within a domain" (Simondon 2005, 32). Simondon describes it as "something transmitted little by little, something that propagates, eventually, in amplified form" (De Assis 2017, 700), emphasizing its dynamic nature. Each interaction within a Spatial Navigation System can be seen as an 'ecceity' - "a passage, a singular point in timespace that dramatizes it, curving it, folding it, giving it transient form and temporal structure" (De Assis 2017, 706). De Assis, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, distinguishes 'haecceity' from 'ecceity,' noting that Simondon's apparent misspelling without the 'h' reinforces the idea of emergence, i.e. an event coming into being rather than a stabilized entity. This perspective aligns with the concept of the archival path, which is not predefined but emergent, materializing through a sequence of interactions and driven by the participant's choices influenced by both the system and the spectators.

A Spatial Navigation System does not present an archive in its entirety; it progressively reveals it. Unlike an external,

comprehensive view of a collection, these systems immerse visitors within the collection in a process of discovery, where meaning unfolds over time. This paradigm echoes recent discussions of digital complexity, such as the metaphor of the megadungeon, a “model for the digital that is capable of capturing its complexity” (Berti et al. 2023, 187). In this view, “the only way to explore [the digital archive] is through partial, playful engagement with its vertiginous, multidimensional, phantasmagoric depths” (188). This resonates with the digital reappropriation of the figure of the Parisian urban flâneur into the “information flâneur”, who navigates digital spaces through curiosity-driven exploration (Dörk et al. 2011), highlighting the performative aspect of the viewer (Schipper 2017).

In sum, transduction’s temporal nature highlights the emergent and iterative construction of meaning in interactive archival encounters. The archival path is best understood as a sequence of ‘*ecceities*’, as a continuous process of participant-system interactions, open-ended and evolving. These interactions progressively disclose the archive, shaping not just access but interpretation itself. Yet, for transduction to occur, an initiating element is required – what Simondon calls the “structural germ” (2005), to which we now turn.

4.3 The Participant as the Structural Germ

In Simondonian terms, the archive functions as a metastable system, holding a reservoir of potential that remains latent until activated by interaction. The infinite recombinations and exploratory paths embedded in the collection form this field of potential energy, held in equilibrium until a participant starts interacting, serving as a “structural germ” bringing “singularities” (Simondon 2005), i.e. prior knowledge, expectations, and cultural identity in our context. These singularities evolve through interaction, shaping the participant’s experience and the emerging archival path. Taking the experience of engaging with hypertext as an example, Massumi highlights the crucial role of the reader in exploring hypertext’s “quotient of openness”, “creating resonances and interference patterns moving through the successive, linked appearances” (Massumi 2002, 138). Furthermore, he discusses the importance of affect and emotions as other entities resonating throughout the transductive process, echoing the affective dimension of the body (Johnson 2015). Recognizing that participants themselves are transduced through interaction thus challenges static search paradigms that fail to accommodate evolving user needs (Whitelaw 2015).

Andrea Pinotti’s reinterpretation of immersion, drawing from the myth of Narcissus, frames the participant of immersive experiences as one who perceives an image as immediate, present, and unframed,

“crossing its threshold” (Pinotti 2021, 38). This perspective resonates with Spatial Navigation Systems, which immerse visitors inside the embodied space of the archive, inviting them to enter and inhabit it instead of simply accessing it from the outside. Furthermore, as with the mirroring pool in Narcissus’s myth, visitors exploring a digital archive metaphorically see themselves in the collection, bringing their individualities, their singularities, as the starting point of their interactive experience and resonating them throughout the emergence of the archival path. This was evident in *Dancing Through Time* when it was exhibited at the Prix de Lausanne 2024. Visitors frequently explored the archive via the country of origin or the names of dancers, seeking figures they knew or admired. One respondent, for instance, described looking up “dancers that you’ve looked up to since you were young” (Alliaa, Kenderdine 2025). Such behaviours illustrate Johnson’s (2008) cultural body, where personal context drives engagement. Echoing Greenblatt’s (1990, 19) notion of resonance, each item in the archive has the capacity “to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged”, as the visitor interprets it as a meaningful cultural sign within their own cultural frameworks. Thus, the emergence of concrete archival paths produces unique and novel perspectives of the archive being explored.

In sum, the participant initiates the transductive process as a structural germ, carrying singularities that shape the unfolding interaction. Through engagement with the system, these singularities, alongside the participant’s affective body, propagate, resulting in an emergent archival path. This transductive process however does not occur in a vacuum, it is always in the situated context of the trichotomy participant-system-spectators. Hence, we now turn to Simondon’s concept of associated milieu to characterise these dynamics with respect to transduction.

4.4 The Situated Context of Transduction

Simondon’s (2005) concept of ‘associated milieu’ provides a useful lens for understanding how the dynamic interplay between system, participant and spectators shapes the process of transduction in interactive environments. As mentioned, the system’s response to participants’ manipulations and the subsequent adjustments participants make in their decisions create emergent paths within the archive. This reciprocal interaction reflects the notion of transduction, where both the participant and the system influence each other in a continuous cycle, and echoes Johnson’s (2008) ecological body with visitors enacting the embodied metaphors operated by the system. In the context of Simondon’s theory, the

associated milieu encompasses not only the physical system but also the social and ecological dimensions – the collective presence of spectators, the embodied actions of participants, and the dynamic environment in which they all engage. For Simondon, the milieu is not a static backdrop but a vital, active context that continuously evolves as it interacts with the individuals within it (Barthélémy 2012, 207). In this case, the system itself serves as part of the associated milieu, adapting to the participant's actions and shaping their future decisions. As participants adjust to these changes, they contribute to the ongoing process of individuation of a concrete archival path, with each new decision influencing the state of the system.

The social context, best captured with Johnson's (2008) social body and including the passive presence and active influence of spectators, further enriches this process. Indeed, on the one hand, even the simple awareness of other people potentially watching the interaction transforms the participant into a performer (Dalsgaard, Hansen 2008; Reeves 2011). Quoting media artist Jeffrey Shaw, the interactive encounter "constitutes a 'performance' [and] for the other spectators [it] becomes 'theatre'" (Dinkla 1994, 3; emphasis in the original). On the other hand, spectators can also directly interact with the participant. For instance, when groups of people engage with the *BiographScope* in the Panorama+, we commonly observe visitors interacting between them, commenting on the silent films being played and instructing the person interacting which ones to play next.

Furthermore, these interactive experiences unfold continuously, with each new participant engaging with the system in the state left by the previous visitor. In this public and situated context, the emergence of an archival path is shaped collectively rather than being the sole responsibility of an individual participant, even in a single-user, multi-spectator paradigm. This interaction underscores the relational nature of transduction: both the participant and the spectators shape each other's actions, and their engagement with the system is not a linear, individual process but a collective, dynamic flow. This relational, open-ended unfolding of meaning challenges the notion of a single-user, isolated experience, highlighting how transduction in such environments is shaped by both the system's affordances and the social and ecological contexts in which it is situated.

In sum, the process of transduction in Spatial Navigation Systems is inherently relational, shaped by the reciprocal interplay between participants, spectators, and the system itself. Drawing on Simondon's concept of the 'associated milieu', this dynamic extends beyond individual interactions to encompass the situated context in which engagement unfolds. The participant's embodied actions, influenced by both the system's responses and the presence

of spectators, contribute to the emergence of an archival path that is collectively shaped rather than individually determined. This underscores the performative and intersubjective interpretation of archives in situated and collective experiences, where meaning is not fixed – since archives cannot speak for themselves (Derrida 1996) – but is continuously co-constructed through embodied and social engagement, aligning with contemporary views on digital archives (Cook 2013; Brunow 2017; Paalman et al. 2021).

5 Conclusions

In conclusion, this paper has explored the transformative potential of interactive and immersive technologies within the GLAM sector through an embodied, transductive lens. We have demonstrated how Spatial Navigation Systems, as transductive interfaces, go beyond traditional user interaction by facilitating a dynamic, embodied engagement with digital archives. Drawing from Gilbert Simondon's concept of transduction, we have illustrated how the process of individuation in archives emerges through interaction, where meaning is not fixed but continuously reconfigured in response to participant and system interplay. The role of the participant as a 'structural germ' has been key in this process, as each individual visitor brings their singularities to the archive, shaping the emergent archival paths through which meaning is constructed.

We have also highlighted the situated and collective nature of transduction in these interactive environments, where the system's affordances, the participant's embodied actions, and the social context interact in a fluid, open-ended manner. This collaborative approach to archival access starkly contrasts traditional models, suggesting that these digital collections, when viewed through the lens of embodied cognition and transduction, can become dynamic spaces of potentiality rather than static repositories.

Ultimately, this paper argues for the importance of integrating embodied and situated modes of access to digital archives within the immersive turn of the GLAM sector, highlighting the importance of acknowledging archives as evolving and interactive spaces for reinterpretation.

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Fonti e archivi digitali per lo studio della Resistenza: stato dell'arte, limiti e opportunità

Vincenzo Colaprice

Università degli Studi di Torino, Italia

Abstract The digitization of archival sources related to the Italian Resistance has significantly increased since the 1990s, leading to the development of numerous digital projects. While these initiatives enhance accessibility and foster research democratization, they also present methodological challenges, including information overload and decontextualization. This paper examines major digital archives and databases, assessing their impact on historical research and public memory. It highlights benefits and limitations of digitization, emphasizing the need for standardized approaches to ensure interoperability and user-friendly consultation tools.

Keywords Resistance. Digital Archives. Digital History. Public Memory. Historical Sources.

Sommario 1 Introduzione. – 2 Metodologia. – 3 La Resistenza in digitale: progetti ed esperienze. – 3.1 In principio fu la Guida. – 3.2 Fate largo agli archivi della Brigata Garibaldi. – 3.3 Il fondo RICOMPART: un'anagrafe della Resistenza. – 3.4 L'ANPI per una memoria pubblica digitale. – 4 Conclusioni.



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1 Introduzione

Nel nostro Paese, gli archivi relativi alla storia della Resistenza non sono rimasti estranei al *digital turn*, essendo al centro di progetti di digitalizzazione fin dagli anni Novanta. Esistono, infatti, portali, banche dati e collezioni digitali all'interno dei quali, nel corso degli anni, è stata raccolta una parte significativa delle fonti documentarie relative alla guerra di Liberazione dal nazifascismo. L'Istituto nazionale Ferruccio Parri, capofila di una rete di sessantasette istituti storici della Resistenza, evidenzia sul suo sito ben quattordici progetti digitali tematici tra portali di fonti ed esiti di percorsi di ricerca.¹ Il numero sale a quarantacinque se si includono gli istituti storici regionali e provinciali. Allargando lo sguardo a enti, fondazioni e associazioni nazionali esterne alla rete, si rintracciano almeno altri tredici progetti di carattere generale.²

Una cifra così alta riflette l'estrema ramificazione territoriale del patrimonio documentario della Resistenza. La ragione di questa abbondanza sta nella 'febbre archivistica' che ha caratterizzato il Novecento (Derrida 1995), nonché nelle scelte operate dalle istituzioni e dalle organizzazioni legate alla Resistenza, impegnate a favorirne lo studio e la tutela della memoria fin dall'immediato dopoguerra.

Non a caso, Colarizi ha osservato che occuparsi oggi di quel particolare periodo storico e del ventennio che l'ha preceduto, equivale a confrontarsi con un secolo di storiografia e una disponibilità documentaria sconfinata:

Appare inesauribile la mole di fonti antifasciste - memorie, diari, scritti politici, epistolari - a disposizione degli studiosi che a partire dalla metà degli anni Cinquanta si sono misurati anche con la documentazione conservata negli archivi dello Stato, degli Istituti per la storia del fascismo e della Resistenza e delle Fondazioni intitolate alle più alte personalità dell'antifascismo. (Colarizi 2023, XVII)

Un universo documentario al quale si potrebbero aggregare fonti letterarie, sonore e audiovisive. Una massa di fonti che oggi costituisce il patrimonio di decine di enti e archivi pubblici e privati, chiamati a confrontarsi con i temi dell'accessibilità e della trasformazione

¹ I progetti sono rinvenibili sul sito web dell'Istituto Nazionale Ferruccio Parri. <https://www.reteparri.it/>.

² Questi dati sono desumibili dal dataset realizzato dall'autore, all'interno del quale sono stati elencati i vari progetti digitali relativi a fonti e archivi della Resistenza. Il dataset è accessibile attraverso questo link: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15649268>.

digitale. Tendenze, queste ultime, sollecitate dall'esperienza delle limitazioni imposte dalla recente pandemia di COVID-19.

Di fronte a questo scenario, l'abbondanza di progetti digitali relativi alla storia della Resistenza richiede di essere esplorata, analizzata e antologizzata (Peace, Allen 2019, 219). In che modo fonti e archivi della Resistenza sono stati impiegati in progetti digitali? Quali sono le prassi seguite? Quali i limiti? Il presente contributo prova a rispondere a queste domande, soffermandosi su alcuni portali legati alle fonti della Resistenza e sulle scelte effettuate dagli enti conservatori, offrendo alcune considerazioni sulle prospettive aperte dai processi di digitalizzazione.

2 Metodologia

Il contributo nasce da una ricerca condotta nel corso della pandemia, riguardante la partecipazione dei partigiani meridionali alla Resistenza. Nei mesi in cui archivi e biblioteche sono rimasti inaccessibili, le fonti incluse in portali e banche dati hanno costituito l'unica possibilità di reperire documentazione utile. È emersa così l'esigenza di censire e categorizzare i progetti digitali esistenti all'interno di un dataset.³ Consultando i siti web degli enti legati alla storia della Resistenza, sono stati individuati 58 progetti, composti in larga parte da banche dati, come desumibile dal grafico 1.

3 Il dataset è accessibile attraverso questo link: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15649268>.

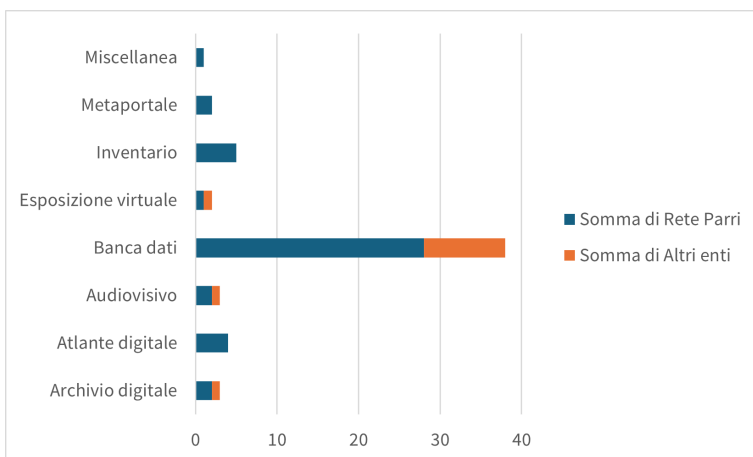


Grafico 1 Progetti digitali realizzati da istituti afferenti alla rete 'Parri' (blu) e da altri enti nazionali (arancione)

Tuttavia, essendo impossibile descrivere la totalità dei progetti in questa sede, oltretutto difficili da comparare alla luce della grande varietà di applicativi e metodologie utilizzati, si è optato per la descrizione di alcuni portali di fonti realizzati da enti di rilevanza nazionale. Tra questi sono stati selezionati: l'Istituto nazionale Ferruccio Parri (Milano), in quanto capofila della rete degli istituti storici della Resistenza; la Fondazione Gramsci (Roma), presso cui sono conservati gli archivi delle Brigate Garibaldi; l'Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS, Roma), dove è depositato il fondo RICOMPART; l'Associazione Nazionale Partigiani d'Italia (ANPI), in quanto organizzazione partigiana dotata di maggiore forza associativa. I progetti descritti sono stati selezionati sulla base delle metodologie adottate, in modo da illustrare le differenti modalità di trasposizione digitale di archivi e fonti.

3 La Resistenza in digitale: progetti ed esperienze

3.1 In principio fu la Guida

L'Istituto Nazionale Ferruccio Parri custodisce fonti archivistiche e bibliografiche relative alla Resistenza, a partire dai fondi originari del Corpo Volontari della Libertà (CVL) e del Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale Alta Italia. L'estrema rilevanza di questi fondi ha spinto l'Istituto a lavorare sin dal dopoguerra sulla realizzazione di una guida alle fonti del movimento di Liberazione. Questo progetto si è concretizzato soltanto nel 1974, quando l'istituto ha pubblicato

la *Guida agli archivi della Resistenza*, descrivendo il patrimonio documentario conservato dal Parri e da altri quattordici istituti storici (Torre 2006, 17). Una seconda edizione è stata pubblicata nel 1983, per poi lanciare nel 1988 la proposta di informatizzare la gestione degli archivi e gli strumenti di consultazione. Questa prospettiva, per certi versi pionieristica, si è consolidata negli anni Novanta, quando l'Istituto ha sviluppato un applicativo denominato *Guida*, basato sul software CDS/ISIS, informatizzando ed espandendo la *Guida agli archivi* del 1983 e puntando a mettere in relazione i database dei vari istituti storici, contenenti descrizioni testuali dei fondi conservati. Il database, che ad oggi conta 52.293 unità archivistiche, è ospitato dall'Istituto di Linguistica Computazionale di Pisa ed è stato reso consultabile online nel 1998.⁴

L'applicativo *Guida* rappresenta uno strumento essenziale per lo studio della Resistenza. Attraverso il motore di ricerca, è possibile scandagliare i fondi dei vari enti collegati, ottenendo record relativi a fondo, serie, sottoserie, fascicolo e documento [fig. 1]. È possibile, inoltre, filtrare la propria ricerca in base a specifici criteri o enti selezionati.

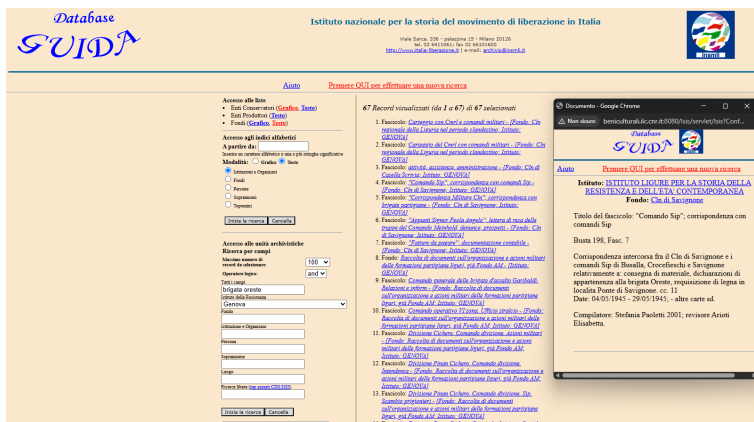


Figura 1 Consultazione del database Guida attraverso la ricerca delle parole chiave 'brigata oreste' all'interno del fondo dell'istituto ligure per la storia della Resistenza (ILSREC)

Nel corso del tempo, *Guida* è stato affiancato da altri due database, sempre realizzati in ambiente CDS/ISIS: si tratta di *Foto*, contenente le descrizioni degli archivi fotografici conservati da diciannove istituti

⁴ Il database Guida è consultabile al seguente link: <http://beniculturali.ilc.cnr.it:8080/Isis/servlet/Isis?Conf=/usr/local/IsisGas/InsmliConf/Insmli.sys6t.file>.

storici (10.413 unità archivistiche) e di *Carto*, riportante le descrizioni delle cartoline del fondo Giulio Fiocchi (893 unità archivistiche).⁵ La ricerca nei tre database è stata resa interoperabile attraverso il portale *Metaopac archivistico*, che consente di compiere una ricerca integrata.⁶

In trent'anni di servizio, i quattro database sono cambiati poco e manifestano ormai i segni del tempo. Il front-end è essenziale, caratterizzato da uno stile tipico del web 1.0. Inoltre, i quattro applicativi presentano, talvolta, problemi di compatibilità, essendo ottimizzati per l'utilizzo di Internet Explorer, browser non più supportato da Microsoft a partire da giugno 2022. Anche CDS/ISIS rappresenta ormai un software superato, nonostante i quattro applicativi appaiano agili e performanti durante l'esperienza di ricerca. L'ampio volume di dati testuali e l'architettura chiusa che caratterizza l'ambiente CDS/ISIS sono elementi che lasciano immaginare un lavoro di migrazione impegnativo per traghettare la *Guida* nel web attuale. Un primo tentativo di superare questi limiti è stato avviato nel 2024 con la realizzazione del percorso tematico 'Archivi della Resistenza e della società contemporanea' all'interno del SIUSA (Sistema Informativo Unificato per le Soprintendenze Archivistiche).⁷ Il percorso include la descrizione aggiornata dei fondi conservati dagli istituti storici aderenti alla rete dell'Istituto Parri, rendendoli interrogabili attraverso un motore di ricerca dinamico. Tuttavia, la consultazione degli inventari analitici continua a rimandare all'applicativo *Guida*. Inoltre, parte di questi inventari risulta già riprodotta in altri progetti, generando una certa ridondanza: è il caso, ad esempio, degli inventari degli istituti storici di Liguria e Piemonte, descritti in almeno altri due portali, secondo modalità e software diversi.⁸

Accanto a questi strumenti, tra i vari progetti realizzati dall'Istituto Parri, va menzionato *Stampa clandestina 1943-1945*. Il progetto aggrega i periodici pubblicati dalle formazioni partigiane e dai partiti antifascisti nel corso della Resistenza, conservati nei fondi

⁵ I database sono accessibili ai seguenti link: *Carto*, <http://beniculturali.ilc.cnr.it:8080/Isis/servlet/Isis?Conf=/usr/local/IsisGas/CartoConf/Carto.sys6t.file>; *Foto*, <http://beniculturali.ilc.cnr.it:8080/Isis/servlet/Isis?Conf=/usr/local/IsisGas/FotoConf/Foto.sys6t.file>.

⁶ Il *Metaopac archivistico* è consultabile al link: <http://beniculturali.ilc.cnr.it:8080/Isis/servlet/Isis?Conf=/usr/local/IsisGas/MetaInsmliConf/metaopacStar.syst.file>.

⁷ Il percorso tematico è consultabile al link: <https://siusa-archivi.cultura.gov.it/cgi-bin/siusa/pagina.pl?RicProgetto=resistenza&RicDimF=2>.

⁸ Si tratta dei portali *Archos Metarchivi*: <http://www.metarchivi.it/default.asp> e *9centRo* (<https://archivi.polodel900.it/>).

già descritti in *Guida* e provenienti da altri enti.⁹ Il portale mette a disposizione un database consultabile in profondità, che consente di accedere sia alle schede descrittive delle testate, sia alle riproduzioni digitali dei singoli numeri.

3.2 Fate largo agli archivi della Brigata Garibaldi

Un ruolo preminente all'interno del movimento partigiano italiano è stato svolto dalle Brigate Garibaldi, promosse dal Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI) (Ranzato 2024, 22). Il complesso documentario prodotto dalle formazioni garibaldine si articola in due spezzoni: una parte contenuta nel fondo CVL dell'Istituto Parri, un'altra appartenente agli archivi del PCI custoditi dalla Fondazione Gramsci. Nel 1979, la documentazione della Brigata Garibaldi è stata oggetto di una pubblicazione in tre volumi, costituendo una guida ai due fondi, ricca di indici e ampie trascrizioni dei documenti di maggiore interesse storico.¹⁰

In occasione del 70esimo Anniversario della Liberazione, la Fondazione Gramsci ha scelto di digitizzare la documentazione relativa agli anni della Resistenza (1943-45). Si tratta di tre fondi, già descritti da Giuva (2006, 418): il fondo Brigate Garibaldi, contenente documenti prodotti dagli organismi politici e militari a livello centrale e periferico; il fondo Direzione Nord, comprendente documenti provenienti dagli organismi dirigenti locali e nazionali del PCI, del CLN, delle Brigate Garibaldi e di altre forze del movimento di Liberazione; il fondo Corrispondenza Roma-Milano, relativo alla documentazione prodotta dai centri dirigenti del PCI situati nelle due città. Questi tre fondi sono stati pubblicati nel portale *Archivi della Resistenza*, realizzato al termine di un progetto svolto tra il 2015 e il 2017 e finanziato con fondi della Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri.¹¹

Il portale ospita anche altri nuclei documentari: si tratta della sezione Volantini, contenente oltre duemila esemplari risalenti alla guerra di Liberazione; la sezione Periodici, ospitante la riproduzione digitale della stampa prodotta dalle organizzazioni della Resistenza e conservata dall'Istituto romano e dalla Fondazione Gramsci di Puglia; le riproduzioni dei numeri dell'*Unità clandestina* e della rivista *Rinascita* pubblicati tra il 1943 e il 1945; i fascicoli personali degli antifascisti pugliesi provenienti dal fondo dell'Associazione Nazionale Perseguitati Politici Italiani Antifascisti, conservato dall'Istituto

⁹ La banca dati è accessibile al sito: <https://www.stampaclandestina.it/>.

¹⁰ Vedi Carocci, Grassi 1979; Nisticò 1979; Pavone 1979.

¹¹ Il portale è consultabile al sito: <https://archivioresistenza.fondazionegramsci.org/resistenza-gramsci/>.

pugliese per la storia dell'antifascismo e dell'Italia contemporanea 'Tommaso Fiore'.

Il portale funge da collettore di un ampio corpus documentario relativo alla Resistenza. L'interfaccia utente del front-end è strutturata in maniera chiara, facilitando la navigazione. La ricerca del materiale d'archivio, organizzato per fondo, serie e fascicolo, è agevolata da un motore di ricerca che consente di interrogare un database indicizzato, adoperando filtri o parole chiave per recuperare le risorse digitali desiderate in base ad anno, nomi, enti o luoghi citati. Ciascuna risorsa presenta un sistema di tagging e metadatazione (Dublin Core) che permette di affinare la ricerca e orientarsi tra fascicoli e documenti grazie alle descrizioni riportate. Un sistema virtuoso, avanzato e di indubbia rilevanza. Alcuni limiti si riscontrano nell'esperienza di consultazione dei documenti, dove l'interazione con la finestra pop-up risulta disagiata nei casi di fascicoli voluminosi e comprendenti materiale di tipologia diversa [fig. 2]. Al contrario, la consultazione dei periodici risulta più immediata ed efficace attraverso il ricorso a un *book reader*.

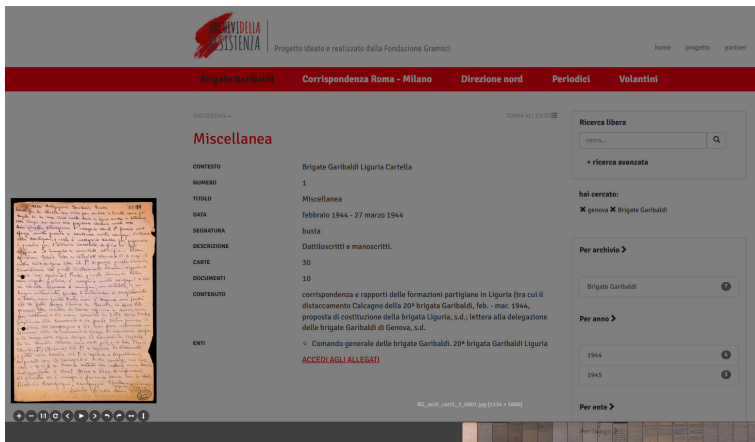


Figura 2 Consultazione del portale attraverso la ricerca della parola chiave 'genova' nel fondo Brigate Garibaldi

Infine, lo studio delle fonti relative alla partecipazione comunista nella Resistenza può essere integrato con la consultazione del portale 'Archivi PCI: fonti per la storia del Partito Comunista Italiano', lanciato nel 2021 dalla Fondazione Gramsci insieme agli istituti omonimi regionali, all'Istituto Parri e ad altri enti di rilevanza

nazionale.¹² Il portale costituisce un aggregatore di descrizioni dei complessi archivistici relativi alla storia locale e nazionale del PCI, i quali includono documentazione relativa alla guerra di Liberazione.

3.3 Il fondo RICOMPART: un'anagrafe della Resistenza

Tra il 1944 e il 1945, i governi dell'Italia liberata elaborarono dei dispositivi legislativi volti a riconoscere l'attività militare svolta dai partigiani. Il decreto legislativo luogotenenziale n. 518 del 21 agosto 1945 istituì undici commissioni regionali e una commissione estera atte a valutare le pratiche per conseguire il riconoscimento della qualifica partigiana. Una commissione di secondo grado fu istituita per valutare le proposte di ricompensa al valore militare, mentre nel 1948 fu creata una nuova commissione per vagliare le pratiche di quanti avevano combattuto nelle formazioni irregolari a fianco degli Alleati e dell'Esercito Cobelligerante Italiano. La legge n. 502 del 14 maggio 1965 pose le commissioni sotto la responsabilità del Ministero della Difesa, istituendo l'Ufficio per il servizio riconoscimenti qualifiche e per le ricompense ai partigiani (RICOMPART). A partire dal 1968, le commissioni regionali ed estera furono unificate nella commissione unica nazionale, che cessò la sua attività negli anni Novanta. Una volta esaminate le pratiche ricevute, le commissioni assegnavano qualifiche precise a quanti ne facevano richiesta, distinte in base alla durata e alla tipologia del servizio prestato nella Resistenza: partigiano combattente, patriota, benemerito.

Di conseguenza, la richiesta di riconoscimento delle qualifiche partigiane, comprovata dalla presentazione di documentazione adeguata, creava la necessità di istituire un archivio apposito. Tra il 1945 e il 1947 le commissioni esaminarono 449.180 pratiche, delle quali furono respinte 156.003. Quando tra 2009 e 2012 il Ministero della Difesa versò all'ACS l'intero fondo RICOMPART, il solo schedario comprendeva 703.716 nominativi, i cui fascicoli erano custoditi in oltre 7.000 buste.

Nel 2019, ACS e Istituto Centrale per gli Archivi hanno avviato le operazioni di censimento e digitizzazione dello schedario, avvalendosi della collaborazione dell'Istituto Parri e della rete degli istituti storici della Resistenza, a partire da quanti avevano già provveduto a inventariare e informatizzare la documentazione prodotta dalle

12 Il portale è accessibile al link: <https://www.archivipci.it/>.

commissioni regionali. È questo il caso degli istituti storici di Torino e Genova che hanno pubblicato tre diverse banche dati tra 2005 e 2018.¹³

Il 15 dicembre 2020, ACS ha lanciato il portale *I partigiani d'Italia*, permettendo agli utenti di consultare lo schedario.¹⁴ Un motore di ricerca consente di interrogare il database relazionale in cui sono stati riversati i dati. Gli utenti possono effettuare una ricerca libera oppure filtrare i risultati in base a nome, cognome, qualifica partigiana, formazione di appartenenza, provincia e regione e periodo di attività del combattente. Attraverso i risultati si può accedere alla pagina dedicata a ciascun combattente, divisa in due sezioni: a sinistra, appare la riproduzione digitale della scheda personale proveniente dallo schedario; a destra, una tabella strutturata che riporta i dati anagrafici e militari [fig. 3].

I PARTIGIANI D'ITALIA
Lo schedario delle commissioni per il riconoscimento degli uomini e delle donne della Resistenza

HOME IL PROGETTO L'ARCHIVIO LA LEGISLAZIONE LE COMMISSIONI LE FORMAZIONI PARTIGIANE CERCA CREDITI

Home > Fenoglio, Giuseppe

Fenoglio, Giuseppe

Dati anagrafici	
Nome:	Giuseppe
Cognome:	Fenoglio
Genere:	M
Nato il:	1922 mar. 1
Comune:	Alba
Provincia:	Cuneo
Nazione:	Italia

Attività partigiana	
Nome di battaglia:	Beppe
Formazione:	3° Brig (Garibaldi), dal 1944 gen. al 1944 mar. Odo 6° Brig Belbo, dal 1944 set. al 1945 giu. 7
Grado:	Partigiano, dal 1944 gen. al 1944 mar. Partigiano, dal 1944 set. al 1945 mar. UFF Add Min Allett, dal 1945 mar. al 1945 giu. 7
Qualifica riconosciuta:	Partigiano Combattente
Commissioni:	Commissione regionale piemontese per l'accertamento delle qualifiche partigiane
Schedari:	Piemonte

Figura 3 Scheda personale del partigiano Beppe Fenoglio

13 Si tratta della banche dati del partigianato piemontese: <http://intranet.istoreto.it/partigianato/default.asp>; meridionale in Piemonte: <http://intranet.istoreto.it/partigianatomeridionale/default.asp>; ligure: <https://partigianato.ilsrec.it/introduzione.php>.

14 Il portale è accessibile al link: <https://partigianiditalia.cultura.gov.it/>.

La possibilità di eseguire query approfondite, basate sui luoghi di nascita o di combattimento dei partigiani, consente di dare seguito a ricerche tematiche, spaziando da casi studio di carattere locale fino a macroanalisi di tipo quantitativo e qualitativo. Il RICOMPART si configura come «un bacino documentario» destinato a far emergere nuove proposte di ricerca (Carrattieri, Meloni 2021, 162), a partire dai temi meno esplorati dalla storiografia, come la partecipazione dei meridionali alla guerra di Liberazione (Fimiani 2016; Baris, Verri 2019; Insolubile 2025), oppure costituire la base di partenza per attività di Public History (Colaprice, 2023).

Tuttavia, è opportuno riconoscere anche i limiti del portale, relativi non agli aspetti tecnici, ma alle modalità di restituzione delle informazioni estratte dallo schedario. Data la difformità dei procedimenti adottati dalle varie commissioni, i dati trascritti dalle schede personali cambiano sensibilmente in termini quantitativi e qualitativi. Non sempre è possibile distinguere se la richiesta di riconoscimento della qualifica partigiana sia stata accolta o respinta. Nel caso della commissione estera, i dati dei combattenti risultano privi delle più comuni informazioni anagrafiche.

Appare evidente come l'enorme numero di combattenti censiti richiederebbe un esteso intervento manuale per uniformare e completare le schede descrittive. Un lavoro dispendioso sotto il profilo economico e temporale. Per tali ragioni, l'esperienza di consultazione dello schedario RICOMPART non può essere considerata come definitiva, ma ha bisogno di essere integrata con la consultazione dei fascicoli individuali depositati presso l'ACS. Il portale rappresenta, tuttavia, un punto di accesso rilevante per la disponibilità di dati relativi alla partecipazione individuale alla guerra di Liberazione, fungendo da anagrafe del partigianato italiano.

3.4 L'ANPI per una memoria pubblica digitale

Nell'ambito delle fonti relative alla Resistenza, accanto alla documentazione archivistica, un ruolo rilevante è svolto dalle fonti orali, la cui centralità è emersa da tempo nella storiografia (Passerini 1987; Bravo, Bruzzone 1995; Portelli 2012). Queste fonti, raccolte sotto forma di testimonianze audio e video, permettono di accedere a dimensioni soggettive dell'esperienza resistenziale, spesso estranee alle fonti tradizionali (Contini 2022, 76-7). Fin dall'immediato dopoguerra, studiosi e istituti storici hanno raccolto testimonianze orali, intervistando protagonisti e testimoni della Resistenza. Oggi, con il progressivo venire meno dei superstiti della guerra partigiana, tale attività di ricerca si fa più ardua, mentre si pone il tema della trasmissione della memoria della Resistenza alle nuove generazioni.

In questa prospettiva si colloca il progetto *Noi partigiani*, promosso nel 2019 dall'ANPI e curato da Gad Lerner e Laura Gnocchi, che ha raccolto e diffuso in formato audiovisivo centinaia di interviste ai partigiani ancora in vita. Le registrazioni sono state alla base del saggio omonimo pubblicato da Feltrinelli nel 2020 e pubblicate nel 2021 sul portale *Noi partigiani*.¹⁵ In seguito al lancio, il portale è arrivato a ospitare le testimonianze orali di 976 partigiani e 22 testimoni, grazie al contributo di istituti storici, ricercatori e organismi territoriali dell'ANPI. Il portale presenta un front-end minimalista che mette al centro i volti e le voci degli intervistati, facilmente accessibili attraverso un elenco. Per ogni intervistato è stata realizzata una pagina che contiene delle brevi note biografiche anticipate dall'interfaccia di riproduzione video [fig. 4].

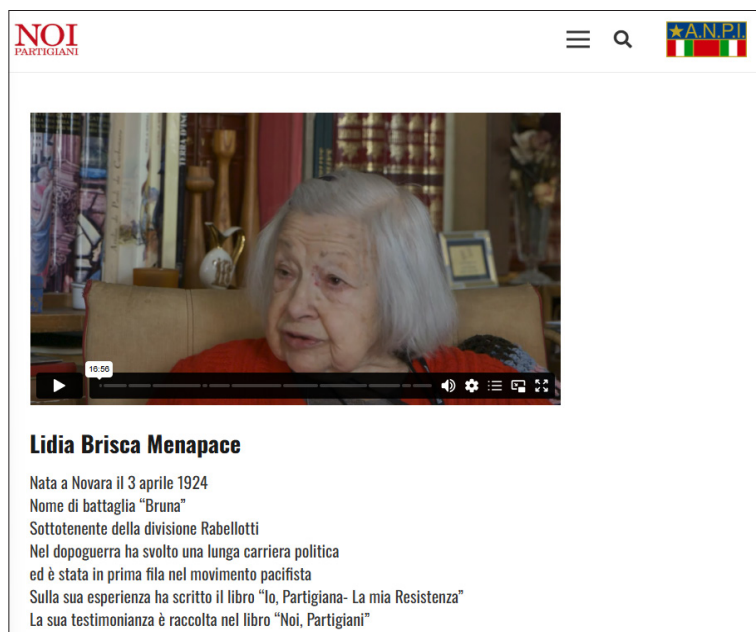


Figura 4 Riproduzione della testimonianza della partigiana Lidia Menapace

A conferma dell'interesse verso fonti meno convenzionali, nel 2024 l'ANPI ha lanciato il portale MEMO (Memorie e Monumenti), dedicato alla memoria pubblica della lotta di Liberazione.¹⁶ Partendo da una mappatura iniziale di 2.700 monumenti, il portale ha assunto una

¹⁵ Il portale è consultabile al sito: <https://www.noipartigiani.it/>.

¹⁶ Il portale è accessibile al link: <https://memo.anpi.it/>.

dimensione partecipativa, consentendo agli utenti di contribuire alla mappatura dei luoghi della memoria. In meno di un anno, i monumenti registrati hanno superato le 4.300 unità. Inoltre, il portale ospita un atlante interattivo attraverso cui visualizzare i dati in forma spazializzata. Il database è pubblicato come open data e strutturato secondo una logica relazionale.

Sul versante delle fonti archivistiche, va segnalato l'impegno delle organizzazioni territoriali dell'ANPI, le quali hanno conservato fin dal dopoguerra gli schedari dei partigiani iscritti, oltre a documentazione propria dell'attività associativa. Tra i vari progetti realizzati, merita una menzione il portale *Memoria resistente - Vite pugliesi per la democrazia*, realizzato dal comitato provinciale barese dell'ANPI nel 2023. Il portale ospita un database che raggruppa le informazioni relative ai partigiani iscritti alle sezioni ANPI della provincia di Bari nel dopoguerra.¹⁷ Attraverso l'utilizzo del motore di ricerca, è possibile filtrare la banca dati e accedere alle pagine relative a ciascun partigiano, recanti la riproduzione digitale della scheda e del modulo d'iscrizione all'associazione, oltre a pochi dati anagrafici e ai riferimenti archivistici. Il portale ospita nel complesso 1.608 unità archivistiche. Come nel caso del RICOMPART, la consultazione del portale non è da considerarsi esaustiva. Questa va integrata con lo studio della documentazione cartacea conservata dalla Fondazione Di Vagno, in modo da stabilire l'avvenuto riconoscimento della qualifica partigiana.

4 Conclusioni

Archivi e fonti per la storia della Resistenza sono oggetto di esperienze di digitalizzazione da circa un trentennio. I progetti illustrati mettono al centro la pluralità di fonti disponibili, cercando di intercettare le sollecitazioni provenienti dalle nuove domande di ricerca e di rendere sempre più accessibile la documentazione di maggiore interesse per studiosi e cittadini. Tali complessi documentari conferiscono ai progetti uno spessore civile, consentendo in alcuni casi di attivare percorsi virtuosi di valorizzazione nel campo della Public History, riscoprendo «la funzione didattica, civica e politica che tali fonti svolgono e svolgeranno nel prossimo futuro» (Pezzica 2020, 89).

Lo scenario italiano si distingue per la ricchezza e la capillarità di progetti digitali se rapportato al contesto europeo-occidentale. Infatti, nei Paesi in cui la Resistenza ha svolto un ruolo rilevante, si riscontra una minore densità di progetti, tutti legati a enti nazionali. Il

¹⁷ Il database è consultabile al seguente link: <https://www.anpi-bari.it/memoria-resistente/>.

caso francese, già esplorato da Paci (2014), è significativo. Per quanto riguarda le fonti documentarie, il punto di riferimento è rappresentato dal *Musée de la Résistance en ligne*, portale legato alla Fondation de la Résistance, il quale ospita oltre 55.000 documenti, organizzati su base tematica.¹⁸ Quanto alle banche dati, sebbene il portale ospiti un database ristretto a circa 45.000 nominativi,¹⁹ i dati relativi agli oltre 600.000 combattenti della Resistenza francese, schedati dal Service historique de la Défense, sono stati resi consultabili in una delle banche dati accessibili sul portale *Mémoire des Hommes*, realizzato dal Ministero della Difesa francese, riportante i dati anagrafici e i riferimenti archivistici.²⁰ Un'esperienza simile al lavoro realizzato in Italia sul fondo RICOMPART proviene dal Belgio. Nell'autunno 2024 il centro di ricerca CegeSoma e gli Archivi di Stato hanno lanciato il portale *Resistance in Belgium*.²¹ Attualmente, è possibile consultare le informazioni relative a più di 42.000 combattenti, sebbene il progetto punti a includere la totalità degli oltre 200.000 resistenti belgi. I dati sono organizzati secondo un modello Wiki, basato sul software open-source Wikibase, con schede strutturate contenenti proprietà semantiche e riferimenti archivistici.

Come si può osservare, i processi di digitalizzazione delle fonti storiche sono sempre più centrali nelle strategie messe in atto da istituti e archivi, pubblici e privati. La digitalizzazione consente ai ricercatori di condurre le proprie ricerche da remoto, abbattendo costi e distanze (Müller 2021, 45). Per gli enti conservatori rappresenta uno strumento utile a ridurre il carico di lavoro, semplificare le procedure e tutelare i documenti più fragili, limitando l'accesso fisico. Nel complesso, la maggiore accessibilità delle collezioni favorisce una democratizzazione della ricerca storica (Bolick 2006, 122; Peace, Allen 2019, 219).

Tuttavia, tali processi non sono privi di criticità, già evidenziate nel dibattito scientifico (Vitali 2004; Minuti 2015). L'abbondanza di fonti digitali può disorientare l'utente, esponendolo a una mole eccessiva di documenti talvolta decontestualizzati (Peace, Allen 2019, 218; Kim 2022, 531), con il rischio di compromettere l'integrità del vincolo archivistico (Valacchi 2023, 159). Nel contesto italiano, a ciò si aggiunge una marcata frammentazione dei sistemi descrittivi adottati (Valacchi 2016), insieme alla necessità di ingenti risorse

18 Si veda il sito del *Musée de la Résistance*: <https://www.museedelaresistanceenligne.org/>.

19 La banca dati è consultabile al link: <https://www.museedelaresistanceenligne.org/liste-personne.php>.

20 Il portale è accessibile al link: <https://www.memoiredeshommes.sga.defense.gouv.fr/fr/>.

21 Il portale è consultabile al sito: <https://data.arch.be/?lang=en>.

economiche per la realizzazione dei progetti di digitalizzazione e alla formazione adeguata del personale impiegato (Barbuti 2022, 29-30).

Questi aspetti emergono nei chiaroscuri che caratterizzano lo stato dell'arte relativo alle fonti digitali della Resistenza: i progetti illustrati mostrano un'estrema varietà di sistemi informativi, linguaggi e software adoperati. Questa eterogeneità non gioca a favore degli utenti e degli istituti promotori dei progetti, i quali, nel corso del tempo, nonostante l'attitudine a collaborare, non sono andati oltre la metacatalogazione. Il database *Guida* si muove in questa direzione, imitato dal portale *Archos Metarchivi*. Tuttavia, entrambi sono basati su software e linguaggi ormai superati. Allo stesso tempo, la creazione del percorso tematico dedicato alla Resistenza presente sul portale SIUSA appare essere una soluzione parziale.

È possibile immaginare questa grande massa di dati messa in relazione ricorrendo alle più recenti tecnologie digitali? I Linked Open Data (LOD) potrebbero rappresentare una prospettiva interessante, auspicabilmente sostenuta da un'infrastruttura pubblica nazionale. Il ricorso ai LOD favorirebbe l'integrazione tra i dati, preservando un formato aperto, interoperabile e disponibile al riuso (Daquino, Tomasi 2017, 33), rispecchiando i principi FAIR (Wilkinson et al. 2016), scarsamente riscontrati nei progetti presi in esame.

Il rischio concreto è di trovarsi a breve in mezzo a un guado, disorientati tra cataloghi generali cristallizzati nel web 1.0 e progetti digitali tematici innovativi, il cui numero già ampio si prevede in aumento a fronte dell'80esimo anniversario della Liberazione. Un «blob digitale» (Barbuti, De Bari 2021, 72) da evitare, favorendo una razionalizzazione dei portali esistenti per dare maggiore centralità all'esperienza di consultazione e alle fonti, il cui valore politico e civile continuerà a ispirare politiche memoriali (Potts 2021, 3) e ricerca storiografica.

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