PortADa
Port Arrivals Data

Port Arrivals Data. Automatic data collection for a large-scale comparative history of 19th century shipping: a Digital Humanities approach to maritime heritage. A project for the exchange of academic personnel funded by the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions program of the European Union's Executive Agency for Research.

(HORIZON-MSCA-2022-SE-01-01; Project 101129889 – PortADa)

The PortADa project kicks off with clear objectives

At the end of 2023, the inaugural meeting of the PortADa project took place. The project is based on a series of academic personnel exchanges among various European and Ibero-American institutions to study ship entries at the ports of Barcelona, Marseille, Havana, and Buenos Aires between 1850 and 1914. It has two equally important objectives. The first is the development and sustainability of new and lasting research collaborations, creating a team of around thirty digital humanists specialized in the application of computational methods to explore maritime and economic history.

The second objective is the generation of an open database with thousands of records related to 19th-century trade, containing information on ship arrivals at the ports included in this project, upon which we can base new studies on economic, social, (geo)political, and cultural topics. This database will cover approximately 1.6 million ship entries from the period 1850-1914 (Barcelona 330,000, Buenos Aires 480,000, Marseille 540,000, Havana 242,000). The database will be available under an open license for other researchers and interested non-academic public to explore its content.

The PortADa project successfully carries out its first Summer School in Argentina
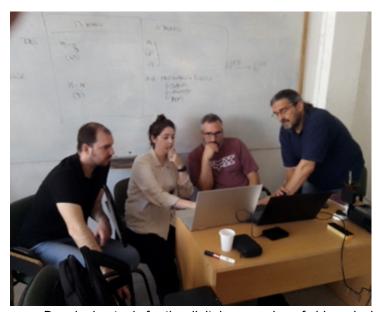

A training workshop in Digital Humanities

The PortADa project is designed around four Summer Schools, each lasting two months per year. During the Summer Schools, most of the researchers come together to share their progress, address difficulties, and impart knowledge on historical and computational aspects related to the research. Through this mechanism, they are fulfilling one of the project's main objectives: forming a team with a stable vocation for digital humanism.

A significant portion of time during the Summer Schools is dedicated to teamwork—either by thematic area (such as the four ports studied) or by working methodology (historiographical or computational).

In the Summer School held in Mar del Plata, weekly plenary meetings were conducted to share progress and address uncertainties or difficulties. The environment and camaraderie that emerged created conditions for sharing knowledge and collaborating to solve the inherent challenges of the project.

In the Mar del Plata Summer School (February and March 2024), progress was made in various areas. A series of informative presentations on maritime history topics and others related to the proper production of images, image processing using OCR and other tools, and the construction of a common database were conducted. Conditions for obtaining and storing images using a digital camera (even from a mobile phone) were agreed upon. The typology of information stored in the database, its model, and its operation were also agreed upon. The methodology for scanning arrival news images and processing them with appropriate technology (in this case, a series of publicly available low-cost apps) was also subjected to an initial test.

Developing tools for the digital processing of ship arrival announcements.

Seminars on related projects

Among the activities carried out, it is worth highlighting the academic seminar in which other research projects on maritime topics with large databases participated. In addition to presentations on each port, the following researchers participated: Cesar Ducruet, François Dremeaux, Erwam Jacomino, and Benjamin Brice. Their presentations were as follows:

- Cesar Ducruet (Directeur de Recherche CNRS), "The World Seastems project: harnessing big maritime network data (1880-2010)";
- François Dremeaux (Université d'Angers) & Erwam Jacomino (Université Le Havre), "MarCoMo";

Work session at the National University of Mar del Plata.

• Benjamin Brice (British Columbia University), "Marseille, Mediterranean ports, and migratory routes to Buenos Aires, 1892-1932".

After their respective presentations, they discussed the PortADa project and the application of lessons learned from those projects.

One of the most notable issues was the keen interest of all in keeping communication channels open and identifying opportunities to collaborate with the PortADa project. Additionally, a meeting was held with researcher Matteo Barbano, recipient of a Marie Skłodowska-Curie postdoctoral fellowship (from the European Union) for his Med-MaD (@Med_MaD_project) research. His

work revolves around maritime migrations in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, especially by communities of religious pilgrims during the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century.

Institutional Relations of PortADa

The PortADa team held meetings with leaders from the National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET, Argentina) in Mar del Plata and from the National University of General San Martín (UNSAM, Buenos Aires). Representatives from both institutions expressed their great interest in the project, gratitude for being able to participate, and willingness to collaborate as necessary to ensure the project's success.

Various members of the project are part of CONICET. UNSAM, on the other hand, is involved in the project through the participation of several students and researchers.

Meeting with the Administration of the National University of General San Martín (UNSAM) in Buenos Aires.

This university collaborates on work related to the port of Buenos Aires alongside researchers from the National University of Mar del Plata, the University of Buenos Aires, and the National University of Entre Ríos. Both CONICET and UNSAM emphasized the benefits of participating in a research project funded by the European Union, including the value of opportunities for their faculty and doctoral students and the institutional relationships that may arise and be consolidated throughout the project.

Formation of the Communication Team

During the Mar del Plata Summer School, a dedicated communication team was formed to keep the participating institutions, the academic community, and the general public informed. The team includes representatives from each node to serve as information and contact liaisons at each of the ports studied.

Setup of the @Proyecto_PortADa Server

The team at the Universitat de Barcelona has prepared a virtual server capable of processing the images corresponding to the 1.6 million ship entries at the four ports participating in the research. By establishing microservices and through a simple application, project staff without technical knowledge will be able to upload the images for processing and enhancement, as well as for obtaining the OCR (Optical Character Recognition) of these images.

The Universitat de Barcelona prepares for the second Summer School

Preparatory activities are already underway to welcome over thirty doctoral students and researchers dedicated to the PortADa project to Barcelona at the beginning of 2025. The Barcelona Summer School will take place from January 8 to March 8 of the upcoming 2025. During these two months, the team will focus especially on processing the information obtained during the project's first year of work and addressing expected issues of synonymy, coherence of information, and others. In addition to intensive teamwork sessions, the Barcelona Summer School also promises a variety of workshops, meetings, and computer and scientific activities related to the project, including some open to interested academic staff and the general public.

Expert Team Prepares to Travel to Havana, Cuba

A team of European researchers is preparing for their trip to Havana, Cuba, as established in the PortADa project work plan. The researchers—from the Universitat de Barcelona, the Autonomous University of Madrid, and the Foundation for Research and Technology Hellas (FORTH)—will stay in Cuba during the months of October and November 2024 to work hand in hand with the team from the University of Informatics Sciences of this Caribbean country. The aim is to transfer what was achieved in Mar del Plata and to make progress on the necessary work to process ship entries in that port.

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Participants of the PortADa project look forward to giving presentations at the following conferences to disseminate the initial results of their work:

Sixth International Conference of the Mediterranean Maritime History Network, Rethymno, Greece (May 2024);

Fifth International Congress of the Latin American and Iberian Social History Association, Castellon, Spain (September 2024);

Seventh International Congress of the Association of Caribbean Economic History, Mexico City, Mexico (November 2024) - session proposal submitted, pending acceptance;

Fourth National Congress of the Cuban Society of the History of Science and Technology, Havana, Cuba (November 2024) - session proposal submitted, pending acceptance;

Fourteenth International Congress of the Spanish Association of Economic History, Las Palmas, Spain (January 2025);

Fifteenth European Social Science History Conference, Leiden, Netherlands (March 2025) - communication proposal submitted, pending acceptance.

For more information, we invite you to contact us through the following channels:
Email: pr.portada@ub.edu
Or, follow us on "X" (formally Twitter): @ProyectoPortADa