Amanda Madden

Menocchio Mapped: Italian Microhistory and the Digital Spatial Turn

Abstract: This article looks at the juxtapositions of Italian microhistory and digital spatial history. While microhistory and digital history are in opposition to one another in terms of scale, they have similar aims, particularly a commitment to a methodology whose partial purpose is overcoming the silences of the subaltern and underrepresented in the archive. Digital history can help microhistorians find the exceptional normal in a cache of documents, follow clues, and illuminate the mentalities, particularly the spatial ones, of their subjects.

Keywords: microhistory, digital history, spatial history, GIS

In 1562, in Modena, Italy, Sister Lucia Pioppi wrote in her diary the following verses:

> Do not grieve uncle, so many friends and family remain
> that will punish this senseless malice
> and will take vengeance so fatal that the infinite abyss will be amazed.
> <div align="right">(Bussi 1982: 42)</div>

When I read these lines for the first time, the incongruity of such vicious words in an early modern nun's diary was striking and uncanny. The rest of the diary is quotidian enough. She wrote of visitors to the convent parlors, larger geopolitical events, earthquakes, deaths, marriages, births and other news from relatives; the contrast between the furnishings of daily life and the revenge poem made these lines even more striking. Who were these friends and family? What was the senseless malice? These questions and how a nun came to speak of vendetta and revenge deserved an answer.

After following the trail of clues from this poem in Sister Lucia's diary, I discovered a complex story of fractious nuns, murders in churches, jurists breaking the law, and a bloody vendetta between two noble families, the Bellincini and the Fontana. To quote Carlo Ginzburg in the preface to *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-century Miller*, "As frequently happens, this research too, came about by chance." (Ginzburg 1980: xv) Digging through the letters of the Modena's governors to the Duke of Ferrara, chronicles, and family papers looking for those named in Sister Lucia's poem, I discovered that these families were in a vendetta for over a century. There was abundant documentation on this vendetta, thousands, and thousands of pages worth, and even more valuable still—first-

hand accounts; eyewitness reports of vendettas, despite the ubiquity of the practice in sixteenth-century Italy, are rare.

It was also by accident that I discovered that the Bellincini and Fontana were neighbors. While taking an introductory GIS for the Humanities course, I was looking for data to practice with and found the data for the Bellincini and Fontana assassinations on my thumb drive. After a quick google search, I was able to find a sixteenth-century map which identified historic buildings, including family palazzi and churches. After plugging in the information and tracking down the coordinates on the geo-rectified map, I realized what I previously had not been able to put together—the warring factions lived around the corner from one another. Even though the factions would have encountered one another daily, no assassinations or fights had taken place on the streets they lived on. This challenged my assumption that vendetta fights were spur of the moment, opportunistic encounters in the streets. Indeed, after I mapped the murders, I realized they were in public places—mostly piazza and churches—and had been carefully planned for months or years. By using the methods of microhistory and digital spatial history, I learned about vendetta.

As a microhistorian in the field of Italian history and a digital historian primarily working on spatial history, I experience these two methodologies as mutually enriching. While following the trail of a normative exception in the archive, I have often turned to digital history to map spaces, visualize patterns, and contextualize events. Such affordances, in turn, offer fresh paths of inquiry that must be pursued by more traditionally textured and confined investigation; the macro sometimes leads down avenues that can only be traversed by a turn to the micro. Nor is my experience particularly unusual; productive interactions between digital history and microhistory are becoming more common. How this synergy might develop remains to be seen, particularly because of the key role digital history currently occupies. As a methodological subdiscipline, digital history is a marked growth area and a driving force for change. If dissertation and hiring trends are a bellwether of methodological trends in the field, then narrative microhistories are likely to push towards topics on a macro-scale-the Atlantic world, the global, the transnational. Whether digital projects will be equally productive of microhistorical research is, as yet, unclear.

Microhistory, for its part, retains a steady role but not necessarily a leading one. Prominent journals and academic presses regularly publish microhistories of the working classes, persons of color, colonial subjects and LGBTQA+ persons. This methodology in particular, and a disciplinary commitment to narrative in general, continue to excite scholars, inform graduate training and provide new insights. However, examining the fifty or so most well-known microhistory monographs written by Anglophone scholars in the last five decades, one would be hard pressed

to find junior scholars' books among them; most were written by tenured faculty at elite institutions. And while microhistory has benefitted from the proliferation of digital archives and access to new materials, it is apparent that early career scholars are not encouraged to write microhistories in the Anglophone world. They are, however, encouraged and incentivized to do digital work. The proliferation of source materials, digitized books and archival material at our fingertips, and the increasing pressure to do comparative work at scale, seem to have resulted thus far in a privileging of synthesis over narrative. However, these conditions may eventually fuel new, more traditionally narrative work at all career stages. And if so, the particular strengths of microhistory will continue to matter. Indeed, in the writing of histories of subaltern subjects, for instance, the responsible and nuanced care of microhistorical methods will likely be crucial. Even as digital tools and methods unearth a host of new potential stories, dealing with them responsibly will require telling them with texture and depth.

Such present and potential realities should not, of course, obscure an essential and mutually enriching compatibility that is already evident. While microhistory and digital history are in opposition to one another in terms of scale, they have similar aims, particularly a commitment to a methodology whose partial purpose is overcoming the silences of the subaltern and underrepresented in the archive. Many digital projects also have the aim to inject agency into the subjective. Digital spatial history, particularly geospatial history using methods like GIS and deep mapping, can help us get at particular modes of agency in ways that were more difficult before, fulfilling some of the original priorities of microhistory in unexpected ways.

1 A macro-history of digital history

Before the development of what is known as global microhistory, the geographic scale of microhistory was typically narrower in scope. In the past twenty years, digital methods have dramatically expanded the possible scale of historical research in ways that have transformed the profession, but not microhistory per se. Nonetheless, digital methods present distinct new affordances, and challenges, to microhistorical practice moving forward. It is also the case that digital history could greatly benefit from microhistory, particularly as it comes to a focus on agency and narrative. This essay explores the twists and turns of these developing and potential relations.

The potentials worth exploring here emerge from the dizzying multiplication of computer-based tools, web archives and digitized materials that have trans-

formed the practice of history in the past twenty years. As Laura Putnam pointed out in her article on scale in history, "technology has exploded the scope and speed of discovery for historians" in ways that have had profound impact on our research (Putnam 2016: 377). Not so long ago, when most historical research meant traveling to an archive, sometimes at great expense of time and resources, calling up information from typed inventories or card catalogs, requesting specific materials, and transcribing data from them by hand, the collection of evidence was necessarily limited by the nature of the research process. Now, when a researcher need only travel as far as their favorite chair while poring over fifteenth-century Veronese wills, digitized copies of seventeenth-century plays, or medical remedies from seventeenth-century Japan, the very notion of limits works much differently. Even when traveling to archives is still necessary, technology eases the process; phone cameras with the capacity to take professional-quality pictures of documents, then store them in the cloud, offer greatly enhanced levels of data gathering. Likewise, digitized archival materials are becoming available online at an accelerated rate.

If collecting materials has allowed research to scale up, tools have likewise allowed us to speed up in a range of ways. The process of organizing and then analyzing documents has, by degrees, also become much easier. Programs like Tropy and Omeka allow for document organization and the creation of metadata for digitized collections both large and small. OCR and programs like Transkribus are moving closer to automated transcription of even the most difficult handwriting.[1] Interfaces like Voyant allow us to perform keyword searches, analyze proximity and terms, and trace when and where a word is used.[2] If I want to research cultural perceptions of dueling in the seventeenth century, a quick Google Books search turns up the entry on dueling in a seventeenth-century French/Italian dictionary, numerous Italian treatises on dueling, an eighteenth-century musical, some poetry, sermons, and accounts of historic duels, all within the course of a few minutes-generating more material than can be analyzed without computational methods in any one lifetime. In short, the digital revolution has widened the research pipeline exponentially.

Not only has the computer changed the way we research primary sources, but the online availability of monographs, articles and teaching materials has also changed the practice of historiography and reading in the field. Journals are available online and easily searchable; some are freely available and open access, as are the articles of this collected volume. Monographs, likewise, are easily accessible in electronic copies. Digital book repositories like Cambridge Core, ACLS e-books on-

---

1 Readcoop, accessed June 28, 2023, https://readcoop.eu/transkribus/.

2 Voyant, accessed June 28, 2023, https://voyant-tools.org/.

line, and Perlego have made entire libraries available at considerably reduced expense. Scholars can upload articles and presentations to Researchgate, academia.edu and Humanities Commons. A quick JSTOR search on the history of prostitution can turn up hundreds of articles; fifty years of scholarship on the Italian Renaissance resides on ACLS e-books online and Cambridge Core. The net effect is that decades of research are easily available at our fingertips, frequently obviating the need for a trip to a physical library, a search through bound book indexes or a glance at printed bibliographies.

In the context of an ongoing, or potentially reinvigorated, interest in more conventional historical methods, these developments are not wholly unproblematic. In her seminal article "The Emmett's Inch-Small History in a Digital Age," Julia Laite articulates the ambivalence of digitization:

> The boundlessness of the past has always been kept in check not only by the boundedness of the archive and library but also by our own cognitive and physical abilities to identify, search, collect, and connect records. This, argues Rigney, is where history meets the sublime—where historians admit the limitations of their ability to know, comprehend, and represent a boundless past. So, what happens now that our ability to chase so many people out of the bounded archive has become so much greater, faster, and finer grained? (Laite 2020: 968)

As Laite points out, context can be key for understanding materials. Returning to our examples above, does it make a difference if one can see the folder which contains the Veronese wills? Does it make a difference which collection they are housed in? Will seeing and touching the scroll for the seventeenth-century Japanese remedy for headaches make a difference to interpretation? Will touring the royal theater that premiered the 1780 play about dueling make a difference in our interpretation of it? As critics have pointed out, sometimes digital work elides context in ways that can make historical work more shallow.[3]

Other drawbacks to the scale afforded by digitization can be seen in the constraints that search algorithms place on research. At once they enable broader searches while shaping them in ways that the user may not intend. Google Books search is dependent on algorithms that index imperfectly. Article databases require searches to be precise at the metadata level in order to be effective. Online digitized collections still require the same labor as the in-person archive and in some cases more, depending upon organizational structures and the availability of a search function. And the sheer number of materials to work with can create a sense of vertigo more severe, in many cases, than that prompted by the physical

---

3 See, Mykola Makhortykh, Aleksandra Urman, and Roberto Ulloa. "Hey, Google, is it What the Holocaust Looked like?" *First Monday* 26.10 (2021), accessed June 28, 2023, https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/11562.

process of exploring a material archive, however large its footprint or extensive its holdings. At the biggest risk of loss, perhaps, is the tangible serendipity of the archive and the library, the mental catalogs of collections in the minds of archivists, and the expertise of years spent sifting through dusty and crumbling documents. Computers are not yet able to suggest with any precision a collection that one may want to consult if one is interested in the history of prostitution in sixteenth-century Venice. Folders upon folders of inquisition cases have yet to be consulted.

Methodologically speaking, microhistory would naturally seem opposed to the scaled-up practices afforded by digitization and digital methods. One relies on metadata and computer-aided searches, the other on serendipitous archival finds. Unsurprisingly, when asked about digital humanities in a recent interview, the microhistorian Carlo Ginzburg had the following to say:

> As for big data, are they able to detect anomalies? Or do they tendentially erase them? I have actually debated this topic in a written dialogue with Franco Moretti. The danger of working with big data lies in the erasure of anomalies because they focus on convergences and norms. (Dayeh 2022: 218)

In Ginzburg's view, it is hard to find Menocchio in a spreadsheet.

Many microhistorians who are highly vocal about the debates in their own field, however, have not weighed in at length on the digital revolution. Even though they have much to contribute to the debates about digital history, they have been mostly silent observers, aside from a few notable recent examples that will be discussed later (Trivellato 2015: 122). The silence is particularly notable when remembering the sometimes vociferous critics of cliometrics and social science methodology. Indeed, it was these developments in historical methodology that inspired microhistorians to take a different scope. Despite their sometimes resemblance to cliometrics, digital methods also have a great deal to offer the microhistorian. New digital tools and methods allow us to trace these clues in new and novel ways. The digitization of little-studied, hard to find records, manuscripts, early printed works, and archival collections has made uncovering context and tracing clues easier. Tim Hitchcock argues that digitization has allowed us to 'radically contextualize' by hunting down clues in physical archives and online archives (Hitchcock 2013). Does digitization give us access to hundreds if not thousands of Menocchios making the normative exception, in fact, normal?

Indeed, digital history may be helping to bring about a resurgence in microhistory. Whether motivated by fear of losing sight of the historical subject entirely in a sea of numbers, online archives and maps, or desires to carve narrative out of electronic frontiers, the number of microhistories or reflections thereof ap-

pears to be growing and not decreasing in number.[4] As Thomas Cohen mused in a recent article commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the publication of Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms*, "microhistory is alive and kicking; it still intrigues writers, beguiles readers, and charms abundant students" (Cohen 2017: 53). Cohen's observation seems to hold true; as already noted, microhistories are still being published both in monograph and article format along with robust discussions of methodology.

In fact, looking at recent titles and monographs, one could have the impression that microhistory is not only alive and kicking, but is experiencing something of a revival. To name a few notable examples from the past five years, articles employing microhistory as a methodology have been published on the life of a workhouse pauper in nineteenth-century London, on lesbian persecution by the Gestapo, and on black women's social activism in St. Louis (Jones 2022; Marhoefer 2016). Moreover, several prominent journals have given microhistory particular attention. In 2017, the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* published a special issue on microhistory with reflections from Thomas Cohen and Ivan Szijártó.[5] The social history journal *Past and Present* recently published a special issue on the conjunctures between global history and microhistory.[6] The *American Historical Review* published the reflections of several prominent historians on scale in history in 2016. The cumulative effect of these journals' special issues has been to keep microhistory visible in discussions of scale.

Books are still being published in the genre by academic presses, including recent works on the microhistory of the picaresque novel with contributions by prominent microhistorians Giovanni Levi and Matti Peltonen (de Hann and Mierau 2014). Under the editorial helm of Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and István M. Szijártó, with an editorial board featuring Carlo Ginzburg, Simona Cerutti, Edward Muir, Giovanni Levi, Jacques Revel and Matti Peltonen, among others, Routledge began publishing a new generation of microhistories in 2018.[7] Perhaps most tellingly, the *Journal of Social Science History* recently published Richard Huzzey's work, which uses prosopography and network analysis to examine British antislavery petitions (Huzzey 2019). Such developments might well reduce our concern that the changes wrought by digital tools and affordances are, on balance, a threat to microhistorical work.

---

4 A non-scientific and cursory scan of the number of indexed works using the term microhistory in the title shows that there is indeed an increase since 2011.

5 Special issue on Microhistory, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 47.1 (2017).

6 *Past & Present*, Volume 242, Issue supplement 14.

7 This series follows Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon's and István M. Szijártó's *What is Microhistory? Theory and Practice* (London & New York: Routledge, 2013).

Spatial humanities also offer some potential solutions to the potential unease associated with scaling up, bringing into relief understandings of geography, place and space as sometimes interconnected, sometimes separate realms of experience. How we understand space in a kinetic sense shapes our 'personal space,' including our tolerance for touch by strangers and non-strangers, feelings in crowds and wayfaring. How we understand space in a conceptual sense leads to our sense of direction and perception of the landscape and our place in it. There are a multitude of varieties of space and place all shaped by historical, cultural, social and political contingencies.

Moreover, the visual and spatial elements available through locative affordances can bring striking new dimensions to narration as conventionally understood. Menocchio's sense of place was prominent and his cosmopolitanism clear, and it could certainly be illuminating to walk in the same streets as Menocchio guided by a tour app. One could get a feel, both spatially and phenomenologically, for the world that undoubtedly shaped his worldview by seeing the views he saw, visiting the sacred places he frequented, studying the church frescoes he gazed upon, exploring the building in which he did his business as mayor, and surveying the river on which his mill was built. Thus the advantage to the combination of spatial history with microhistory in particular-the ability to find the exceptional normal with more richness and precision.

Very few would argue that points on a map convey the same detailed information or narrative punch as the tale of Menocchio. Microhistory could teach digital history a great deal about how to tell stories. As Lincoln Mullen points out:

> historians have long prized the art of storytelling and have often focused on the particulars of history, including individual lives, as a mode of communicating the complexities of the past. Yet digital history (at least computational history, rather than digital public history) has tended to pull historians toward the abstract and the generalizable at the expense of storytelling and historical particulars. (Mullen 2019: 383)

Works in digital history often fall short of what we call the braided narrative or interweaving of method and story.

2 A brief history of microhistory

To understand further how microhistory could benefit spatial history and vice versa, we should first outline it with a bit more precision. Ivan Szijártó defines microhistory by three characteristics: 1) microscopic focus on a well-delineated object of study; 2) engagement with the "big" historical questions, partially in response to the annales school and the longue-durée; and 3) a stress on the agency

of the historical subject, particularly in the case of Italian microhistory (Szijártó 2022). Specifically, the historian is to look for Grendi's definition of "exceptional normal", or the normative subject. The scale of observation is reduced-the curious miller in the Friuli, the village exorcist, the returning soldier, the New England midwife and the scorned young woman. This allows for "a meticulous reconstruction of events and relationships, and a juxtaposition of conflicting sources concerning the same event" (de Vries 2019: 23).

Alongside Giovanni Levi's *Inheriting Power* (1988), Carlo Ginzburg's *Cheese and the Worms* (*Il formaggio e il vermi*) was at the forefront of microhistory and remains the most well known work in the field to an Anglophone audience. Published in 1976 in Italian, *The Cheese and the Worms* made the methodological claim that focused attention on one biography can tell us as much information about large topics such as the Counter-Reformation, the diffusion of print culture, the Venetian empire and the everyday lives of the non-elites as history at the more traditional scale. The establishment of the journal *Quaderni Storici* gave another forum to microhistorians and helped disseminate their work in Europe, the UK and the United States. As microhistory leapt across the Atlantic, Anglo-American histories adopted the methodology. Works like Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's, *A Midwife's Tale*, Robert Darnton's *The Great Cat Massacre* and Natalie Zemon-Davis's tour-de-force *The Return of Martin Guerre* became popular instances of this adoption. Anglophone historians of Renaissance and Early modern Italy also began to write works of microhistory, including Gene Brucker's *Giovanni and Lusanna*, Thomas and Elizabeth Cohen's *Words and Deeds in Renaissance Rome* and Judith Brown's *Immodest Acts*. Microhistory took its place in the methodological toolbox alongside social history and cultural history. And the increasing popularity of global history and transnational history did not signal the death of microhistory as some feared. In fact, the field was transformed and enriched by new approaches and particularly by what has come to be known as global microhistory (Ghobrial 2019).

Tonio Andrade and subsequent others argued for a world history less social science in approach and more attentive to narrative as the sheer scope and scale of analysis in global history tends to elide the stories and voices that most matter. Such elision on the part of global historians has been judged shortsighted: "we've tended to neglect the human dramas that make history come alive. I believe we should adopt microhistorical and biographical approaches to help populate our models and theories with real people" (Andrade 2010: 574) The microhistorian Francesco Trivellato has argued similarly and advocated for more productive conversations between microhistory and global history.

A recent example, Daniel O'Quinn's 2018 monograph, *Engaging the Ottoman Empire: Vexed Mediations, 1690–1815* for example, focuses on the linkages between Euro-

peans' and Ottomans eighteenth-century itineraries by tracing a series of nodes and networks (O'Quinn 2018). In a series of connected microhistories, O'Quinn contemplates geographical connections, maps and space or the lack of. Using microhistory and cultural analysis, O'Quinn explores "a series of intimate encounters, some of which have lasting geopolitical ramifications" (2018: 7), for what he calls constellatory analysis. His combination of quantitative, qualitative, microhistory, and global history promotes new insights on the global early modern.

Global history, however, is attentive to space as an important object of historical analysis in the way that some other methodologies are not. As Lara Putnam points out, there are many geographic claims in history (Putnam 2006: 616). Many of these claims are local, regional, state-level and nation level but that simplifies the complexities of interactions with and within space. In their introduction to a special issue on the space and the transnational, Bernhard Struck, Kate Ferris and Jacques Revel point to this contradiction in perception of space and the accompanying trap that can ensnare historians, noting that "historical and social processes cannot be apprehended and understood exclusively within customary, delineated spaces and containers, might they be states, nations, empires, or regions" (Struck et al. 2011: 573–574). Indeed, historians tend to under-theorize space:

> As historians, we know we must draw artificial but useful boundaries in time in order to be able to make meaningful statements about historical developments. We call this periodization. We also need to do the same thing for space. That is, we need to think consciously, argue intelligibly, and reach (ever-provisional) collective conclusions about the spatial units that will allow us to talk about large-scale trends and patterns in a meaningful way. As far as I know, there is no consensus term for this process. (Putnam 2006: 620)

Geographies lend themselves to history, easily, but space doesn't shape the discussion of history outside of the geographic. This is a problem when one considers that the nation-state is a construct that social actors don't necessarily live within. Actors are more likely to be shaped by streets, fields and landmarks than they are by the fact that they live within the Venetian Empire or Colonial India. When asked about their experiences, they give us different impressions of space than we impose upon them in our field definitions of history: Latin America, Eastern Europe, Indian Ocean and the Atlantic World.

In general, microhistory, thanks to its discrete focus, is still attentive to actors in space, especially in a symbolic and cultural way. George R. Stewart wrote several influential books in the field specifically focused on place (Ginzburg et al. 1993). His book, *Pickett's Charge: A Microhistory of the Final Charge at Gettysburg, July 3, 1863* analyzed a decisive battle in the American Civil War that lasted less than half an hour (Stewart 1987). As Ginzburg notes in a discussion of this work,

"the outcome of the battle of Gettysburg is played out in a matter of seconds be-
tween a clump of trees and a stone wall"(Ginzburg et al. 1993: 12). Microhistory
also had its origins in local history. In *Inheriting Power* and subsequent reflec-
tions, Giovanni Levi addressed this focus:

> Microhistory is more concerned with the symbolic significance of space as a cultural datum:
> it concentrates therefore on a precise point, but one which may be invested with different
> characteristics by the different players involved, and be defined not only by its geographical
> situation but by the significance attached to a place and a given situation that may be con-
> tained or determined by a broad range of connections and thus linked to other, widely dis-
> tributed spaces. It seems to me to be less characterized by spatial dimensions than by the
> network of meanings and interrelations set up by the particular phenomenon being studied,
> and reads places as ever-evolving cultural and social constructions. (Levi 2019: 40)

There are many commonalities between Levi's above dictum and the approach of
spatial history.

Influenced by Lefebrve, Foucault and Baudrillard's theorizations of space, the
spatial turn was a push past an exclusively geographic understanding of space.

3 The spatial turn

Despite its conflation, however, spatial history is not the same as GIS. While it is
hard to pinpoint the precise moment(s) of the (or a) spatial turn in history, not
least because space and history cannot be disconnected from one another, it is a
little easier to identify the point at which mapping and geospatial approaches,
particularly those using Geographic Information Systems (GIS), became more
prevalent. Anne Kelley Knowles' monograph, *Placing History: How Maps, Spatial
Data, and GIS are Changing Historical Scholarship* was one of the first influential
discussions of this approach, followed by the work of Ian Gregory, Tim Cole, and
many more scholars (Knowles and Hillier 2008; Knowles et al. 2014; Gregory and
Ell 2007). Research groups such as The Spatial History Project at Stanford were
established, courses and institutes were offered, tutorials were written and proj-
ects proliferated.

The reasons for the increasing popularity are clear, since the goals and benefits
of historical GIS are manifold. Not only is it a means of visually representing spatial
information, but also the quantitative and qualitative techniques that underpin GIS
allow for multi-layered investigation. As Tim Cole has pointed out, this combination
of methodologies is one of the innovations of doing this sort of work:

> It is the integration and almost seamless passage between one set of tools and another, from
> one method and technique to another, that makes GIS a powerful tool within a broader

> range of digital humanities approaches that draw on the processing power of computer technologies to read the archive differently. (Cole and Giordano 2021: 274)

GIS can put historical maps, hundreds of analyzable data points, geographic referents and powerful visualizations at our fingertips. It can make it easier to exchange data, share research and do large-scale comparisons. Historical GIS can readily allow for the creation of public-facing, interactive exhibits, projects and experiences for non-historians. It may seem that historical GIS is simply a return to geographic-based history. After all, part of the methodology involves drawing geographic boundaries: creating maps, delineating them with lines and incorporating topography. Many projects are built upon streets, fields and land-surveys.

Yet within the past decade, spatial humanities scholars have begun to repurpose GIS for investigations of space and place. Tim Cole and Alberto Giordano used GIS to look at what they called the "geography of oppression" in Budapest and Italy during the Holocaust (Giordano and Cole 2018). In particular, Cole and Giordano argue for a definition of space consisting of three dimensions: location, locale and sense of place. In their view, a GIS of place will bridge the gap, both epistemological and ontological, "between the humanities and GIScience" (Giordano and Cole 2020: 842).

Several recent historical GIS projects are starting to realize similar goals. Notable projects include *Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the American City*, which allows a user to examine changing racial demographics and their impact on an American city from a variety of types of data collected during the last century.[8] The Atlantic Networks Project helps visualize the North Atlantic slave trade, including patterns of death and the seasonality of the passage.[9] The Atlas of Early Printing allows researchers to map trade routes, universities, fairs and borders on the networks of early printed books.[10] The Digitally Encoded Florentine Census (DECIMA), which will be discussed more presently, allow users to explore and map several early modern Florentine censuses and explore various aspects of the urban environment including where people with certain occupations lived, the composition of women's convents and the diffusion of prostitution across the city.[11]

Historical GIS can, of course, favor the sort of work that microhistorians are critical of, especially quantitative approaches. Indeed, microhistory evolved as a

---

8 "Mapping Decline: St Louis and the American City", accessed June 28, 2023, http://mappingdecline.lib.uiowa.edu/.

9 Andrew Sluyter. "The Atlantic Networks Project", accessed June 28, 2023, https://sites.google.com/site/atlanticnetworksproject.

10 University of Iowa. "The Atlas of Early Printing", accessed June 28, 2023, http://atlas.lib.uiowa.edu/.

11 Decima, accessed June 28, 2023, https://decima-map.net/.

partial response to the turn towards social scientific methods in history, particularly the use of large datasets and statistical methods. This turn towards social science was itself enabled by the development of machine-readable datasets and hastened by personal computers and programs like SPSS that made storing and crunching data possible at an unprecedented scale. Historic demographic and population data could be more freely analyzed, plague mortality rates could be traced, economic crises outlined and birth rates scrutinized. David Herlihy and Christiane Klapsich-Zuber's computerization and analysis of the 1427 Florentine Catasto was an example of a history of this type (1985). First published in French in 1978 and in an English translation in 1985, *Tuscans and Their Families* breaks down a historic Florentine census, analyzing household demographics and wealth including data on professions, marriage rates, birth rates and the gender of heads of households.

Reviews of Herlihy and Klapsich-Zuber's quantitative work exemplify the critiques of such approaches. Many of the reviews pointed out that numbers could be fuzzy and sloppy and thus be hard to generalize from. Like many works of social scientific history, *Tuscans and their Families* made big claims that did not hold up to scrutiny under a magnifying glass. And from the beginning, a persistent criticism of quantitative approaches was that, in turning important histories into numbers and percentages, they could make for dull reading. Whether or not works like *Tuscans and their Families* are slow going for individual readers, they certainly elicited other kinds of backlash, particularly for claiming to get at history from below. Demographic numbers on the marriage age of peasants were indeed novel in that they focused on peasants as an object of analysis. However, from such data, one could not actually get a sense of the peasant, the range of his or her marriage choices, the influence of family preference and the real terms of the dowry or bridal gift, whether it consisted of a silver spoon or a promise of cash in the future brought about by the sale of crops. While social scientific history illuminated some things previously difficult to see, particularly without the aid of computer analysis, it still, intentionally or otherwise, made structure and thereby the elites a persistent focus in historical analysis. While the Florentine Catasto provided certain insights concerning, for instance, the number of female-headed households, it did not aid an understanding of the everyday life of women. Instead, the Catasto is in many ways a document that tells us more about the desires of the elite to understand how they could enhance the practice of tax farming. Enter microhistory.

In some ways, microhistory vs. digital history is a false methodological dichotomy. Very few historians are exclusively microhistorians any more than digital historians are exclusively digital. Most of us borrow methods and materials as sources and subject dictates. In some ways, however, both are the outliers methodologically.

4 Playing with scale

While microhistorians rarely become digital historians, many digital historians borrow from microhistory. One obvious explanation for this is that microhistory is a more established approach than digital history as we have now come to think of it. Another explanation is that digital history as a methodology is only now being taught more widely in graduate programs. Yet another reason is that the ego-documents that form the basis for many microhistories lend themselves to certain types of digital humanities analysis. One example of microhistory's influence on digital history is Cameron Blevins's topic-modeling of Martha Ballard's Diary-a source that was to become the basis for one of the first Anglophone microhistories-Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard* (1990). Martha's diary contains over 10,000 entries which by any standard is difficult and time-consuming to analyze.[12] Using a package for natural language processing (NLP), the algorithm generated a list of thirty topics and thematic trends in the diary, confirming some of Ulrich's hypothesis concerning an increase in the usage of certain words over time. Blevins noted that in some cases, the NLP analysis was more useful than traditional hermeneutics. Blevins's work and interpretation of the data enriches and augments Ulrich's reading.

Approaches that rely on larger quantitative datasets might seem antithetical to the endeavor of microhistory. Much of the work of GIS, for example, is quantitative, and often it includes hundreds if not thousands of data points. Indeed, much of the work is quantitative enough that many practitioners of historical GIS have colloquially described it as 70 percent data collection and preparation. Historical GIS would seem to be the least compatible with microhistory for quantitative and technical reasons. Yet GIS and spatial history have a great deal to contribute to microhistory. In *Geographies of the Holocaust*, Tim Cole, Alberto Giordano, and Anne Kelly Knowles point out that investigating events like the Holocaust must be conducted using a variety of methods, quantitative and qualitative alike:

> Investigating the where of these Holocaust events necessarily means working at a variety of scales, for they took place from the macro scale of the European continent; through the national, regional, and local scales of individual countries, areas, and cities: and down to the micro scale of the individual body. (Knowles et al. 2014: 12)

Cole, Giordano, and Knowles thus advocate for this mixed-methods approach that includes GIS, visual analysis and qualitative methods. They argue further that

---

12 Cameron Blevins, "Topic Modeling Martha Ballard's Diary," April 1 2010, accessed June 28, 2023, https://www.cameronblevins.org/posts/topic-modeling-martha-ballards-diary/.

"spatial analysis and geo-visualization can complement and help specify the humanistic understandings of space and place by exploring and quantifying relationships among things and people to discover and visualize spatial patterns of activity" (Knowles et al. 2014: 15). By using a braided-narrative approach, they zoom in and out on the various geographies, spaces and places that were impacted by, and had impact on the Holocaust.

Other works are illustrative of the productive insights of this approach that combines GIS and microhistory. In the most recent book in Routledge's Microhistory series, *Neighbors of Passage: A Microhistory of Migrants in a Paris Tenement, 1882–1932*, Fabrice Langronet, argues that digital methods and tools can in fact make microhistory easier: "microhistory from scratch, so to speak, is now within the realm of possibility. New digital tools and databases make it easier to track specific individuals in the sources" (2022: 10). To produce a microhistory of a tenement, Langronet collected data about the tenement's occupants in birth and death registers and explored municipal archives, naturalization files, police registers and other quantitative sources for those who populated this community. Following the clues and seeking contextualization with mapping, he produces a rich history of the geographies as well as spaces and places of migration.

Newer studies like these align with Istvan Szijártó's idea of microhistory as a junior partner, or microhistory "built on a partnership rather than a rather than a rivalry of the two macro and micro approaches", or a microhistory that would inform and benefit from macrohistory, quantitative history or digital history (Szijártó 2022: 211). The combination of macro and micro approaches has been labeled as Microhistory 2.0 or even as a third wave of microhistory, though what such terms mean is open to debate (Renders and Veltman 2021). Part of the resurgence in microhistory, these new forms of microhistory retain the earliest goals of the methodology while also incorporating insights from newer fields like global history. Microhistory 2.0 aims to be particularly attentive to non-western perspectives and the colonization of archives.

Other advocates of Microhistory 2.0 have argued for an incorporation of digital humanities. Fabrizio Nevola has talked about a Microhistory 2.0 that productively incorporates digital humanities methods, tools and techniques to create interactive narratives (Nevola 2016). He and his colleagues developed the Hidden Cities phone app, which allows users to interactively experience Renaissance Florence. Users are led on a guided tour narrated by a series of archetypes, including Cosimo de'Medici, a female silk weaver, a widow and a policeman, actualizing what Nevola has labeled a new form of microhistory. Digital history projects can also lead to a Microhistory 2.0. The growth of larger scale digital humanities projects, datasets and new tools has transformed the field of Italian history in particular. Projects like, DECIMA, a historical GIS project which maps early mod-

ern census data from Renaissance Florence on the sixteenth-century Buonsignori map, have reshaped the field and allowed researchers to reconsider scale in unprecedented ways. With DECIMA's web-GIS interface, for example, one can Zoom in and out and play with scale in ways that elicit narratives that would be impossible to make visible through conventional methods. In a companion edited volume, for example, several scholars reflect on how they have used DECIMA to zoom in on histories of nuns and prostitutes to reconstruct otherwise inaccessible stories. Working on nuns, Julia Rombough and Sharon Strocchia examine placement patterns of female religiousness in relation to their social networks and world in which they lived. As they point out, "the convent has rarely been utilized as the main lens through which to view how Italians constituted social networks, distributed religious patronage, and strengthened ties to other people and places within the early modern city" (Rombough and Strocchia 2018: 89). Using the 1548–1552 Florentine census of nuns and the 1561–62 population census, they mapped the women of religious houses and their proximity to their familial palazzos and neighborhoods. Their research showed that placement of women in geographically distant convents, instead of religious houses closer to their family complexes, was part of a wider pattern to diversify economic and social ties outside neighborhoods many families had been living in for centuries. The mapping also highlights how female networks, in which convents were key nodes, played crucial roles in family strategies and fortunes. It also sets into relief how powerful these institutions were in the urban landscape:

> Because these socio-spatial networks permitted both people and information to flow into and out of the convent with both rapidity and regularity, cloistered religious women could stay abreast of neighborhood news, keep tabs on property values, grasp dynamics of heated disputes and participate in broader forms of civic discourse. (Rombough and Strocchia 2018: 97)

Rombough and Strocchia's findings challenge the claims of previous scholarship that Florentine women were confined to and operated exclusively within the private space of the home and convent almost wholly unconnected to the wider world apart from their husband's family (in the case of married women) or their fellow nuns (in the case of religious women). Thus, this sort of analysis opens up understanding for varieties of spaces: social, cultural, mental, relational and so forth.

Such projects show that the macroscale of digital humanities projects with tens of thousands of points of data and the microscale of a thick inquisitorial deposition are not incompatible. For historians of early modern Italy in particular, GIS and spatial history have increasingly become a path to doing both qualitative and quantitative investigations that complement one another. GIS and spatial history are not just looking at thousands of Menocchios; geospatial approaches can allow historians to zoom in and out to explore both the threshold of a noble pa-

lazzo, the working class tavern and the neighborhoods prostitutes lived in as well as bandits on the borders between Bologna and Modena and the spaces where guns were most likely to be used. Carlo Ginzburg's Menocchio is easier to understand if you have a basic concept of where Domenico Scandella lived. In a Special issue of the *American Historical Review*, David Aslanian argued that

> there seems to be an inverse relationship between scale and human agency; in other words, the greater the scale of analysis (temporally or spatially), the less room is left for accounts of human agency. (Aslanian et al. 2013: 1444)

A combination of digital spatial history and microhistory, may allow us to uphold microhistories' political commitment to understanding agency. Since the unfolding of microhistory, scholars have been criticized for disentangling the original political focus of Italian microhistory in favor of narrative and novelty (Guldi and Armitage 2014). While many of these criticisms are unfair, there is no question that microhistory is sometimes branded as more palatable history that is suitable for public consumption, irrespective of political commitments to the narrative project and a desire to tell the stories that have been pushed aside in favor of narratives of structure. Digital spatial history and GIS could help return microhistory to its conceptual and ideological roots.

In her article, "Mapping Working-Class Activism in Reconstruction St. Louis", Elizabeth Belanger advocates for this type of GIS work:

> Blending the tools of micro-history with historical Geographical Information Systems (GIS) permits us to chart the social networks and everyday journeys of black working-class women activists and the middle-class men with whom they came into contact. Social and spatial ties shaped the activism of St. Louis' working-class women; mapping these ties reveals the links between everyday acts of resistance and organized efforts of African Americans to carve a space for themselves in the restructuring city and make visible a collective activism that crossed class and racial boundaries. (Belanger 2020: 354)

Bellanger's work highlights the extent to which black activists mobilized space to protest segregation and the political spheres of influence in which they operated. By geolocating black churches and activist homes in post-reconstruction St. Louis, she unfurls the stories of black, working class women. GIS and mixed methods can provide agency for communities that have literally been erased from the map. In the Rosewood Massacre, Edward Gonzalez-Tennant uses geospatial analysis and anthropology to recover the stories of lost communities like Rosewood, Florida, a town that was literally burned to the ground in 1923 (Gonzáles-Tennant 2018). As Simone Lässig has noted of these approaches that combine the two:

> digital history makes it possible to productively intertwine macro- and microhistory, also free-ing historical figures from an anonymity that the logic of archival collections had previously relegated them to [. . .] digitization offers paths to new sorts of history from below – an approach to less prominent people historians have pursued since the 1970s. (Lässig 2021: 18)

Digital spatial history is particularly suited to this endeavor. Digital spatial history can help us follow clues, uncover structures that were previously not apparent and focus on and better understand the agency of historical actors.

The methodologies of microhistory may now be more important than ever with the scaling up of history:

> microhistory's central argument-that a variation of scales of analysis breeds radically new interpretations of commonly accepted grand narratives-has acquired new urgency as globalization and its discontents demand that historians produce new grand narratives about the ways in which interconnections and hierarchies have developed on a planetary Scale. (Trivellato 2015: 122)

Similarly, this scaling up of history can be put to microhistorians' use. Methods of digital history could help microhistorians find the exceptional normal in a cache of documents, follow clues and illuminate the mentalities, particularly the spatial ones, of their subjects. The methods of digital history could help microhistorians track down clues with more ease, particularly if those clues are in far-flung archives or could be found in collections that haven't been touched. Apart from archival clues, digital spatial history can help establish a foundational sense of place in a way that further illuminates the subjects of microhistory. In addition to sharing similar aims, microhistory and digital spatial history have much to offer one another.

References

Andrade, Tonio. "A Chinese Farmer, two African Boys, and a Warlord: Toward a Global Microhistory," *Journal of World History* 21.4 (2010): 573–591.

Aslanian, Sebouh David, Joyce E. Chaplin, Ann McGrath, and Kristin Mann. "AHR Conversation How Size Matters: The Question of Scale in History." *The American Historical Review* 118.5 (2013): 1431–1472.

Belanger, Elizabeth. "Mapping Working-Class Activism in Reconstruction St. Louis, "*The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 51.3 (2020): 353–375.

Blevins, Cameron. "Topic Modeling Martha Ballard's Diary," April 1 2010. Accessed 28 June 2023. https://www.cameronblevins.org/posts/topic-modeling-martha-ballards-diary/.

Bussi, Rolando. ed., *Diario di Suor Lucia Pioppi, Materiali per la storia di Modena medievale e mod- erna*, vol 4 (Modena: Panini, 1982).

Cohen, Thomas V. "The Macrohistory of Microhistory," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 47.1 (2017): 53–73.

Cole, Tim and Alberto Giordano, "Digital Mapping," in *Doing Spatial History*, ed. Riccardo Bavaj, Konrad Lawson and Bernhard Struck (London & New York: Routledge, 2021), 274–287.

Dayeh, Islam. "Philology and Microhistory: A Conversation with Carlo Ginzburg." *Philological Encounters* 7.1–2 (2022): 197–232.

Decima. Accessed June 28, 2023. https://decima-map.net/.

De Hann, Binne and Konstantin Mierau. *Microhistory and the Picaresque Novel: A First Exploration into Commensurable Perspectives* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

De Vries, Jan. "Playing with Scales: The Global and the Micro, the Macro and the Nano." *Past & Present* 242.14 (2019): 23–36.

Ghobrial, John-Paul A. "Introduction: Seeing the World like a Microhistorian," *Past & Present* 242.14 (2019): 1–22.

Ginzburg, Carlo. *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-century Miller*, trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980; 2013).

Ginzburg, Carlo, John Tedeschi, and Anne C. Tedeschi. "Microhistory: Two or Three Things that I know about it." *Critical Inquiry* 20.1 (1993): 10–35.

Giordano, Alberto and Tim Cole. ""The Limits of GIS: Towards a GIS of Place."" *Transactions in GIS* 22., no. 3 (2018): 664–676.

Giordano, Alberto and Tim Cole. "Places of the Holocaust: Towards a model of GIS of place." *Transactions in GIS* 24, no. 4 (2020): 842–857.

González-Tennant, Edward. *The Rosewood Massacre: An Archaeology and History of Intersectional Violence*. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2018).

Gregory, Ian N. and Paul S. Ell. *Historical GIS: Technologies, Methodologies, and Scholarship*. Vol. 39. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Guldi, Jo and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Herlihy, David and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and their Families: A Study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

Hitchcock, Tim. "Confronting the Digital: or How Academic History Writing Lost the Plot." *Cultural and Social History* 10.1 (2013): 9–23.

Huzzey, Richard. "A Microhistory of British Antislavery Petitioning." *Social Science History* 43.3 (2019): 599–623. https://doi.org/10.1017/ssh.2019.19.

Jones, Peter. "Looking through a Different Lens: Microhistory and the Workhouse Experience in Late Nineteenth-Century London," *Journal of Social History* 55.4 (2022): 925–947.

Knowles, Anne Kelly, Tim Cole, and Alberto Giordano, eds. *Geographies of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

Knowles, Kelly Anne and Amy Hillier. *Placing History: How Maps, Spatial Data, and GIS are changing Historical Scholarship*. (ESRI, Inc., 2008).

Laite, Julia. "The Emmet's Inch: Small History in a Digital Age," *Journal of Social History* 53.4 (2020): 963–989.

Langrognet, Fabrice. *Neighbors of Passage: A Microhistory of Migrants in a Paris Tenement*, 1882–1932 (Abingdon-on-Thames, UK: Routledge, 2022).

Lässig, Simone. "Digital History: Challenges and Opportunities for the Profession," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 47.1 (2021): 5–34.

Levi, Giovanni. "Frail Frontiers?" *Past & Present* 242.14 (2019): 37–49.

Magnússon, Sigurður Gylfi and István M. Szijártó. *What is Microhistory? Theory and Practice* (London & New York: Routledge, 2013).

"Mapping Decline: St Louis and the American City". Accessed June 28, 2023. http://mappingdecline.
    lib.uiowa.edu/.
Marhoefer, Laurie. "Lesbianism, Transvestitism, and the Nazi State: A Microhistory of a Gestapo
    Investigation, 1939–1943." *The American Historical Review* 12.4 (2016): 1167–1195.
Mullen, Lincoln. "A Braided Narrative for Digital History," *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2019* (2019):
    382–388. Accessed July 17, 2023. https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/4805e692-0823-4073-
    b431-5a684250a82d/section/e5496dc6-dcc1-42e7-8609-9377d05812c5#ch31.
Mykola Makhortykh, Aleksandra Urman, and Roberto Ulloa. "Hey, Google, is it What the Holocaust
    Looked like?" *First Monday* 26.10 (2021). Accessed June 28, 2023. https://firstmonday.org/ojs/
    index.php/fm/article/view/11562.
Nevola, Fabrizio. Microstoria "2.0: Geo-locating Renaissance Spatial and Architectural History," *New
    Technologies in Renaissance Studies* 6 (2016): 261–284.
O'Quinn, Daniel. *Engaging the Ottoman Empire: Vexed Mediations, 1690–1815* (University of
    Pennsylvania Press, 2018).
Putnam, Lara. "To Study the Fragments/Whole: Microhistory and the Atlantic World," *Journal of Social
    History* 39. 3 (2006): 615–630.
Putnam, Lara. "The Transnational and the Text-searchable: Digitized Sources and the Shadows they
    Cast," *The American Historical Review* 121.2 (2016): 377–402.
Readcoop. Accessed June 28, 2023. https://readcoop.eu/transkribus/.
Renders, Hans and David Veltman, "The Representativeness of a Reputation: A 'Third Wave' in
    Microhistory," in *Fear of Theory: Towards a New Theoretical Justification of Biography*, 191–194
    (Leiden: Brill, 2021).
Rombough, Julia andSharon Strocchia. "Women Behind Walls: Tracking Nuns and Socio-spatial
    Networks in Sixteenth-century Florence," in *Mapping Space, Sense, and Movement in Florence:
    Historical GIS and the Early Modern City*, ed. Nicholas Terpstra and Colin Rose, 88–107 (Abingdon-
    on-Thames: Routledge, 2018).
Sluyter, Andrew. "The Atlantic Networks Project". Accessed June 28, 2023. https://sites.google.com/
    site/atlanticnetworksproject.
Stewart, George R. *Pickett's Charge: A Microhistory of the Final Attack at Gettysburg, July 3, 1863* (Boston:
    Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1987).
Struck, Bernhard, Kate Ferris and Jacques Revel, "Introduction: Space and Scale in Transnational
    History," *Size Matters: Scales and Spaces in Transnational and Comparative History*, Special Issue,
    International History Review 33.4 (2011): 573–584.
Szijártó, Ivan. "Arguments for Microhistory 2.0," in Hans Renders and David Veltman, ed. *Fear of
    Theory: Towards a New Theoretical Justification of Biography*, 211–227 (Leiden: Brill, 2022).
Trivellato, Francesca. "Microstoria/Microhistoire/Microhistory," *French Politics, Culture, & Society* 33.1
    (2015): 122–134.
Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher. *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard*(New York:Vantage Books, 1990).
University of Iowa. "The Atlas of Early Printing". Accessed June 28, 2023. http://atlas.lib.uiowa.edu/.
Voyant. Accessed June 28, 2023. https://voyant-tools.org/.