A millennial history in a digital world Studies on the Papacy and the Roman Curia and the Digital Humanities

Roundtable discussion

26 June 2023 - 15:00-18:00
École Française de Rome (Rome) and online

Call for Participation

Since its beginnings, research on the history of the papacy and the Roman curia has been confronted with an incredible variety and quantity of sources, many of them organised in long if not very long archival series, in which there were traces of innumerable actors, institutions, places and themes relating to every corner of the world over an extended period of time. Identifying, measuring, quantifying and visualising these elements, linking sources and documents, and creating authoritative reference tools for future research were needs felt perhaps earlier than in other areas of historical research.

The idea of this roundtable discussion stems from the consideration that the digital tools available to us today offer new or renewed methods of analysing historical data, but at the same time ultimately answer the classic questions we all ask ourselves when we think about the past: Who? What? When? Where? To these basic questions will be added two other fundamental elements in historical research: changes and continuities and the uncertainty, indefiniteness, incompleteness of information or the ambiguity of its interpretation. The meeting intends to convene scholars from the papacy and the Roman curia and other related fields, as well as specialists in the methodologies and techniques of Digital Humanities, to discuss these issues in an informal atmosphere and with the aim of exchanging reflections and experiences that can benefit everyone and the discipline itself. As a result of the meeting, we also hope for a joint discussion on the possibility of further initiatives in this field.

The meeting therefore proposes to encourage a comparison at the theoretical level between historiography and the methodology of historical research in the field of the history of the papacy and the Roman curia on the one hand and the new technologies, methods and models of analysis proposed and practised in the field of the Digital Humanities on the other. A theoretical approach also seems desirable to help participants orient themselves in the increasingly complex digital world that sees a constant proliferation of projects, tools, platforms and technologies, unfortunately not always accompanied by an adequate theoretical and methodological analysis. It is, however, always fundamental, also from the point of view of the Digital Humanities themselves, as regards, for example, the sustainability of digital tools, the ever-increasing need to compare with other projects and thus to reason on the level of standards, authority records, and interoperability of data.

The roundtable discussion is not intended to be a presentation of digital tools or ongoing projects, but rather a forum for discussion of the challenges and problems faced by research on the history of the papacy and the Roman curia in the digital environment. In order to foster the development of a critical and transversal discussion, we therefore invite participants to take part in the roundtable discussion by proposing short interventions (maximum 10 minutes) that, while based on their own research projects, focus on one or more of the following themes:

- Who? With this question we intend to stimulate a discussion on the innumerable actors who populate the historical sources of our common interest and the conceptual categories that can help us systematise the collection and processing of data on them, in order to appreciate their interaction with other elements such as institutions, places, etc. In this context, it may be useful to reflect on the advantages of using differentiations such as 'individual', 'collective', or 'historical' actors and other actors involved in the source analysis process (archivists, researchers, etc.). Reflection on this issue will also allow us to dwell on the characteristics that define different types of actors as individuals, e.g. biographical data, positions and titles acquired, or in relation to specific contexts, such as the functions and roles played in a given event, in the specific context of the history of ecclesiastical institutions, the papacy and the Roman curia.

- What? Through this question, we want to promote a discussion on the most appropriate theories and methodologies for working with the variety of themes, actions, concepts, topics and categories of the most diverse origins and typologies with which we are dealing in the field of research on the history of the papacy and the Roman curia. In this context, it may be useful to reflect on the fluidity of certain categories and the variability of terms to express the same concept and to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of using categories and concepts from the past or rather of creating reference systems linked to our present through which historical sources can be read.

- Where? Locating events and identifying places has always been a necessary occupation for historians, not without risks and difficulties. The digital world offers new possibilities to address these issues, but also poses new risks and challenges to the researcher. Many of the new digital approaches do not (yet) guarantee adequate consideration of historical issues, especially when moving from a local scale (archaeological projects, GIS, etc.) to a larger scale. The discussion on this topic intends to focus on the need to combine geographical knowledge deposited in various ways in the past (historical sources, repertories, bibliography, maps and charts, drawings) with current technologies and standards for spatial definition and visualisation (Places, Territories, Geographical Coordinate Displays, Geographical References, Old Maps).

- When? Measuring time, describing its phases and segments, fixing past events in conventional and shared conceptual structures, recognisable by an intellectual community, constituted, perhaps, one of the first historical approaches to human history. This question seeks to explore the scope of such operations with particular reference to their transfer to the digital sphere. In the digital world, in fact, different logics operate from those recognisable in ancient sources (e.g. dating operations based on conventions very different from the current ones) and from the current standards of measuring and recording time (dates expressed through parameters different from the ancient ones, duration vs. punctual events, etc.).

- Uncertainty, incompleteness, indefiniteness, ambiguity: An undoubted characteristic of historical sources is that they describe temporal, spatial and objective elements in a way that can be characterised in our eyes as incomplete, uncertain, indefinite or giving rise to ambiguous or discordant interpretations. This question aims to explore the distance between our perception and the historical elements we wish to analyse, to understand the reasons for this and to reflect on the appropriate tools for analysing the data.

- **Change and continuity**: History can be described as a complex set of changes and continuities. Reflecting on how to observe, measure and visualise this complexity is fundamental to our research. Reflection on this topic will be useful to offer insights and tools to appreciate, model and visualise historical change in our work.

Those who would like to participate in the panel discussion with a presentation, can send the title of their paper accompanied by a short abstract to **Benedetta Albani** (albani@lhlt.mpg.de) and **Laura Pettinaroli** (dirmod@efrome.it) by 15 June. Those who would like to take part in the joint discussion, but do not wish to make a specific presentation, may contact the organisers to agree on a different form of participation. The languages of the meeting will be Italian and English. The roundtable discussion will take place on 26 June 2023, from 15:00 to 18:00, in a hybrid format: at the École française de Rome (Piazza Navona 62, Rome) and online.

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Scientific conception
Benedetta Albani (Max Planck Institute for Legal History and Legal Theory, Frankfurt am Main)
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