Call For Papers: Mapping Historical Environments in the Indian Ocean World

Digital mapping is essential to visualising and modelling environmental change over the long-term and into the future. It has also been generative of original historical analyses in which changing environmental conditions and spatial circumstances have been central. In this context, scholars from a wide range of disciplines have used a mixture of sources and tools, including satellite images, remote sensing, and digital cartography, to map changing land-use, settlement patterns, and the effects of disasters, as well as the effects of variable global temperatures on natural and human-made environments. These maps are not merely illustrations; they are fundamental to the spatial analysis of our currently warming world.

In recent years, historians have made significant contributions to these efforts. Digital mapping has traditionally been in the domain of geography and its cognate disciplines. However, partly in response to wider calls for interdisciplinarity in the humanities and social sciences, collaborations across these disciplines have been shown to have significant value. For example, historians have contributed to the creation of land-use models, which visualise humans' changing influence on environmental conditions over time.[1] They have also incorporated spatial and topographical analysis to elucidate the direction of historical roads.[2] And they have visualised changing settlement patterns and their effects on the flow of rivers, which have had major consequences for national and regional histories.[3]

Even though these are by no means historians' only contributions to digital mapping, certain trends are observable, which this conference seeks to address. The first is that relatively few of these collaborative and interdisciplinary efforts have been published in outlets specifically intended for historians (there are, of course, exceptions). In pushing the bounds of their discipline, historians have tended to try to make their data, sources, and methods, relevant to scholars in other fields.

But how does digital mapping enhance historical approaches in and of themselves?

How can digital mapping be incorporated into core historical methods, alongside, for example, archival and oral research?

How can historians who are familiar with digital mapping make their approaches intelligible to other historians in interdisciplinary publications?

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[1] David Max Findley et al., 'Land Use Change in a Pericolonial Society: Intensification and Diversification in Ifugao, Philippines Between 1570 and 1800 CE,' *Frontiers in Earth Science*, 10 (2022), 1-16.
[2] M Erdem Kabadayi, Piet Gerris, and Grigor Boykov, 'Geospatial mapping of a 16th century transport corridor for southeast Europe,' *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities*, 37, 3 (2022), 788-812.
[3] Ruth Mostern, *The Yellow River: A natural and unnatural history* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

A second trend is that most historians' and their collaborators' approaches to digital mapping have been nationally or regionally focused. This is, in some ways, a natural consequence of cross-disciplinary collaborations being developed between scholars with similar regional expertise. But it belies the fact that environmental change has little respect for these kinds of boundaries, especially in the context of current-day global warming. It also means that historians' contributions to digital mapping have taken somewhat divergent forms depending on the nation or region under review.

What would a trans-regional approach to historical digital mapping look like?

And what could, for example, a historian of the Philippines with expertise in digital mapping learn from a scholar with similar disciplinary expertise but who focuses on the Ottoman Empire, and vice versa?

These are the kinds of questions that this conference on Mapping Historical Environments in the Indian Ocean World (IOW) seeks to address. Building on expertise developed at the IOWC under the umbrella of its Appraising Risk Partnership, it seeks to bring together scholars from the humanities and social sciences who focus on the IOW and its constituent parts, from eastern Africa through the Middle East and South, East, and Southeast Asia, and who use digital mapping to visualise historical environmental conditions and environmental change over time. We hope to build a community of interdisciplinary scholars and to enhance historians' contributions to digital mapping on a macro-regional scale. We hope that conference participants will contribute their expertise, discuss their experiences of cross-disciplinary collaborations and publications, and learn from each other's research for their future endeavours.

Logistics

The conference will be held in hybrid format (in-person elements at McGill University in Montreal) on **20-22 May 2026**. Morning (Eastern Standard Time) sessions will be prioritised to facilitate maximum participation from scholars in more eastern time-zones.

Interested scholars should send a **200-300-word abstract** of original research that incorporates digital mapping in an analysis of historical environments, accompanied by a **100-word scholarly biography**, to Philip Gooding (philip.gooding@mcgill.ca) and the Indian Ocean World Centre (iowc@mcgill.ca) by **Friday 30 January 2026**.

The goal is to publish selected conferences paper in a special issue of the *Journal of Indian Ocean World Studies*. The deadline for submission of full papers will be **Friday August 2026.** We hope that the conference will be generative of new questions and perspectives, and that it will provide participants with useful feedback to turn their conference papers into peer-reviewed journal articles aimed at an interdisciplinary audience.