Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme

Herlihy, David, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, R. Burr Litchfield, and Anthony Molho, eds. Online Catasto of 1427. Database

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Herlihy, David, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, R. Burr Litchfield, and Anthony Molho, eds.
Online Catasto of 1427. Database.
Providence, RI: Brown University, 2002. Accessed 29 September 2022.
cds.library.brown.edu/projects/catasto.

The Online Catasto of 1427 site presents the work of David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, principal investigators of the Census and Property Survey of Florentine Dominions in the Province of Tuscany, 1427–1480. It provides a database derived from the printed census inventories (the *Campioni*) located in the Archivio di Stato di Firenze. The Florentine state passed the Catasto census by law in 1427 to understand and tax its population in a period of demographic stabilization following waves of the plague. The resulting social, financial, and spatial data have supported decades of scholarship on issues of demographics, patronage, class, and gender at the heart of the Italian Renaissance.

Online Catasto was among the first projects to demonstrate the potential marriage of census data with computational humanities. Herlihy pursued goals of "serial history" shared with the French *Annales* school, among others. Online Catasto and related works use digitization to automate, expedite, and enrich an otherwise tedious process of tabulation. More recent projects like DECIMA (decima-map.net) have published datasets for the 1551, 1561, and 1632 censuses and have incorporated GIS to enrich both the data and user experience.[1] "Seeing like a state" naturally gathers human data into quantifiable categories that work well in a digital environment.

The 2002 Online Catasto SQL search interface has few of the bells and whistles of later web development, but that does mean it has survived better than many later generation tools. Users have the option to search by string inputs for family name, sex, or age with Boolean operators. Further features include sorts and subsorts as well as the ability to limit the fields (columns) and overall number of records (rows) returned. This search user interface is straightforward and appropriate for even novice database users and remains applicable for researchers of all levels. Instructors can easily assign names from

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1. Online Catasto of 1427 provides a rough schematic map based upon the Buonsignori map (1584) as well, but it only serves to illustrate the layout of the city with reference to the location codes in the database.

readings or lectures for students to research. The resulting data can be used to compare the value of assets across categories for a given individual or family, or to juxtapose different groups in each time slice. Searching for the family name "Alberti," for example, returns 21 individuals presented in a basic table consisting of the chosen fields (e.g., "series," "location," "sex," "age," "marital status"). Consulting the codebook reveals that series "1" indicates that the majority of the Alberti can be found within the original 1427 Catasto, as opposed to its 1428 and 1429 supplements. Similarly, the value "23" in the "location" field indicates that most of the Alberti resided in the Leon Nero neighborhood (*gonfalone*) in the Florentine quarter of Santa Croce.[2]

Determining the relations among individuals requires further inference, as it would for the original sources. The site provides a map of the locations in the dataset and a few pre-rendered lists showing name counts and household wealth rankings drawn from the database. Associated scholarship by Herlihy, Klapisch-Zuber, and the other editors provide further insights into the fifteenth-century categories. The codebook also offers explanations for more arcane field names such as "bocche" (literally "mouths" in Italian).

Tables can be manually copied into a spreadsheet program for further filtering and quantification, but more technically advanced users may wish to engage with the SQL data directly. Unfortunately, there is no direct download or link to the data on the site, but a link on the "About" page references data hosting and distribution by the Data and Program Library Service of the University of Wisconsin (see disc.wisc.edu/archive/catasto). The data is still available for download after a free registration, which leads to an ominous "Are You Sure?" prompt akin to "Here Be Dragons." The search interface significantly smooths data design originally intended for use with older statistical programs.

Understanding these "dragons" requires appreciating the long and varied history of the project. Online Catasto is intertwined with the life and legacy of historian David Herlihy (1930–91), who pioneered using the UNIVAC computer system for his work on medieval demography. He largely worked by hand to transcribe and encode the data, the analysis of which supported the groundbreaking book (co-authored with project editor Christiane

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2. For the codebook, see "Codebook of the 1427–29 Catasto Data File for Florence" (cds.library.brown.edu/projects/catasto/newsearch/catasto_codebook.html).

Klapisch-Zuber), *Tuscans and Their Families*.[3] Herlihy's colleague at Brown University, project editor R. Burr Litchfield, describes how Herlihy began his work with the Florentine Catasto of 1427–29 soon after moving to the University of Wisconsin in 1964. Herlihy continued work on the database through his presidency of the American Historical Association and until his death in 1991.[4]

Transitioning from punch-card binaries and early statistics software to a web-based database results in data eccentricities. The most evident example is the persistence of numerical coding in place of string data: human interpretation requires constant reference to the codebook. The Online Catasto site nonetheless provides good background, starting in Litchfield's "Note" and continued in the codebook, conveniently available in Italian translation. Take surnames, for example: the common social practice of describing an individual by their profession is never fully reconcilable with organization by familial patronymic. Litchfield's encouragement to users to exercise "care and ingenuity in their research" holds true across any early modern dataset.

Finally, without venturing too far from Online Catasto, it is worth mentioning a related project, Online Tratte of Office Holders 1282–1532 (cds.library.brown.edu/projects/tratte). While conceptually (and hyper-) linked, the two databases remain largely separate. The database of the Giornali of the Tratte (the original records of office-holders drawn by lot) was Herlihy's later work, published by colleagues R. Burr Litchfield and Anthony Molho. There are many caveats for working with the Tratte data, however, which Litchfield warns is "not a final answer to the problems presented by Florentine names and office holding."[5] While daunting, reconciling the Tratte database with the Catasto database in a single search function would greatly enrich the user experience of both. The translation of this data into a more easily accessible (and downloadable) format also seems a logical next step for future researchers.

I can nonetheless only recommend the Online Catasto project as a useful research and teaching tool for digital early modernists as well as an instructive

3. Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and Their Families*.

4. See "A Note on David Herlihy's Computer Files" (cds.library.brown.edu/projects/catasto/newsearch/note_on_herlihy_files.html).

5. See "Notes on the Coding and Editing of the Data File" (cds.library.brown.edu/projects/tratte/doc/NNcoding.html), para. 9.

model of the way practices, technologies, and labour shape digital preservation. The Online Catasto of 1427 is a monumental digital historical work that remains relevant and functional half a century after its initial conceptualization.

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Work Cited

Herlihy, David, and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber. *Tuscans and Their Families: A Study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985.