

modern example of a social movement based on networks. Until the collaborative *Italian Academies* project, all that was available to scholars interested in studying the phenomenon as a whole was Maylender's inventory of academies. The new systematic approach to the study of Italian academies we propose with the IAD suggests that one of the issues deserving more in-depth analysis is the networking characteristics of the global phenomenon.

The Italian Academies Database: Approaches and Figures

The IAD is a digital resource that allows the linking of people (in their various roles of academician, printer, author, dedicatee, contributor, engraver, censor, editor, and publisher), publications, academies, and cities. Since such a vast and complex web of cross-references is not possible on the printed page, the digital tool represents the geography and history of Italian academies in a way that continues a suggestion⁴⁸ that has long influenced and continues to influence the best research on Italian cultural history, namely, the need to study the geography, as well as the history, of Italian literature.⁴⁹

The changing attitude in scholarship that Big Data⁵⁰ and digital humanities are bringing to the fore has been commented in a 2010 article in the *New York Times*. Patricia Cohen commented on the new trend in humanities scholarship: "The next big idea in language, history and the arts? Data. Members of a new generation of digitally savvy humanists argue it is time to stop looking for inspiration in the next political or philosophical 'ism' and start exploring how technology is changing our understanding of the liberal arts. This latest frontier is about method, they say, using powerful technologies and vast stores of digitized materials that previous humanities scholars did not have."⁵¹

While this methodology has been taken up by other large projects—the Oxford-based *Cultures of Knowledge: Networking the Republic of Letters (1550–1750)* and the *Archilet: Epistolary Network: Online Archive of Italian Literary Correspondences in Early-Modern Age* are just two examples⁵²—it is also important to remember what Anthony Grafton affirms in the same article: the humanities are also very much about interpretation.

If there is a historical and social phenomenon in need of being quantified and reinterpreted in light of the new data acquired and the new medium by which data are stored, it is the "Italian Academic movement," to use Richard Samuels's definition—tellingly, Daniel Roche also adopted the same definition for his groundbreaking research on French provincial academies and academicians of the eighteenth century.⁵³

The IAD is based on prosopography, bibliography, and hypertext. Its aim is to solve the limits imposed by the printed page by providing the prosopography of academicians, the geography of academies, and the circulation of knowledge through publications related to academies and through the mobility of academicians. These data are linked to one another via the hypertext, offering users an interactive tool and a broader perspective on the Italian academic movement and its networks.

Prosopography is a research methodology that aims to make visible the particular characteristics of a large group of people. This helps the historian avoiding generalizations from a handful of examples, or to propose conclusions by selecting individual cases, however representative they are.⁵⁴ The etymology of prosopography is rather complex—it comes from the Greek προσοράω (“prosorao”)—and means the “description of external/material individual characteristics.” As scholars have explained, from a methodological point of view, “prosopography attempts to bring together all relevant biographical data of groups of persons in a systematic and stereotypical way. As such it is a system for organizing mostly scarce data in such a way that they acquire additional significance by revealing connections and patterns influencing historical processes.”⁵⁵

Thus the combination of data in the IAD from both the bibliographical and the prosopographical approach has revealed an intense web of people, books, and academies covering the peninsula, from Mesagne to Rome, from Venice to Genoa, from Bologna to Enna. The merit of the IAD lies in the possibility of visualizing the links between academies, academicians, and the people involved in the publication of books and in the possibility of providing some context in the spaces dedicated to people, academies, or books. Thus while historically the people who were part of Italian academies could be considered as being part of a social movement, on the screen, such movement has the features of a modern-day social network.

Let us now look at some hard data. Since this book stems from my research with the project *Italian Academies 1525–1700: The First Intellectual Networks of Early-Modern Europe*, it is important to describe and comment on the results of the IAD. In the 22 cities completed so far (Bologna, Siena, Padova, Palermo, Enna, Venice, Rome, Bari, Casale Monferrato, Aversa in the province of Caserta, Catania, Mantova, Mesagne in the province of Brindisi, Messina, Modica in the province of Ragusa, Naples, Piazza Armerina in the province of Enna, Ragusa, Ragusa of Dalmatia, Siracusa, Trapani, and Verona), there were 496 academies in existence. In the IAD, we have included cities and academies that were not within the original scope of the project, thus the total number of academies listed in the IAD, though not completed, is higher. One of the key features of the project was the cataloguing of books related to academies and the list of people associated

with such academies, something that previous studies of the phenomenon did not take into account. The IAD now lists 905 publications related to the aforementioned academies. The number of academicians included thus far is over 4,000. Out of the 7,042 persons catalogued, the IAD list 527 authors, 1,793 contributors, 795 dedicatees, 217 editors, 396 printers, 73 publishers, and 549 censors. Obviously, in the great majority of cases, the roles overlap, especially when someone was an academician, an author, a contributor, a dedicatee, a censor, and so on. Such figures make it clear that a sociological definition of academicians is not possible. They varied in age, profession, social status, and provenance. They came from big centers such as Rome or Venice, smaller cities such as Bologna or Siena, or from provincial towns such as San Daniele in Friuli, Belforte or Montefano (both near Macerata), Asola in the province of Mantua, Positano in the province of Salerno, and other such small villages.

What is represented in the IAD is a “republic of letters” (Chapter 4), with individuals meeting and sharing knowledge in academies, whether orally, as Pietro Della Valle remembers with nostalgia,⁵⁶ or through publications—many times such academies coincided with meetings in private houses (as were the cases of Accademia Venier [from the name of the host, Domenico Venier], Accademia della Virtù [Academy of Virtue], Accademia degli Animosi [The Spirited Ones] of Padua, Accademia dei Gelati, Accademia Sarottiana [from the name of the host, Paolo Sarotti])—but they also collaborated in theatrical representations (Intronati, Orditi [The Outlined Ones], Infiammati [Varchi’s *Canace* was performed in the Infiammati Academy while he was still writing it⁵⁷], Stravaganti), tournaments (Accademia dei Torbidi [The Turbid Ones]), and scientific experiments (Accademia della Traccia [Academy of the Trace], Accademia fisico-matematica, Accademia Sarottiana).

In my research, I have taken on the role of police inspector as described by Robert Darnton,⁵⁸ identifying as many candidates as possible of the thousands of individuals involved in different roles within the academies and their publications, thus creating the profile of groups according to the tenets of prosopography. Such individuals and groups can be linked to one another through the hypertext, thus giving the user a visual and interactive tool for exploring paths of social and intellectual networks and the circulation of knowledge. It has been a long time since social historians first called for the visualization of complex phenomena. An online, searchable database that connects people, academies, and publications meets this request, in that the visual representation of the social exchange and where it took place allow users “to capture and reduce complex or ephemeral visual phenomena into a more manageable (permanent, detailed) form,”