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The Formation of the Idea of the Library as an Institution in 18th-Century Europe. A Qualitative and Quantitative Approach*

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ABSTRACT

The paper illustrates the LIBMOVIT project – Libraries on the Move: Scholars, Books, Ideas Traveling in Italy in the 18th Century – whose main research focus is the European Eighteenth century socio-cultural framework in which the library as an institution acquired an historical, social, public and dynamic dimension. This context will be analysed through a study of the Eighteenth century sources connected to the learned journey experience of the Grand Tour, in particular those contained in the Angiolo Tursi collection – one of the largest travel literature collections in Italy – held at the Marciana national library in Venice. The paper presents the planned approach of the research: first, a classification and an organization of a corpus of relevant documents for the knowledge of travel literature in connection to the libraries world will be created; in particular, the sources will be identified, further bibliographical information will be added, and new sources will be integrated to the corpus and selected documents will be digitized. After that, the research will proceed through a double analysis – traditional and computational – of the texts collected in the corpus is to be developed. First, all the library and bibliographical aspects described by travellers will be studied according to the traditional approach in humanities research to collect important information about the history of libraries (location, decoration, catalogues, opening hours, access, collections, cited books and documents), the travellers and their companions (professions, nationality, reason to travel), the people met (scholars, librarians, superintendents) and the subjects and ideas discussed during the visits in the libraries. Second, the texts will be computationally analysed through several Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques, starting from the automatic text recognition until arriving to more complex lexical and terminological analysis and Named Entity Recognition (NER). This work is meant to support the previously described qualitative study and will also allow to produce Linked open data about the domain entities (e.g. libraries, people, books) in view of their publication in the semantic web in order to ease and promote their exploration, visualisation and reuse.

KEYWORDS

Library history; Travel literature; Natural Language Processing; Wikidata; Qualitative research; Quantitative research.

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Introduction

This paper presents a research project that aims to historically reconstruct the formation of the idea of the library as an institution in the 18th century through odeporic sources and by applying qualitative and quantitative methodology. On the one hand, the purpose of this publication is to highlight the key points that enabled the project to receive a national research grant (PRIN 2022) and, on the other hand, to foster the project to a wider audience, with the goal to identify possible additional partners and stakeholders.

The project title is "Libraries on the move: scholars, books, ideas in 18th century Italy" (LIBMO-VIT) and involves three research units: the University of Bologna (host institution of the Principal Investigator), the University of Pavia and the Institute for the European Intellectual Lexicon and the History of Ideas of the National Research Council of Italy (CNR-ILIESI).

The LIBMOVIT[1] project focuses primarily on the socio-cultural background of eighteenth-century Europe, examining the historical, social, public, and dynamic dimensions of libraries as institutions during this period. The investigation delves into the context through an exploration of eighteenth-century sources related to the scholarly journeys of the *Grand Tour*, with a particular emphasis on the Angiolo Tursi collection. This collection, housed at the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana in Venice, stands as one of Italy's most extensive collections of travel literature.

In the initial phase of the project, a corpus of pertinent documents, illuminating the intersection of travel literature and libraries, will be assembled. The documents will undergo classification and organization based on various criteria, such as publication type, language, origin, literary genre, and accessibility. This stage involves source identification, additional bibliographical details, corpus expansion with new sources, and the digitization of selected documents.

The second phase incorporates a dual analysis – traditional and computational – of the collected texts. Traditional humanities research methods will be applied to examine library and bibliographical aspects described by travellers. This includes an exploration of elements crucial for reconstructing library use and assessing the impact of library visits on intellectual development, the European scholarly communication network, and the formation of bibliographic collections and library institutions. The computational analysis will leverage Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques, ranging from automatic text recognition to advanced lexical and terminological analysis, as well as Named Entity Recognition (NER). This computational aspect aims to support the overall research and facilitate the indexing of domain entities (e.g., libraries, individuals, books) for publication in the semantic web. The goal is to enhance exploration, visualization, and reuse of the data.

Background of research

The Grand Tour reached its zenith in the 18th century, with Italy standing out as one of its preferred destinations. Extensive scientific literature exists on this historical and cultural phenome-

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[1] Progetto finanziato dall'Unione Europea – NextGenerationEU a valere sul Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza (PNRR) – Missione 4 Istruzione e ricerca – Componente 2 Dalla ricerca all'impresa – Investimento 1.1, Avviso Prin 2022 indetto con DD N. 104 del 2/2/2022, Progetto dal titolo LIBMOVIT – Libraries on the move: scholars, books, ideas traveling in Italy in the 18th century, codice proposta 2022CP88KY.

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non, with numerous studies delving into specific interests and research areas related to the Grand Tour. However, studies examining the relationship between this extensive travel experience and the world of libraries, a key participant in this era, are sporadic.

While travel documentation has been acknowledged as a potential source for library history, particularly by authors such as Ottino-Fumagalli, Predeek, Buzas, and Serrai (Ottino and Fumagalli 1889; Predeek 1928; Buzas 1976; Serrai 1999) – as well as used for limited interventions by Lodovica Braida (Braida 2002; 2018), Loretta De Franceschi (De Franceschi 2013), Graziano Ruffini (Ruffini 2012), Gianfranco Tortorelli (Tortorelli 2012) e Vincenzo Trombetta (Trombetta 1994; 2014; Andrés 1997)- a comprehensive historical perspective on libraries has only recently emerged. In addition to numerous essays on the topic which delve into specific testimonies or highlight relevant aspects, (Sabba 2018a; 2019; 2021a; 2021b; 2021c; 2021d; 2023; Conterno and Sabba 2022) a notable recent study by Sabba (Sabba 2018b) presented a broader historiographical approach with a focus on library history. Nonetheless, this study analysed a limited sample of sources, including only printed sources, travel reports, and letters from foreign travellers.

Against the backdrop of early modern European culture, this project aims to scrutinize the role of libraries more extensively and precisely than previous studies. It seeks to underscore the centrality of libraries in scholarly communication, pivotal in shaping cultural models revered by aristocratic and bourgeois elites throughout the early modern era. The project also endeavours to explore and document the 18th-century European origins of the contemporary concept of the library as a "conversation" (Lankes 2011) and a space for the elaboration and production – beyond preservation – of knowledge.

In pursuit of these goals, travel memoirs serve as a privileged source due to their spontaneous, culturally diverse, and inclusive qualities. These "original" sources remain underutilized in the context of library history. Their disciplinary significance is evident as the history of 18th-century Italian libraries has predominantly focused on individual collections and institutions, lacking a comprehensive approach. Even if previous research initiative already approached this field using Digital Humanities methodologies (De Caprio and Meschini 2006; Meschini 2011; Anderson et al. 2017; Carey, Golléri, and Ingram 2020), this project aims to fill the absence of a specialized textual database, offering comprehensive information on works, authors/travellers, companions, places, libraries, collections, and individuals encountered. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of structured, open, free, and reusable publication of data in the field of bibliography and library history, hindering innovative approaches to access, exploration, and visualization.

Research context, sources, and methodologies

The Grand Tour phenomenon wielded a significant influence on shaping the European Republic of Letters, marking travel as an intellectual and formative experience. In the 18th century, travel evolved into a multifaceted encounter, impacting both individual and societal perspectives. It became a widespread practice, recognized across European society for its instrumental role in shaping ruling elites, scholars, men of science, and the intellectual class. The Republic of Letters, well-established by the late 17th century, owed its consolidation to various communication channels like literary and scientific journals and scholarly correspondence and to the opportunities for personal interaction and exchange facilitated by travel. This renewed context witnessed movements of people, books, and ideas.

Italian libraries emerged as preferred destinations for foreign travellers, due to their architectural and artistic significance and as hubs of literary and scientific information. Librarians played a crucial role, disseminating knowledge through correspondence and personal interactions with library visitors. Despite the pivotal role of libraries in shaping the cultural identity of modern Europe, there is currently a scarcity of studies that analyse and underscore their significance as centres of erudite communication.

The research will delve into the cultural model associated with the 18th-century birth of the public library – a dynamic institution serving societal advancement, documentary selection and conservation, and the generation, production, and dissemination of knowledge.

Uniquely, the project adopts a library history perspective and relies on odeporic sources, which will be documented and made publicly accessible through an online platform.

The primary resource for building the corpus for study and analysis is the Angiolo Tursi (1885-1977) collection, donated to the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana in Venice in 1968 (Tursi 1956; Vianello 1968). Tursi's collection, collected over nearly 40 years, stands as the richest and most systematic archive on travel in Italy, comprising about 26,000 documents. Noteworthy features include an 80,000-card catalogue alphabetically arranged and enriched by a systematic classification of travellers and resource types. A portion of the collection is digitized and available online on the "Internet Culturale" portal ('Home – Internet Culturale' 2023; Ciancio 2010).

The bibliographic and bibliological richness, coupled with the meticulous arrangement, positions the Tursi collection as an invaluable resource for scholars. Its unique qualities also make it a foundational element for an essential annotated bibliography on travellers in Italy, deserving a dedicated bibliographic study. It is essential to recognize that collector-assembled collections are the most comprehensive and carefully curated, representing a paradigmatic perspective from a bibliographic standpoint.

Analysing the Tursi collection will expand the documentary base for research, broadening the scope of sources to include travel guides and apodemic texts, in addition to the more conventional reports, diaries, and letters. Another expansion will concern both manuscripts and printed documents, and the study will not only consider writings by foreign travellers but also those penned by Italian authors, providing a comprehensive exploration of the subject matter.

Furthermore, the LIBMOVIT project seeks to evaluate a new methodology for source analysis, considering the increasing prevalence of rendering cultural relations, encompassing people and bibliographic, archival, or museum objects. This is pursued through the publication of data in the form of Linked Open Data (LOD). This approach introduces a transformative paradigm for utilizing, exploring, and visualizing data, proving valuable for both research and content dissemination (Barbera 2013; Boccone et al. 2017; Klic et al. 2017; Molinié 2019; 2020; Zavattoni 2020; Bonora and Pompilio 2021). While some limited experiences exist in developing data analysis and visualization for articles in Italian librarianship journals (Bianchini 2021; Bianchini, Marchitelli, and Moi 2023), expertise in publishing LOD in the history of libraries is still to be exploited.

To align the project with LOD practices, the sources corpus will undergo quantitative and computational analysis. Beginning with the 18th-century sources selected in the initial research stage, textual data will be extracted using techniques and tools developed in the Natural Language Processing (NLP) context (Piotrowski 2012). This operation will furnish information to structure subsequent tasks, including the reconstruction of a specific travel experience terminology. With-

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in this framework, the identification of terms linked to key concepts in the history of ideas (e.g., otherness, knowledge, freedom) or associated with philosophical literature using travel metaphors will be undertaken (Van den Abbeele 1992; Menzio 1994). The computational analysis will also facilitate data processing related to individuals, themes, itineraries, places, institutions, collections, and texts, along with their interrelationships.

Ultimately, all the aforementioned data will be published on the semantic web to capitalize on its capabilities, including identification, enrichment, integration, data quality, software independence, accessibility, exploration, sharing and interoperability, decentralization, reusability, visualization, and analysis. Technologically, the research will leverage tools provided by the Wikimedia community, offering additional advantages beyond those associated with semantic web technologies. The publication of data on Wikimedia platforms – or Wikibase instances – brings several additional benefits, complementing the advantages already highlighted for semantic web technologies:

- Cost-Free Tools: Wikimedia tools – and Wikibase websites – are freely accessible;
- Up-to-date Visualization Tools: Access to constantly updated free tools for visualization and disseminating data in the form of timelines, graphs, and interactive maps;
- Interoperability Guarantee: Ensured interoperability of data with those from other institutions;
- Modularity: Easy integration and enrichment of data in future projects, thanks to a modular approach;
- Collaborative Environment: The platform fosters a free and collaborative environment;
- Long-Term Data Guarantee: Assurance of data preservation and compatibility with various formats over the long term;
- Third-Party Reusability: Facilitated reuse of data by third-party institutions;
- Effortless Dissemination: Simple dissemination, communication, and utilization of scientific and cultural content by an extensive audience, including the educational sector, as Wikimedia platforms stand as the most significant and visited non-profit website globally.

Furthermore, adhering to an open science perspective (Giglia 2019; Angiolini 2021), data and information related to the sources under study in this research will be published in the form of datasets. They will be made accessible to the scientific community by uploading them to European research infrastructures, such as *Zenodo*.[2]

Content Objectives of the research and Related Tasks

The primary content objective is segmented into fundamental objectives, along with subsequent tasks to be pursued until the publication of results. These are detailed as follows:

1. In-depth Study of Odeporic Memories:
   a. Conduct an exhaustive examination of research on odeporic memories utilizing the Angiolo Tursi collection;
   b. Utilize the extensive collection to precisely identify bibliographic and library-related aspects significant to both foreign and Italian travellers;

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[2] https://zenodo.org/.

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    c. Investigate the influence of visits to Italian libraries on the construction of collections and library organization;

2. Extension of Research to Additional Bibliographic Typologies:
    a. Extend research to underexplored travel literature types such as guides and apodemic texts;
    b. Enhance understanding of the communicated and conveyed external library idea in comparison with perceived and real libraries from personal travel memories;

3. Creation of an Open Access Portal:
    a. Establish a portal for international collaboration and dissemination of research results;
    b. Provide a platform for scholars interested in travel history and odeporic documentation;

4. Creation of a Bibliographic and Documentary Repertoire:
    a. Identify odeporic sources in the Tursi collection from the 18th century;
    b. Develop a bibliographic tool containing digitized publications and cataloging data;

5. Textual Database Creation and Computational Analysis:
    a. Enrich bibliographic data with the full text of selected works;
    b. Establish a textual database for computational analyses and semantic enrichment;

6. Publication of Linked Open Data (LOD) on semantic web:
    a. Publish data in LOD format on Wikimedia platforms for visibility and accessibility;
    b. Provide modular data for future research integration in the field.

Primary content objectives imply the following descending objectives and Related Tasks:

7. Study on Librarians in Travel Literature:
    a. Investigate the presence of librarians in travel literature as travellers or individuals met during journeys;
    b. Assess the impact of travels and library encounters on the circulation of bibliographic and librarianship models;

8. Creation of Multilingual Textual Corpus:
    a. Establish a multilingual textual corpus of travel literature;
    b. Identify terminology and conduct terminological searches on the intersection of travel and philosophical research;

9. Double Census from Odeporic Texts:
    a. Conduct a register of unknown or forgotten libraries;
    b. Compile a register of librarians not recorded in specialized biographical repertoires.

These tasks aim to contribute significantly to the history of libraries and travel literature, providing valuable resources for future research.

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Expected primary general and specific outcomes

The project aims to investigate the evolving role of libraries in the 18th century, transitioning from scholarly and traveler-centric centers to the public-oriented and service-driven contemporary library. Tangible results for the scientific community and the public include: the creation of a census of 18th-century Travel Records (starting from the Tursi collection); the creation of a bibliographic index by the identification and cataloging of odeporic sources relevant to the research, including digitized full texts; a computational analysis of texts to create a marked full-text multilingual database and the harvesting of data on people, themes, etc., with LOD publication on Wikidata-like platforms; the creation of a web portal for data access, project presentation, ongoing initiatives, and open-access publication of scientific results. These outputs represent an innovative historical approach, leveraging diverse source types and adhering to open science principles, ensuring structured and reusable information accessibility. The project also incorporates Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques for text analysis, offering insights into linguistic, terminological, and quantitative aspects of odeporic literature.

Specific outcomes of the research include educational events, such as seminars and hackathons for students and professionals to disseminate research results and describe methodologies, a final conference for presenting research outcomes and inviting contributions from institutions and scholars from various disciplines, and open access publications, available through the project website, institutional repositories, and research infrastructure. So, outcomes ensure a comprehensive understanding of libraries in the 18th century, and contribute to technological innovation and the potential integration of qualitative and computational research methods. The use of the semantic web warrants global accessibility, facilitating data reuse, collaboration, and the project's visibility.

Research Detailed Tasks Program

The research program was defined in detail, to identify actions, timetables, resources, and interactions between them. First, a project management and monitoring process, to organize operational units and provide initial training for new personnel, conduct a kick-off meeting to introduce the project to the community[3], create a project website[4] and activate communication channels and constantly monitor activities, update social channels and the website.

The second activity – involving all research units – provides for the creation of the census of sources and their classification: sources from the Tursi collection are selected by means of classification and bibliographic records, are integrated by other catalogues of the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Venice, and of other specialized collections. A database based on identified sources, classified according to relevant features, is set up.

A third step includes the use of available metadata to create a repertoire, checking and enriching existing records, and adding sources not yet catalogued in the National Librarian Service (SBN) catalogue, to publish a specific database on the project website.

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[3] The Kick-off meeting was held in Ravenna, on 7 December, 2023.
[4] https://libmov.it/.

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The next activity is the identification and the content analysis of relevant sources, to identify textual and editorial features of classified sources, and recognize passages and information of library and bibliographic interest. Following well established workflow in the field of textual analysis (Piotrowski 2012; Del Grosso et al. 2018), after digitalization, when necessary, and automatic text recognition, identified sources need to undergo to a basic XML/TEI markup. The linguistic analysis will then provide a lemmatized corpus, necessary to perform better Named Entities Recognition (NER), both automatic and manual, and also ease the construction of a terminology resource (Bellandi et al. 2017) related to travel experience with its philosophical connections.

The identification of entities allows to model an ontology of the most interesting entities (e.g. cities, libraries, catalogues, opening hours, etc.), to define necessary metadata for LOD publication on Wikidata-like platforms, to process and validate data, and to link them to existing projects taking advantage of Wikidata as a hub of the semantic web (Allison-Cassin and Scott 2018; Association of Research Libraries 2019; Linked Data for Production 2020).

All the activities need to be properly communicated and publicized, through a well-defined and modular website, the organization of an operational workshop in the first year and of a final conference with an international call for papers, the open access publication of a special monograph and of the proceedings of the conference, and the organization of an online bibliographic exhibition, teaching activities, and third mission activities.

Actions, timetables, resources, and interactions between them required by the research are illustrated in the Flowchart (figure 1) and in the Gantt Diagram (figure 2) below.
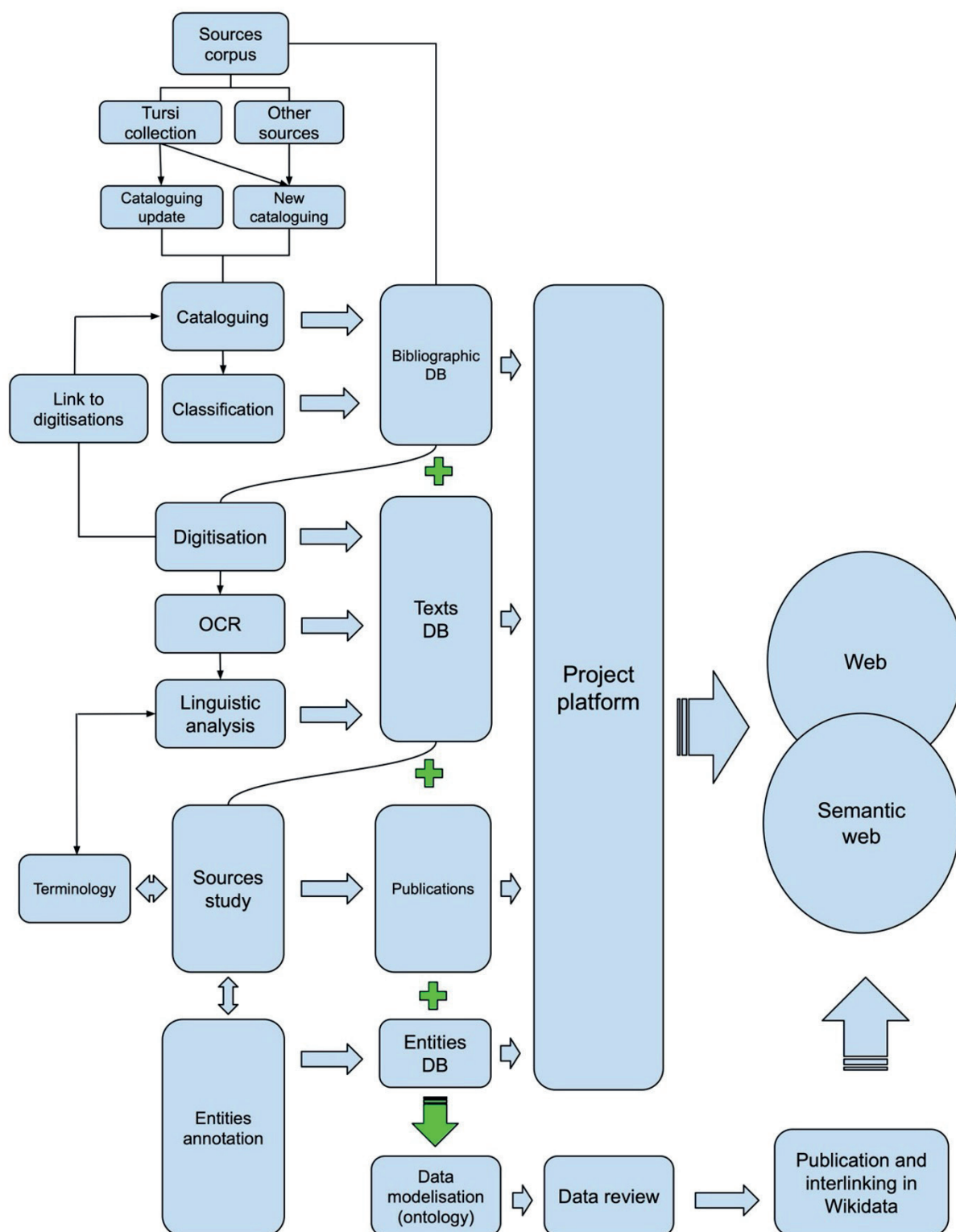
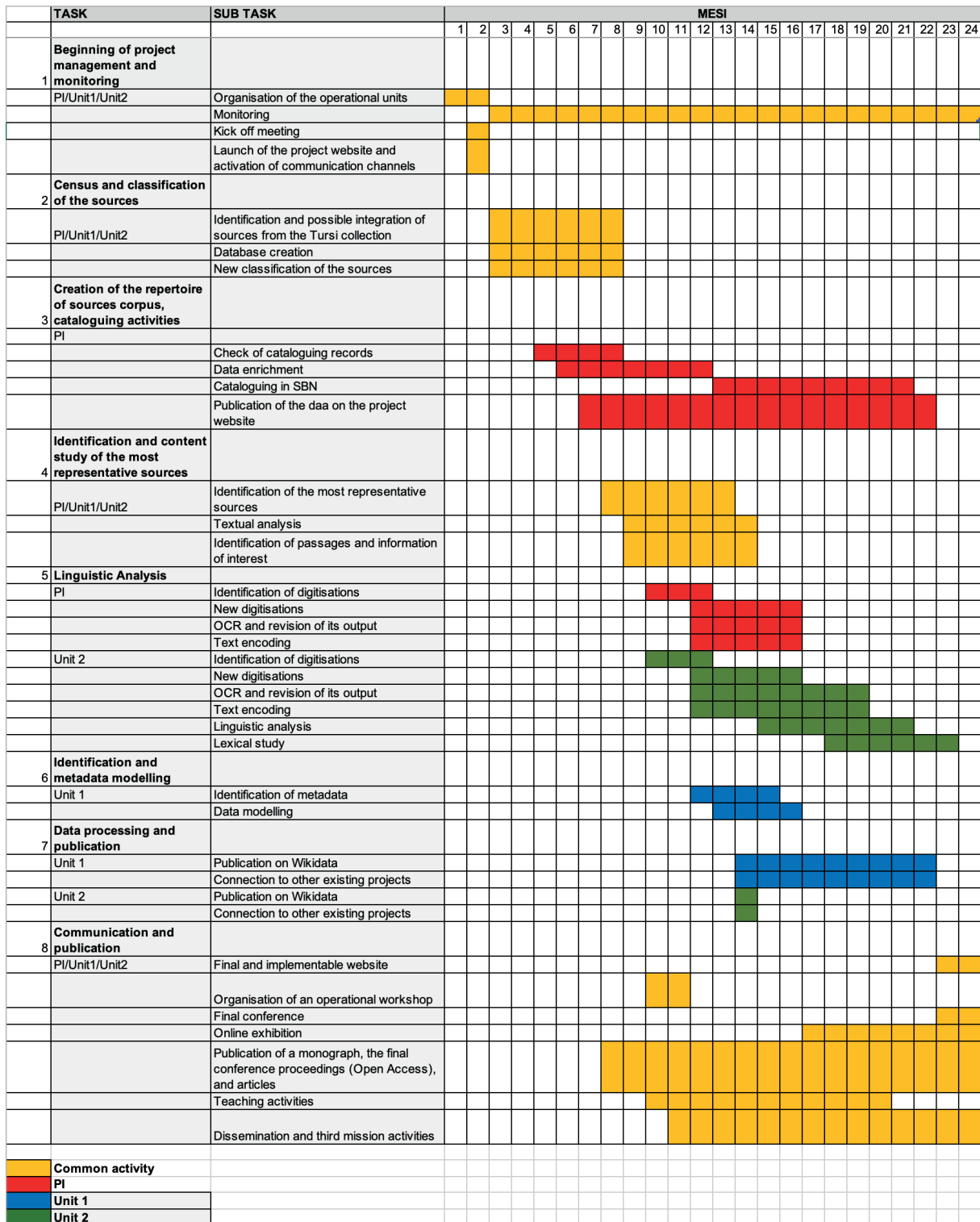Figure 1. Flowchart of activities of the research project.

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TASK	SUB TASK	MESI (months 1–24)
1 Beginning of project management and monitoring		
PI/Unit1/Unit2	Organisation of the operational units	months 1–2 (Common)
	Monitoring	months 3–24 (Common)
	Kick off meeting	month 2 (PI)
	Launch of the project website and activation of communication channels	month 2 (Common)
2 Census and classification of the sources		
PI/Unit1/Unit2	Identification and possible integration of sources from the Tursi collection	months 3–7 (Common)
	Database creation	months 3–7 (Common)
	New classification of the sources	months 3–7 (Common)
3 Creation of the repertoire of sources corpus, cataloguing activities		
PI	Check of cataloguing records	months 6–7 (PI)
	Data enrichment	months 7–11 (PI)
	Cataloguing in SBN	months 12–18 (PI)
	Publication of the daa on the project website	months 9–22 (PI)
4 Identification and content study of the most representative sources		
PI/Unit1/Unit2	Identification of the most representative sources	months 9–12 (Common)
	Textual analysis	months 9–14 (Common)
	Identification of passages and information of interest	months 9–14 (Common)
5 Linguistic Analysis		
PI	Identification of digitisations	months 10–11 (PI)
	New digitisations	months 12–15 (PI)
	OCR and revision of its output	months 12–15 (PI)
	Text encoding	months 12–15 (PI)
Unit 2	Identification of digitisations	months 11–12 (Unit 2)
	New digitisations	months 13–16 (Unit 2)
	OCR and revision of its output	months 14–17 (Unit 2)
	Text encoding	months 15–18 (Unit 2)
	Linguistic analysis	months 16–21 (Unit 2)
	Lexical study	months 18–24 (Unit 2)
6 Identification and metadata modelling		
Unit 1	Identification of metadata	months 12–14 (Unit 1)
	Data modelling	months 12–14 (Unit 1)
7 Data processing and publication		
Unit 1	Publication on Wikidata	months 14–20 (Unit 1)
	Connection to other existing projects	months 14–20 (Unit 1)
Unit 2	Publication on Wikidata	month 14 (Unit 2)
	Connection to other existing projects	
8 Communication and publication		
PI/Unit1/Unit2	Final and implementable website	months 23–24 (Common)
	Organisation of an operational workshop	months 10–11 (Common)
	Final conference	months 23–24 (Common)
	Online exhibition	months 10–24 (Common)
	Publication of a monograph, the final conference proceedings (Open Access), and articles	months 10–24 (Common)
	Teaching activities	months 23–24 (Common)
	Dissemination and third mission activities	months 11–24 (Common)

Legend:
- Common activity (yellow)
- PI (red)
- Unit 1 (blue)
- Unit 2 (green)

Figure 2. Gantt diagram with the timetable of the research project.

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Expected impact of the research project

The impact of the project primarily lies in making a substantial amount of data and information related to the history of libraries and travel literature available to the scientific community. This is particularly significant for understanding the 18th-century origins of the modern public library as a space for exchange and conversation, rather than mere preservation.

Additionally, the project will contribute significantly by creating a free and online bibliographic repertoire of odeporic sources. The availability of full-text selections from these sources will serve to enhance knowledge in this domain. While these sources are primarily studied for historical-librarianship purposes, their interdisciplinary nature, reflecting diverse cultural experiences through travel, adds broader academic value.

Moreover, the recognition and systematization of sources from the Angiolo Tursi collection will not only enrich the odeporic collections of the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Venice, but also exemplify how the scientific community can collaborate with cultural institutions to enhance and promote existing collections. It will serve as a model for the collaborative development of similar source corpora across Italian and European institutions.

The significance of these collections extends beyond individual libraries. Notable Grand Tour collections in various Italian cities, such as those in Florence, Rome, Naples, Turin, and Milan, represent valuable tools for promoting the internationalization of research. These collections offer a comprehensive view of how libraries were perceived by travellers over a broader chronological spectrum, enhancing the study of library perceptions.

Furthermore, odeporic literature, by its nature, is international and multilingual, aligning with the spirit of the Grand Tour. The project's results will facilitate international scientific relations by involving scholars from other European countries and experts in computational text analysis in languages other than Italian.

Within the Italian research context, the project sets an example of desired integration, distributed across the territory, between the university's scientific community and public research bodies. Such integration is relatively uncommon, especially in the field of humanities research.

Finally, the research results will be disseminated through the promotion of an interdisciplinary study approach, integrating humanities with technological applications, including teaching; the dissemination of basic research data from an open science perspective, utilizing platforms like Zenodo and other European research infrastructures; the dissemination on a Wikidata-like platform of structured, open, searchable, and reusable data under a free license. This includes data visualizations tools to enhance accessibility and impact on a non-specialist audience at national and international levels.

Embracing an open-access approach aligns with Open Science principles, aiming to involve society in the research community and share the resulting benefits in economic, social, and cultural terms.

First steps of the project

As stated at the beginning, the objective of these pages was to present to a specialized audience the background, the goals, and the expected results of a project worthy to be funded in a competitive

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national research programme. The LIBMOVIT project officially started in October 2023 and in December the Cultural Heritage Department of the University of Bologna hosted the kick-off meeting. During this event[5] the team laid out the project and invited Lodovica Braida and Giorgio Montecchi to attend and comment its potentialities for the fields of Book, Library and Cultural History; in addition, Orsola Braides, special collections librarian at the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, was invited to present the Angiolo Tursi collection, which constitutes the main LIBMOVIT bibliographic source. The kick-off meeting was also the opportunity to promote the project website (available at: https://www.libmov.it/, where more information about the project, a page with a specialized bibliography, and a "News" section are available, to stay updated about the research progress and events.

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[5] https://www.libmov.it/?p=1.

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