
Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Terpstra, Nicholas, and Colin Rose, principal investigators.
Digitally Encoded Census Information & Mapping Archive
(DECIMA). Other

Andrea Gazzoni

Volume 44, Number 3, Summer 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1085830ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i3.37999>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Gazzoni, A. (2021). Review of [Terpstra, Nicholas, and Colin Rose, principal investigators. Digitally Encoded Census Information & Mapping Archive (DECIMA). Other]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 44(3), 219–222. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i3.37999>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2022

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

shared with classmates, families, and even with the city's own inhabitants. Open-source architectures do not necessarily prevent app creators from controlling the contents. While alternative versions of an app like Hidden Florence could be “forked” by the community as independent variants and made available as progressive web applications, the developers would still conserve the authority to decide whether any of these new features should be added to future updates of the original app.

Open-source and platform-agnostic architectures promise to help geohistorical content management systems to reach their full potential. In the meantime, students, tourists, and Florentines can benefit from a compelling and user-friendly solution that successfully brings state-of-the-art scholarship to new audiences.

CLÉMENT GODBARGE

Harvard University

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i3.37998>

Terpstra, Nicholas, and Colin Rose, principal investigators.

**Digitally Encoded Census Information & Mapping Archive (DECIMA).
Other.**

Toronto: University of Toronto / St. Catharines, ON: Brock University, 2010.
Accessed 4 June 2021.

decima-map.net.

Begun in 2010 by Nicholas Terpstra, the Digitally Encoded Census Information & Mapping Archive (DECIMA) is an ongoing project that until now has geo-referenced the data of three censuses of Florence (1551, 1561, 1632) to create a searchable ArcGIS map, the base layer of which is a high-resolution reproduction of the axonometric view of the city etched in 1584 by Stefano Buonsignori. The primary purpose of DECIMA is to serve as a platform for the study of urban dynamics in early modern Florence; on a more general level, it also aims to explore how archival information can be encoded and made more accessible through GIS mapping. As indicated by the acronym DECIMA (Digitally Encoded Census Information & Mapping Archive), the project stands at the intersection of two modes of encoding: census and cartography.

As the “Project Introduction” outlines, *decima* in both Italian and Latin means “one tenth,” a 10 percent tax that has a long history from ancient Rome to early modern Europe; it was in fact a property value tax that gave the 1561 census of Florence its name: *Decima granducale*.¹

The DECIMA map is based on a three-fold dataset whose origin, organization, and purpose are well illustrated on the website. To give an idea of the extent of the data processed for the map, it suffices to say that the 1551 census refers to 11,743 households with twenty-seven fields per entry; the 1561 census refers to 8,691 parcels of property (e.g., houses or shops) with sixty-six fields per entry; and the 1632 census refers to 14,715 households with thirty-one fields per entry. The information held by each item is demographic (owners, residents, tenants, and their job, status, and gender), spatial (street, parish, quarters, minor administrative bodies), and economic (value, rent, types of contracts).² Moreover, many items contain extra information about people and activities located there, especially about the occupations of the residents of a given unit. The dataset contains even more subcategories, as well as uncategorized information; not all of them are visible through the map by default, although all data are searchable and locatable on the map via the Attribute Table and the Data Query tool.³

The map brilliantly takes advantage of the possibilities offered by ArcGIS. First, there is a variety of layers through which users can navigate and search the map. The layers most important for their abundance of information are those based on the 1561 census, but other layers can be profitably used to add key details (e.g., quarters and streets) or to visualize further historical data (e.g., the locations of the *potenze*, namely the groups of workers to which the Grand Duke of Florence commissioned the census of a given area of the city). Other layers, such as the Savonarolan Soundscapes (YouTube videos with music from the age of Savonarola) and the Digital Florence Projects (short descriptions

1. The 1551 and 1632 censuses, not for direct tax purposes, were in fact called *descrizioni* (descriptions). The DECIMA project actually began from the 1561 *Decima* census, which on the map still appears as its primary dataset.

2. Economic information is provided only by the 1561 census, the only one ordered for direct tax purposes.

3. Through the Data Query, the dataset can be searched by owner, shop, property value, number of residents (general or male or female), and sex workers (i.e., parishes, streets, or areas where they were allowed to work).

of and links to other DH projects on early modern Florence), appear to be relatively peripheral, even though they do offer more than a glimpse of other interesting aspects of Florentine life. Finally, Buonsignori's aerial view of the city, which serves as the base layer onto which the socio-economic archive of the censuses is encoded, is in itself a beautiful visual archive of Florentine life.

On such bases, what can DECIMA say, and to whom? This kind of GIS map typically does not spell out new interpretations of the encoded information, leaving such a task for users already expert in one of the scholarly fields addressed by the map, such as urban studies in early modern Europe or Florentine history. What the map does provide, instead, is a platform for enhancing scholarly investigation of the dataset through a set of multiple configurations, all of them dealing with socio-economic issues in the urban setting of Florence. Most likely, only users highly educated in history and in digital mapping may use DECIMA as a tool leading to new patterns and discoveries about Florence's urban life.⁴ On the other hand, the primary purpose of a repertoire-like map such as DECIMA is documentary rather than hermeneutic; therefore, the fact that this map makes documentary sources accessible and displays them through documentary visualization is, in itself, a great merit.

Users can play with the interface of DECIMA at different levels of complexity. Those already familiar with ArcGIS will instantly recognize many of its typical tools and functions: users can play with layers, data query, and attribute tables, but they can also generate charts, select a customized portion of the map to work on, measure distances, and print or bookmark a particular visualization or set of search results. It is also true that the meaning of some features of the interface, especially of some of its layers, may not be self-evident to a non-specialist, as there is some lack of explicit information and instruction about certain layers and tools. For instance, while the description of the dataset and of its processing is thorough and precise, the "How to Use DECIMA" pages leave the non-specialist (either in GIS or in Florentine history) somewhat unguided. Moreover, to better appreciate the growth of DECIMA, we would certainly welcome a more detailed documentation of the development of the project, with a timeline or description of its stages and updates. Nevertheless, other pages do users an invaluable service by clarifying context and vocabulary

4. The website documents the research results of the DECIMA team by providing, in the "Publications" page, references to a volume as well as a number of articles, conference papers, and lectures.

(e.g., with a glossary that gives the English translation of the Italian words that constitute the dataset) or by showing the many ramifications of the research work done so far by the DECIMA team. Another strength of the website is that it provides useful documentation about the technology used for the map (ArcGIS) and a most useful list of resources such as affiliated projects and bibliographical references in a variety of fields, including 3D modelling, urban history, social history, online mapping, Florentine architecture, early modern maps, and cartography.

In conclusion, DECIMA is a project both wide-ranging and field-specific, which is of potential interest to researchers who intend to explore the history of early modern Florence. DECIMA opens new avenues of research in digital mapping and in the re-encoding of archival information.

ANDREA GAZZONI

Independent scholar

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i3.37999>

Prickman, Greg, Andrew Holland, and Robert Shepard, project team.
The Atlas of Early Printing. Other.

Iowa City: University of Iowa Libraries, 2008. Accessed 14 May 2021.
atlas.lib.uiowa.edu.

Background

The Atlas of Early Printing is an interactive map that integrates data found in common bibliographic catalogues of fifteenth-century printing with GIS technology to present a novel teaching resource. This interactive map visualization provides users with the ability to situate early printing history at a given place and time within a cultural context. The atlas is built upon digital versions of multiple scholarly sources, a primary resource being the *Incunabula Short Title Catalog* (ISTC; data.cerl.org/istc/_search).

The atlas went online initially in 2008, was updated in 2013 and again in 2019, expanding from the basic map points based on data found in the *ISTC* to the addition of ecclesiastical borders and other information, including the