# Foreword

Guido Abbattista

University of Trieste, Trieste, Italy
Email: gabbattista@units.it

## Abstract

The Foreword to this special issue of *Itinerario* describes the historical questions that inspired the Global Sea Routes project, from which the essays in the issue derive. It then illustrates the particular sources used in the project, namely logbooks, specifically those of the English East India Company, whose characteristics and interpretation problems are briefly presented. Then, it illustrates the digital tools used in the analysis of those sources and to obtain the digital graphic and cartographic representation of the research results; and finally, it introduces each individual essay contained in the issue.

**Keywords:** Early modern global navigation; Global history; History of navigation; Digital history

The importance of transoceanic maritime connections in the processes of early modern globalisation certainly does not need to be emphasised. Nor does the centrality of the history of shipping—merchant, military, exploratory—in every possible aspect: technical-scientific, organisational, political-institutional, economic, cultural, biographical. Historiography is naturally impressive on the maritime and commercial expansion of early modern Europe, which is closely connected with the history of European maritime powers and their evolution as highly organised state formations. This expansion also underlies the processes of economic, political, and cultural proto-globalisation. However, when the Global Sea Routes (GSR) geodatabase project took shape at the beginning of 2019, there were still questions waiting to be answered, particularly with regard to the history of trade navigations, through which—with the sea exchange of goods, knowledge, and ideas to European and overseas markets—the first forms of continuous economic and cultural interconnection on a global level took place.

Our starting question was very simple: do we know what the actual duration of maritime voyages over long intercontinental distances was in the early modern era? Do we know how numerous were the commercial voyages between Europe and the rest of the world from the time of the great geographical discoveries until the emergence of steam navigation? Do we know how intensively those voyages had evolved over almost four centuries, and how dense the network of global maritime connections of a commercial nature had become over the years? And how much had the duration of those voyages and the average speed on those routes changed? These are challenging questions, for which scattered and fragmentary data were certainly available, gleaned from printed travel reports and a multiplicity of archival documents. But how much better to attempt to

recompose this data in a framework that was both synthetic and comparative. Very challenging questions, and even more so if another one was added: how could we employ digital technologies to produce a visual representation of the development of transoceanic commercial shipping in the early modern age? And, above all, a representation that would be able to jointly bring out and understand the dimensions of time and space. The combination of these questions raised the possibility of bringing together global history and digital history, in what evolved into a certainly challenging but also very stimulating project.

As is often the case, when a project comes to life and begins to be translated into practice, no matter how solid the problematic and methodological foundations are, the problems become clearer and their complexity emerges more visibly through the confrontation with the available sources and digital instrumentation, especially if one is moving in highly innovative and uncharted terrain. Since the beginning of 2019, when the Global Sea Routes project took its first steps, the focus on the complexity of the problems allowed us to imagine the next steps through which the achievement of our objectives could take place and led us to limit our efforts to an initial smaller set of objects of analysis. The availability of a great concentration of archival sources and the richness of the historiographical framework led us to identify the world of the English East India Company as offering the best field of investigation on which to start our experiments, with the idea of tackling in successive stages the great navigations of the other European maritime powers: the Iberian states, Holland, and France. It was in this way that the exceptional quantitative and qualitative importance of the great repository of logbooks of the East India Company's ships held in the India Office Records and Private Papers at the British Library came to the fore. And it was precisely on this material that the first in-depth studies and experiments were launched, made possible, from the point of view of digital technologies, by the use of the Nodegoat platform for data-driven research and the interactive web applications developed by LAB1100 at The Hague. Their collaboration proved decisive for the creation of the final product we imagined for our research: an online geodatabase, accessible first with a provisional public interface (http://gsr.nodegoat.net/viewer.p/57/2230/types/all/list/) and now with a new interface entirely designed from scratch and publicly accessible (https://globalsearoutes.net/).

The analysis of the logbooks revealed their exceptional importance not only as tools for route reconstruction, but also as mirrors of lived reality, of the practical experience of transoceanic European voyages, in this case to Asian destinations and back. The logbook presented itself to our eyes as something more than a technical tool: it provided an open window (at least partially) on the everyday life of long-distance navigations, on their protagonists, on the culture of the navigators, on the facts that accompanied the practice of transoceanic navigation day by day. To the initial challenge—to construct a visual spatiotemporal representation of global routes—a new one soon was added: to construct narratives by means of nonnarrative sources such as logbooks, and to reinsert substantially unknown and anonymous voyages into the historical contexts of which they were part by means of the intersection with documentary sources of other kinds capable of restoring concreteness to experiences never before recounted.

This special issue of *Itinerario* intends to bring to the attention of the scientific community the fruits of this second part of the Global Sea Routes project in particular, and to present the work of the researchers who, in different ways and with different types of contributions, made the development of the project possible in its initial phase of life. I have decided to leave the floor entirely to them, because it is thanks to them that Global Sea Routes was able to blaze new trails of research and arrive at an initial set of results. We felt it was appropriate that the four contributions from GSR team members should be joined by a fifth from a scholar who, through his participation in the

Climatological Database for the World's Oceans (CLIWOC) project, has acquired significant knowledge and experience in analysing logbooks from the perspective of navigation history and historical climatology.

The following five contributions are designed to give the reader as complete a view as possible of the set of problems the project addresses. The introduction by Giulia Iannuzzi presents the main questions, the sources that are used, and the digital technologies employed to obtain results that, in terms of originality, stand out in the panorama of digital history projects on comparable subjects. Erica Grossi's and Filippo Chiocchetti's essays are two case studies that effectively show the enormous informative potential of logbooks and the fact that the navigational experiences of the East Indiamen towards India in the first and second half of the eighteenth century, if studied closely, cannot be traced back to a uniform pattern, but are profoundly influenced by a great number of variables, impossible to grasp except through the analysis of logbooks and other coeval sources.

Phillip Reid's essay also deals with case studies of eighteenth-century transoceanic sailings, but this time in the North Atlantic: the analysis of three experiences of crossings made by British ships during the eighteenth century reveals the difficulties and the empirical methods for overcoming them adopted by navigators. Clive Wilkinson's essay develops exactly this point, not with reference to case studies, but by describing in general the problematic features of early modern sail navigation methods and insisting above all on the importance of environmental observation in an era, between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in which scientific progress still struggled to translate what were essentially empirical methods into new technical aids for navigation..

Before closing, I need to mention that the GSR project was made possible thanks to the financial support of the Italian Ministry for University and Research, the Friuli Venezia Giulia Region funding programs for research, the Foreman Casali Foundation in Trieste, and additional support from the University of Trieste; my thanks go to all of these agencies. Of great importance and impossible not to mention is the project for the digitisation of logbooks of the East India Company relating to navigation in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean area carried out by the Qatar Digital Library at the Qatar National Library; without the availability of these digitised sources nothing would have been possible to the extent that has been achieved so far. Thanks also to our Dutch friends from LAB1100, Pim van Bree and Geert Kessels, who introduced us to Nodegoat and assisted us in setting up an original geodatabase, and agreeing to develop the potential of the platform to meet our needs. Vanessa Di Stefano competently edited linguistic revisions of essays by nonnative-English-speaking authors.

Finally, my heartfelt thanks go to *Itinerario* for accepting our proposal for a monographic issue, which we hope will meet the journal's and the readers' expectations.

**Guido Abbattista** is Professor of Modern History at the University of Trieste, where he teaches Global History, Methodology of Historical Research and Digital History. He is a specialist in the history of Anglo-American political culture in the eighteenth century, the history of the European Enlightenment with particular reference to colonial and imperial issues and the theme of ethno-anthropological diversity. He has been Visiting Professor at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris, and at the Nanjing University (PRC). He is a member of the Academia Europaea for the section "History and Archaeology", the World History Association, the Hakluyt Society, the International Committee for the History and Theory of Historiography and the inter-university research centre "Globhis-Network for Global history". Among his publications there are books, essays and critical

editions of authors such as James Mill, Lord Bolingbroke, Edmund Burke, abbé Raynal, A.-H. Anquetil-Duperron. His most recent works include: *Law, Justice and Codification in Qing China. European and Chinese Perspectives. Essays in History and Comparative Law*, edited by Guido Abbattista (Trieste: EUT, 2017); *La Rivoluzione Americana: A New Edition with a Postface* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2021), *Ethnic Expositions in Italy 1880-1940. Humans on Exhibitions* (London: Routledge, 2024, Eng. transl. of *Umanità in mostra: Esposizioni etniche e invenzioni esotiche in Italia (1880–1940)* (Trieste: EUT, 2013)). As a digital historian he is the P. I. of the research project, the geodatabase and the website "Global Sea Routes", 2019-current.