

Diasporas

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Chantiers de la recherche

Bridging Past and Present Diasporas in the Mediterranean: The ITHACA Project

Rapprocher les diasporas du passé et du présent dans la Méditerranée : le projet ITHACA

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Résumés

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Cet article vise à présenter les objectifs et les premiers résultats du projet européen ITHACA – Interconnecting Histories and Archives for Migrant Agency (2021-2025). Il se concentre en particulier sur la création d'une base de données dans laquelle différentes études de cas concernant des migrations et des diasporas de l'époque moderne et contemporaine sont comparées. À travers la création d'ensembles de données cohérentes et à l'adoption de catégories comparables, l'objectif du projet est de comprendre les caractéristiques récurrentes et les discontinuités des phénomènes migratoires et diasporiques, dans une perspective de longue durée. À cet égard, la base de données ITHACA n'a pas été conçue comme un référentiel conclu, cohérent et exhaustif, mais plutôt comme un prototype, capable d'inclure de nouvelles études de cas pour une compréhension toujours plus riche du phénomène étudié.



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objectives and first results of the European project ITHACA – Interconnecting Histories and Archives for Migrant Agency (2021-2025). It focuses in particular on the present case studies concerning migrations and diasporas of the modern period. Through the creation of coherent datasets and the adoption of comparable categories, the objective of the project is to understand what were the recurring characteristics and discontinuities of migratory and diasporic phenomenon, from a long-term perspective. In this regard, ITHACA has not been conceived as a concluded, coherent and exhaustive repository, but rather as a prototype, capable of including new case studies for an ever richer understanding of the phenomenon

création, base de données, archives, humanités numériques
 migration, database, archives, digital humanities
 Europe, Afrique, Asie

Introduction: the ITHACA project and migration in a long-term perspective

- 1 This essay proposes a critical discussion of the first scientific outcomes of the EU-funded research and innovation project ITHACA – Interconnecting Histories and Archives for Migrant Agency: Entangled Narratives Across Europe and the Mediterranean Region.¹ Within the Horizon 2020 and the Horizon Europe programs, the European Commission has funded numerous research projects to produce evidence-based recommendations for the European governance of migration as well as innovative (including ICT) solutions for collecting and documenting the history of migration to and within Europe.²
- 2 To address this call, the ITHACA project has been applying a historical approach since its design. Its main objective, which will be discussed in detail in this essay, is to provide interpretation frameworks of migration which are based on historical analysis, with the stated goal of encouraging the development of a long-term vision among practitioners, policy makers and researchers.
- 3 Historical knowledge – in its interaction with other disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, philosophy and geography – is proposed as a means for understanding migratory phenomena and, at the same time, a possible starting point for reflection on the policies adopted to govern the displacements of men and women, with particular regard to forced or induced migrations. The project aim is to move away from an emergency logic, as well as to provide reliable information on the migratory phenomenon in the Mediterranean area.
- 4 In order to achieve this objective and to foster reflection on migration trajectories and their evolution over time, ITHACA pursued to build a comparative database.³ The fundamental idea is to set up a digital archive that preserves and analyses memories of migration for scholars, migrants, practitioners, and policymakers. By focusing on the historical memory of the past and present, through the potential offered by the new frontier of digital humanities, the ITHACA project identified its scope in the creation of a digital platform that can constitute a model of preservation and integrated analysis of migration narratives, in a long-term, trans-national and multi-causal perspective.
- 5 Finally, it is important to explain how ITHACA has addressed the subject of diasporas, at the core of this monographic issue. Within the project, the study of migration is focused on narratives and sources providing testimonies of/on mostly individual mobility: the basis, as we will show, is the experience of an “ego”, meaning of an individual or a group. This leads to privileging specific points of view and, so to speak, to enhancing individual (self)perception and representation of migration as well as diasporic phenomena. Although there is no shortage of analyses investigating the displacement of groups and communities, ITHACA mostly follows individual trajectories: the project database offers, therefore, an effective tool to observe and study diasporas, adopting a comparative and interdisciplinary methodology. The framework is the Mediterranean space – envisioned extensively, from the Caspian Sea to the Atlantic, from the North Sea to sub-Saharan Africa – as a scenario of stories, individual paths and, by design, a place of displacements that tend not to have a centre, nor a predefined direction. This points



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I outline some of the results already achieved by the project (a preliminary version of the database that will be discussed). Firstly, the methodology adopted in the definition of the data and the case studies entered into the digital archive will then be discussed. The results of the project in terms of the development of new

challenges

logical challenges the project faced, it is useful to start with one of the most prominent scholars of humanitarianism and migration in the 21st century and what contemporary sources will be available to tomorrow's historians.⁴ A comprehensive answer remains a

desideratum. However, this point recalls others of fundamental importance: the need to preserve the documentation produced by refugees and migrants crossing the Mediterranean and by the multiple actors and stakeholders dealing with them. Or, again, the difficulty of linking narratives marked by a past of colonial domination and post-colonial transformations. In the face of these population movements, multiple and often conflicting narratives and representations have been created and disseminated by a plethora of different actors.

⁸ A similar line of reasoning can be applied to the migrations and diasporas of the Medieval and Modern Ages which, as has been amply demonstrated by studies, have been the subject of reinterpretations, representations and often outright “manipulations” by political and religious authorities (it will suffice to consider the rhetoric of the “health” of the social body that Nicholas Terpstra has shed light on).⁵ This is also linked to the reconceptualisation of the notion of diaspora in the Mediterranean by recent works.⁶

⁹ For both past and present, historians have some challenges to address: above all, the identification of sources and memories preserved and/or produced by/on migrants; secondly, the important need, especially for contemporary events, to conserve these sources, save them from the catastrophes, wars and geopolitical upheavals that are often at the root of migration; thirdly, the definition of methodologies suitable for de-constructing narratives, without losing the richness that comes from the point of view of those who produced them (the migrants or those who narrated their displacement). This means identifying migration trajectories, their unfolding over time, the perception of migration by those who undertook it and those who observed or provoked it, and the analysis of the causes and consequences of forced displacement. These characteristics, as mentioned above, prescribe an approach in which different historical perspectives (cultural history, connected history, global history, history of emotions, etc.) as well as diverse disciplines are combined, from time to time involving anthropology, ethnography, etc. As we shall see, all this is reflected in the configuration of the tool chosen for the development of the project – the ITHACA database – which, in the construction of an effective dataset, must take into account the different methodologies of analysis needed to understand a complex phenomenon such as migration.

¹⁰ There is also a second factor to consider, which is closely connected to the goal of placing the migration phenomenon in a historical perspective: the ability to hold the present and the past together and to build a long-term perspective. There is no doubt that historians, including early modern historians, are profoundly influenced by the present and the “migration emergency,” so much so that they reread crucial passages such as the Protestant Reformation, the confessionalisation of Europe between the 16th and 18th centuries, the slave trade in the Mediterranean or the expulsion of Jewish communities from Christian countries as a form of migration.⁷ Juxtaposing these events with contemporary migrations must avoid reducing everything to an indeterminate notion of an “eternal present”, eliminating the often-deep differences between contexts, spaces and power relations that occurred in various historical periods. For this reason, it is useful not only to proceed from the present towards the past, but in the opposite direction as well, trying to understand which categories used for the examination of the past can fit or be useful for the interpretation of the present. The hypothesis is that by interconnecting migration narratives from different epochs and contexts it is possible to establish similarities and discrepancies between phenomena that are temporally distant in a logic of “emergency management” of migration, leaving a historical-based approach.



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ogy to data modelling: the se

udies at the heart of the ITHACA project, it is appropriate to allenges mentioned above – first of all, interdisciplinarity and efnition of a data-entry structure for the project. There are e process that led to the definition of a data architecture; the lysis (objective-subjective) for each entry in the database; the ire, designed to take into account different disciplinary the first point. The ITHACA team adopted a co-creative e data structure (an increasingly established methodology in rom an international standard (the Dublin core) and inspired e ITHACA team – which includes senior scholars and

early-career researchers active in different fields (history, sociology, anthropology, ethnography, philosophy, linguistics, geography, demography, archival science) as well as associations and NGOs working with migrants – defined which data should be collected by the project researchers, with the aim of fostering a comparison in a long-term historical perspective. Through numerous workshops, a shared data-architecture and data-collection method were thus defined. The guiding principles were: the effort to assume an interdisciplinary perspective, despite the fact that the individual researchers belong to a specific discipline; the definition of a number of controlled vocabularies (*thesauri*) that would allow the research of the various teams to interconnect; the centrality of the migration trajectory (i.e. the movement of an individual in space and time) as the focus and pivot of each entry. Due to the diverse range of scientific approaches described above, it was also fundamental to develop a shared definition and understanding of key concepts such as “migration” and “narrative”, which underpin each case study included in the ITHACA database. A process was developed to establish a shared meaning attributed by ITHACA’s multidisciplinary team to these key-words. This initiative – like the creation of the data-architecture – was carried out through a participatory approach. ITHACA’s researchers were asked to define the meaning they attribute to the three terms: “narrative”, “migration”, and finally to their union “migration narrative.” The results were then processed, applying the thematic analysis method. The outcome of the participatory exercise led to a definition of migration narrative, understood, in the ITHACA project, as an experience of forced and induced mobility of/on an individual.⁸

12 Concerning the second point mentioned above – the double level of analysis –, the data architecture focused on two aspects: on the one hand, the description of the source (archival, digital, iconographic, oral, etc.) by which a certain migration narrative was provided; on the other hand, the migration narrative itself, examined by assuming the point of view of its producer (the migrant in the case of self-narratives; or the observer of the migrant). This double level has the advantage of making the information verifiable by referring to primary sources, and above all it holds together a scientific analysis with the preservation of the point of view contained in it. This makes it possible to retain the richness of the narratives as well as the personal perception of the migration entered in the database. At the same time, dividing the information into comparable and searchable categories facilitates aggregate analyses (quantitative analyses, statistical projections, geovisualisations, etc.) that would be complex and sometimes impossible with the adoption of an overly qualitative approach. Finally, in order to enhance the richness of the disciplines represented by the ITHACA researchers, it was decided to create a data-architecture which would include the research questions of all the project members. In other words, in the data entry concerning their own case studies, historians have been asked to collect useful data for anthropologists, geographers, demographers, sociologists, etc., and anthropologists, geographers, etc. did the same for the other categories of scholars. The result is, as we said, an interdisciplinary data architecture, in accordance with an approach well established in the digital humanities.⁹ The data structure can be outlined as follows:

Tab. 1: Data architecture of the ITHACA database

	<p>source from which the migration narrative was extracted and shared vocabularies are used)</p>
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<p>Personnaliser</p> <p>Politique de confidentialité</p>	<p>igration narrative</p> <p>ed and shared vocabularies are used)</p>

- a) Individual, that is the protagonist of the migration narrative
- b) gender identification
- c) group identification (as described in the narrative itself)
- d) age* (divided by category: baby, child, young person, adult, etc.)
- e) elements concerning the sexual orientation of the ego and/or LGBTQIA+ issues
- f) migratory status*
- g) education* (divided by category: primary education, middle education, higher education, etc.)
- h) profession* (describing the economic field in which the ego operates: trade, agriculture, industry, etc.)
- i) trajectory*
- l) analytic description of the migration narrative


- 13 With regard to the migration trajectory, this must naturally consist of at least two points (a departure and an arrival): however, it is possible to extend the stages touched by a certain trajectory, thus enriching the understanding of the itinerary followed by the migrant.
- 14 For each point in the trajectory, a place, a time and a typology of event connected to that place are defined (e.g. place of: birth, origin, transit, arrival, etc.). The typology of events is defined by means of a controlled vocabulary (which allows the places of the trajectories to be filtered based on their meaning: e.g. all places of arrival in a given historical epoch; all places of transit, etc.).
- 15 The migration data will then be geolocalised and displayed on a map within the OmekaS software which will host all the collected data.
- 16 A user experience and data-visualisation study is currently underway with the aim of enabling, as effectively as possible, a comparison of trajectories, also with reference to their variation over time.

Diasporas and migration: implementing the ITHACA database

- 17 The rise of digital humanities offers new tools to investigate migration as a complex, fluid phenomenon which takes place on different scales, and which involves multiple links between individuals and groups. In fact, connectivity is a characteristic feature of the diaspora phenomenon, and it lends itself particularly well to being studied through the lens of network analysis as well as through digital tools.¹⁰ In this framework, as mentioned above, ITHACA implemented the database at the very centre of the project, populating it with testimonies on past and present migrations/diasporas.
- 18 The digital archive aims at creating a prototype capable of housing migration accounts from all eras and backgrounds. To test such a system, a number of case studies concerning past and present migrations and diasporas were chosen and analysed by teams with different disciplinary expertise.

TABLE 1. Case studies of the ITHACA database

	Main disciplinary perspective
the Early Modern Era	Jewish history
16th Century	History of Christianity
ern Mediterranean	Early Modern History
y 20th Century	Urban history
present	Anthropology, Colonial history
in Rome	Sociology, Ethnography
orary Jordan	History, Ethnography
orary Tunisia	Anthropology, Ethnography
nder UNHCR protection during the	History, Archival Science
to Greece	Economics, Demography
n	Sociology
its in the current Mediterranean and	Sociology

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The selected case studies concern forced or induced migration due to religious, political or economic reasons, underlining how migration has historically been far from monocausal.

19 Keeping our focus on the Modern Age, religion as the cause of migration is one prominent theme. The ITHACA team's research devotes great attention to the Jewish populations of Europe, and those of Italy in particular. Present without interruption from the antiquity, their position, status, and representations have changed greatly over the centuries, sometimes in contradictory ways.¹¹ As is well known, after the repressive measures of the Counter-Reformation, Jewish minorities were expelled and, where the Christian majority allowed them to remain, they were confined to ghettos.¹² Although there were exceptions, such as the international networks developed by the Jewish communities in Leghorn thanks to a regime of tolerance on the part of the political authorities,¹³ the mobility of Jews in modern Italy was often limited and supervised. However, this did not prevent movements that show the vitality of Italian Jewry even under a regime of repression. The case included in the ITHACA database focuses in particular on the population of the ghetto of Mantua in the 18th century: based on extraordinarily complete documentation, it is possible to establish entrances and exits from the community and thus to visualise the trajectories of movement and migration of Jews, households and individuals.¹⁴

20 Further examples of migration due to religious reasons are contained in the ITHACA archive. One is the diaspora of those Italians who left the Peninsula for Switzerland in the 16th century due to the repressive policies of the Catholic Church and the Roman Inquisition.¹⁵ The case study is that of the heterodox community of Modena where, between 1530 and 1570, a large religious protest movement flourished.¹⁶ It looks at how, in periodic waves, religious dissidents left their city of origin to travel to places where they could freely profess their faith. Before finding refuge in the Helvetian valleys, the heretics pursued by the Inquisition completed a long journey that took them a long way, crossing Italy, France and Germany.

21 As stated above, the ITHACA database does not only include diasporas or migrations due to religious motives. It will therefore be of particular interest to compare trajectories, timings and modalities of diasporas which were instigated, in time and space, by other reasons. The following three examples, gathered into the dataset on Early Modern Mediterranean mobility, are useful for outlining the project's perspective. Keeping our focus on the Modern era, we can identify migrations that, although related to religious motivations, were not forced, but were instead prompted by family dynamics and by the consequent need to convert from one religion to another. One such case is that of Malta. Using civil status declarations (*marriage processetti*) recorded in the Maltese Parish Archives between 1678 and 1750, many migration trajectories (from France, Greece, Sicily and Southern Italy) were collected, an example of a much broader trend that shows how the number of foreigners entering Maltese society was sufficient to significantly change its composition.¹⁷

22 Other individuals migrated instead due to primarily economic reasons. Based on sources provided by the Roman Inquisition in Malta, the Marseilles Chamber of Commerce and the Apostolic Visitors in Izmir, the second group of case studies related to the Mediterranean mobility mostly includes merchants: members of European merchant groups in Izmir in the late 17th and early 18th century; English protestant merchants in Valletta; Jewish merchants



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stories reveal not only the fluidity of economic movements in so a certain difficulty that traders encountered in fitting into 1 due to the will of institutions to prevent mixing between

3. erns the so-called *Libro dei Turchi* (Book of the Turks), which of Catechumens in the Italian port of Civitavecchia of Muslim sm in Rome in the 18th century.¹⁸ Captured for the most part son for conversion often lay in the vain hope of being set free. l trajectories throughout Europe, and even in the New World

as that will be accessible via the ITHACA database: however, it y were chosen for their heterogeneity (ethnic, religious, iversity of the causes that provoked the migration, with the ection based on a comparison of the data. It is worth fact not to create a complete database concerning a specific est a prototype aimed at comparing different cases, of which ight. It is with this in mind, after all, that the migrations and

diasporas of the Modern Age have been placed alongside those of contemporary times. Once again, two examples among many that can be found within the ITHACA database will suffice.

25 The first is provided by the migration of the Anatolian Greeks leaving Turkey during the population exchanges of the 1920s, focusing on the arrival of refugees from Asia Minor between the 1920s and the 1950s.¹⁹ For the implementation of the ITHACA database, the phenomenon was studied with regard to the Greater Athens Area, providing socio-economic, demographic and gender-based data of the effects of migration through the perspective of urban history. Drawing on national census and marriage records, this collection of data includes a number of items describing both individuals and large groups.

26 Another difference is the comparison with other modes of forced migration, which combined religious, political and economic motivations, covering a potentially very wide chronological span. An interesting scenario, in this regard, is provided by the Moroccan case, allowing an analysis of forced migration as the product of slavery. Research focusing on this geographical context addresses not just the history of the French and Spanish protectorates and the international zone of Tangier during the 20th century, but also investigates Morocco's own history of slavery from the 16th century onwards.²⁰

27 Aware of the need to investigate the historical diversities and the specificities without stopping at mere formal analogies, the parallels and comparisons that ITHACA intends to promote are aimed at raising new research questions which go beyond the finding of similarities between cases distant in time and/or space. Indeed, it will be useful to investigate and assess how much the mobility trajectories and networks of Modern migration/diasporas influenced those of later eras or how, on the contrary, the latter differed from the former. Still, it may be of interest to detect similarities and differences regarding the perception and self-perception of migrants and, again, the quantitative and qualitative contribution that migration/diasporas made to socio-economic change, including religious aspects, in the departure and arrival scenarios. The long-term perspective also makes it possible to verify the extinction or recurrence of certain trajectories, or the circularity, over time, of certain paths (as the conditions that determine a migration/diasporas change, do human groups tend to return to their places of origin or not?). In addition, the presence of controlled vocabularies used for some categories will not only make it possible to observe trajectories geographically, but also to probe the qualitative data and to understand how migrant individuals experienced the places they passed through. Similarly, it will be possible to analyse trajectories on the basis of the characteristics of the migrant subject (gender, education, profession, etc.) and the combination of search filters will open up a plurality of questions that ITHACA wishes to raise.

From research to policy-making

28 In the mid-20th century, the appraisal of Mediterranean history in the Modern Age revolutionised the methodologies of history as a discipline itself. The seminal work of Fernand Braudel depicted the Mediterranean as a space of exchange and mobility, overcoming the Eurocentric vision that had dominated French and largely European historiography. This was only the beginning of a series of changes, both methodological and analytical, that today

be interpreted a “great sea” of human encounters.²¹

ective, which first of all matured in the academic and cultural itical authorities who in 2019 asked the scientific community olutions to deal with the migration emergency.

to contribute by stimulating a comparative overview of the iterraneanas well as by creating an evidence-based repository and public discourse. The research team worked on the topic the Modern and contemporary era, adopting an approach to n intercultural connectivity. This perspective, revived since iographical studies that followed the publication of *The rined with an expanded idea of the Mediterranean area which by similar socio-economic structures.²²*

archives and records and provided new historical frameworks n and self-perception and the consequent narration and self-As far as the narrative of migration is concerned, it is ag of how a discourse on otherness is historically produced. id, gives an insight into what a migrant looks for in the s, fears and identity representations are projected onto it.



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- 32 The database produced by the project was designed as a means to generate new questions and, above all, does not close itself off from the purpose for which it was conceived (to answer a question from policymakers). Hence, thanks to an effective data architecture, the questions expected to be addressed by the project are manifold. Some may focus on space, i.e. the trajectories that form the pivot of the project. How do the geographical directions followed by migration tend to evolve over time? Is it possible to predict trajectories? And, if so, what are the factors that determine them? Is it possible to identify a cyclical nature, in the long term, of migration or diasporic routes? And again: how do bi-directional or mono-directional trajectories show up over time?
- 33 Other research questions, thanks to the presence of controlled vocabularies, can allow more qualitative analyses: what is the educational level of migrants? Has it increased or decreased over the various eras? Are there trajectories that show higher levels of education or professionalism? And why?
- 34 Similarly, one can proceed to more classical analyses: how does the distribution of migration evolve according to gender? And how much does the variation in historical periods or causes leading to migration affect the gender of migrants? These are some of the possible questions that a database such as ITHACA's can answer.
- 35 It may be useful, in conclusion, to reflect on one last point: preliminary outcomes of the project – pending a more precise scientific elaboration – seem to show the presence of diasporas as a prevalent ‘mode’ of migration. Although there is no lack of more rigid routes, especially where they were governed or imposed by political authorities, what the data entering so far suggests is an extreme variety of migration trajectories originating from similar causes. Those who arrived as Muslim slaves in Civitavecchia (a common point of arrival) and hoped to improve their lives by converting, had behind them paths that spanned the whole of the Mediterranean; those who instead set out from the cities of northern Italy (a common point of departure) to flee the Inquisition, experienced tortuous routes that led them to wander many corners of Europe. In all cases, the dispersion of human and community groups represents a recurring fact and difficult to trace within the category of “migration flow”. The ITHACA database could therefore confirm the diasporic condition as a prevailing condition and, rather than configuring a network of trajectories, contribute to the identification of junctions or thickenings within a tangle of threads made up of individual histories and collective instances.

Notes

1 The project <www.ithacahorizon.eu/> has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement n° 101004539.

2 In 2019, ITHACA addressed a European Commission call for proposals under the title “Narratives on migration and its impact: past and present”. The call aimed to select projects on the dynamics and developments of migration narratives at local, national and EU level, including countries of origin and transit. See <https://cordis.europa.eu/programme/id/H2020_MIGRATION-09-2020>.

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Pour citer cet article

Référence papier

Matteo Al Kalak et Maria Chiara Rioli, « Bridging Past and Present Diasporas in the Mediterranean: The ITHACA Project », *Diasporas*, 43 | -1, 215-230.

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