For the attention of :

Members of the Atelier Généalogique's scientific monitoring committee (inaugurated in 2022) :

- Biagio Salvemini: full professor of modern history at the University Aldo Moro of Bari (chairman)
- **Leonardo Casalino**, professor of modern and contemporary Italian civilisation, Laboratoire Universitaire Histoire Cultures Italie Europe (LUHCIE) of the University of Grenoble.
- **Anne-Marie Granet-Abisset**, professor of contemporary history at the University of Grenoble Alpes and delegated director of UMR5190 of LARHRA (Rhône-Alpes historical research laboratory)
- **Stéphane Mourlane**, lecturer in contemporary history, Aix Marseille University
- Matteo Sanfilippo, Professor of Modern History, University of Viterbo, coordinator of the journals "Studi Emigrazione" and "Archivio storico dell'emigrazione italiana"
- **Professor Eric Vial**, Professor of Contemporary History, University of Cergy-Paris
- **Catherine Virlouvet**, professor emeritus, University of Aix Marseille, former director (2011-2019) of the Ecole Française de Rome

Combining genealogical and historical research: toward establishing de facto rights for individuals to know their personal origins

Abstract

This article sets out the Atelier Généalogique's methodology for combining historical and genealogical research, with the ultimate goal of producing a *de facto* right for individuals to know their origins, in compliance with existing principles of European and international law. The author relates how this methodology was originally developed in the context of small-scale artisanal fisheries, notably through the work of Professor John Kurien at the Centre for Development Studies in Trivandrum, and subsequently applied to the field of maritime labour rights in cooperation with Professor Patrick Chaumette of the university of Nantes. The methodology consists in documenting insufficiently articulated grassroots knowledge in a way that can be recognized by planners and legislators, leading to the production of *de facto* rights without necessarily requiring formal legislation at the outset. The formulation of international policy can also result.

The fundamental issue in our field is the difficulty – and often the impossibility – for individuals to access the archival records that document their family history, and for historians to exploit these records in a systematic and nominative manner. The central hypothesis is that full-text indexation of archival sources, supported by artificial intelligence but necessarily combined with the active participation of local actors and university students, constitutes the key instrument for overcoming these obstacles. At the same time, full-text indexation can provide the structured and searchable data required for the development of an international database capable of supporting the writing of a nominative history of emigration, with the secure architecture required to garantee compliance with *privacy* laws. The participation of academic networks and institutional support can therefore be expected in order to reach these goals.

Introduction

Following 7 years' association with historians, and at a time when the Atelier Généalogique is seeking to collaborate with the American Familysearch corporation in order to access crucial indexation by AI technology, it seems appropriate to take stock. A question which naturally springs to mind is : what does the Atelier Généalogique have to offer Familysearch in return ?

First of all, the proposed collaboration between the Atelier Généalogique and Familysearch would enable Familysearch to participate in the digitisation and indexation of more than 1000 registers held at Trani, thanks to the authorisation received in June 2024 by CRIAT (Centro di Ricerca Interuniversitario per l'Analisi del Territorio) from the DGA (Direzione Generale Archivi) in Rome. Moreover, such a collaboration would show how the combination of historical and genealogical research could overcome various difficulties regarding access to Italian archives and thereby receive firm support from many quarters: not just from our university partners, but also the ministry of cultural affairs and other ministries in both Italy and France, the European Union and other institutions. Publishing the results on Familysearch's website would enable the partners to reach their common goal to allow the descendants of Italians who emigrated to find evidence of their roots, free of charge,

Origins of our methodology combining grassroots knowledge and academic expertise

The methodology proposed by the Atelier Généalogique is rooted in my 20 years' experience of international cooperation. At the outset, Professor John Kurien at the Centre for Development Studies in Trivandrum, India, initiated a movement according to which university researchers devoted their time to cohabitation with small-scale artisanal fishers in order to understand and express their problems and aspirations, with a view to their contribution to the national economy of India being recognised. This methodology was extended to all continents of this planet by the organisation in Rome in 1984 of a parallel conference to that of the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations), which was being held at the same time in order to formulate the world fisheries policies for the next few decades. Artisanal fishers of all continents were represented at the parallel conference in Rome, in which I participated as translator and interpreter. "*Pescadores del mundo !" :* the speeches of the artisanal fishers resounded in the Piazza Navona that summer…and during the following years the realities and demands of the fishers were well-documented and presented to the FAO. Thus the essential rights of a largely illiterate artisanal fishing population, including the women, were gradually taken into consideration. It was in order to apply this methodology that the ICSF (International Collective in Support of Fishworkers) was created in Trivandrum in 1986, of which I was a founder member. In my capacity as the coordinator of an international maritime programme that I set up for the Paris-based French Catholic Committee against Hunger and for Development (CCFD), I was able to gather support for the ICSF for about ten years.

A similar methodology was applied in the 1990s and early 2000s through the cooperation between Professor Patrick Chaumette, a specialist of Maritime social law at the University of Nantes, French inspectors of the ITF (International Transport Workers' Federation) – of which

I was the coordinator for France from 1996 to 2004 -, and the Seafarers' Centres operating within the worldwide network of the Apostleship of the Sea. With Professor Chaumette, we set up an *Observatoire des Droits des Marins (*Observatory of Seafarers' Rights) to combine grassroots experience and knowledge with academic legal expertise. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Soviet fleet of merchant vessels was disbanded and left to be bought up by businessmen who had no consideration for the working conditions of the seafarers who worked on their ships, which mostly flew flags of convenience. Through the *Observatoire*, information was relayed to Professor Chaumette that enabled him to write learned legal articles that contributed to the formulation of the 2006 Maritime Labour Convention by the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

In the Piazza Navona, Rome 1984

With Pope John-Paul II at the Vatican in 1984 : I'm top left, John Kurien is bottom left.

Toward a *de facto* right to know one's origins

Our Corato Emigration Project – otherwise known as *'A Tale of two twinned cities : Corato and Grenoble'* - aims essentially to institute a *de facto* right for people to know their origins. This right does not exist in France, where anonymous childbirth is declared legal, and genetic genealogy declared illegal. The situation is no better in Italy, where many archives are inaccessible and the stringent *privacy* laws seem to be put in place to discourage people from seeking access to the registers that concern them. The data in those registers would likely not be accessible because of insufficient personnel, and deterioration of manual indexing since 1866.

Our conviction is that a *de facto* right for people to know their origins is the common denominator between the ability of people to find the authentic records of their family history and the ability for historians to write the nominative history of emigration. Such a right is consistent with article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and other articles of international law within the United Nations system. Collaboration between Familysearch and the Atelier Généalogique would surely add fuel to the on-going evolution of the notions of a person's right to know his or her origins. Full-text indexation by AI, surmounting deficient or absent manual indexing, is analogous, for example, to the revelation to the Observatory of Seafarers' Rights of the real-life problems faced by seafarers on ships flying flags of convenience, in particular when the ships and their crews were abandoned in ports around the world. In other words, full-text indexing, by making archive data available, can create a *de facto* right to know one's origins, leading in time to more formal legislation. In France, in particular, the methodology proposed for the collaboration between Familysearch and the Atelier Généalogique could contribute to the eventual abolition of anonymous birth and the legalization of DNA testing.

Combining full-text indexation with academic partnerships to set in operation an international database on emigration from Puglia

The methodology proposed requires a solid genealogical base to be effective : this is the case where the development by the Atelier Généalogique of an *albero genealogico coratino* is concerned, comprising 29,000 inter-connected people, mostly descendants of emigrants, coupled with a database of more than 30,000 photos of authentic records. The hypothesis is that Familysearch's technical indexing capability by artificial intelligence could be combined with the informal partnerships the Atelier Généalogique has built up over a period of 7 years with various university professors and historians committed to the principle of writing a nominative history of emigration. The build-up of the academic partnerships was as follows :

In the first instance, from 2019 onwards, Professor Catherine Virlouvet supported the project by introducing the author to a group of eminent Italian and French historians working on migration ; subsequently she greatly encouraged the Atelier to get involved in the digitisation of archives. The historians she recommended all participated in a webinar that the Atelier Généalogique organised in September 2021 on the subject of popular participation in the writing of emigration history. The main speaker was Stéphane Mourlane, a migration historian at Aix-Marseille

university; all the historians who participated in the webinar agreed to become members of the Atelier's scientific monitoring committee (see their names above), which was officialised in the summer of 2022, under the chairmanship of Professor Biagio Salvemini of the Aldo Moro university in Bari.

Following this, in September 2022, at the author's *alma mater,* Pembroke College, Oxford, Guido Bonsaver, Professor of Italian cultural history, and Brian A'hearn, a tutor in economics specialising in questions that concerned northern Italy, expressed their interest in the Atelier's work. Professor Bonsaver suggested that the Atelier could propose to Professor Biagio Salvemini to set up an international database on emigration from Puglia.

Professor Salvemini accepted this suggestion and asked the author to deliver a paper at a conference that was organised by CRIAT in Bari in March 2023. His communication was entitled : *"100 years on: could an international database help to assess what the massive emigration of Coratini to the Grenoble area has contributed to the latter's socio-economic and cultural development*"? The author stressed that many, if not most of the 7450 officially recorded emigrants from Corato to Grenoble from 1920 to 1960 (not counting the illegals !) would, like the fishers, have been illiterate, that their contribution to the development of Grenoble was often said to have been great – especially in the area of construction – but that it was still virtually undocumented. Angela Barbanente, the president of CRIAT, a coalition of four *pugliesi* universities[1], responded to the communication with a decision to create this international database "with enthusiasm".

In 2023, thanks to an incipient partnership between the university of Bari and the Corato municipality, a doctoral student was allowed to access the town's archives. In November of that year, with the university's encouragement, the Atelier Généalogique was asked by the Mayor of Corato to digitize the passport applications of would-be emigrants from 1920 to 1960.

Subsequently, in February 2024, during a webinar organised by Professor Salvemini with seven Italian historians, the Atelier Généalogique's work was described and discussed. Among the participating historians were two from CNR ISMed in Naples, who concluded that the work was interesting, but lacked the essential indexation which would enable historians to make immediate use of the data that had been collected.

It is a fact that all the Atelier's accesses to unpublished genealogical data have been achieved thanks to informal partnerships with university historians. Clearly, Familysearch possesses the crucial indexation technology which would enable the Atelier's university partners to create a database architecture that would guarantee both its effectiveness and its security. With this indexation, the ISMed academics in Naples, database specialists who are also working on migration studies, would surely cooperate to make operational the CRIAT international database.

In the meantime, Stéphane Mourlane, as scientific commissioner for the *Ciao Italia* exhibition owned by the French National Museum of Immigration History, recommended that the Atelier

[1] CRIAT (Interuniversity Research Center for Territorial Analysis), a coalition composed of the Aldo Moro and Politecnico universities of Bari, Salento, and Foggia.

Généalogique produce 3 new exhibition panels on emigration from Corato to Grenoble. This was done in May 2025 in French and Italian versions and praised by the Museum, thanks entirely to the contribution of input from descendants of coratini emigrants, with the support of the Cities of Grenoble and Corato.

How the Atelier Généalogique could help Familysearch correct and adapt indexation results

During the author's presentation of the *Corato Emigration Project* at the Oakland Family History Center on March 26 2026, it was made clear that the essential genealogical goals of Familysearch and the Atelier Généalogique, to enable both local people and the Coratino diaspora to connect with their roots in the most efficient way possible, and free of charge, were absolutely identical. There is also one aspect of the Atelier's project which could help Familysearch to improve the results of indexation by artificial intelligence.

In effect, one of the directions taken by the Atelier Généalogique over the last few months has been to work out how its action can be restructured to enable university students, whether Italian or foreign, to participate as volunteers in the digitisation of the registers held in Trani and also to correct the indexation by artificial intelligence and, in doing so, gain points towards their diplomas. This was discussed in the presence of the Familysearch Experience Manager, Cristian Mannino, during the Atelier's webinar on September 23 2025, co-organised with Professor Catherine Virlouvet, with the participation of Annastella Carrino, representing the Atelier's university partners at the department of Modern History of the Aldo Moro University of Bari. The possibility of student participation has also been discussed with the Atelier's contacts at the University of Oxford. In fact, an academic movement could be created aimed at solving in solidarity the problems existing in the archives in Italy, as revealed by a debate initiated on *tuttogenealogia.it* in February 2023 by the Atelier's genealogical correspondent in Corato, Mariella Tarricone : https://www.tuttogenealogia.it/viewtopic.php?t=21247, and confirmed by the distinguished. archivist *cavaliere* Michele Grimaldi in November 2023. It was Dr Grimaldi who encouraged Biagio Salvemini to ask the DGA for the digitization authorization, with the support of Dr Adriano Buzzanca, the regional director of the State Archive.

Proposed actions that could set in operation the CRIAT international database on the history of emigration

Clearly, it is the participation of Familysearch in the digitization of the more than 1000 1911-1938 Civil State registers held at the Trani branch of the Archivio di Stato that could be the immediate solid foundation of a cooperation with the Atelier Généalogique, based on the authorization obtained by CRIAT in June 2024.

Familysearch could also help to advance without delay the setting in operation of the international database on emigration from Puglia that CRIAT decided to create in March 2023. This could be done by allowing a connection between the Civil State data that has been indexed and the migration, census, military, and other data that has also been indexed by Familysearch. A

contribution to the database could be the *Matching System* devised by the Atelier's collaborator Rafael Caterina : https://www.emigrazione-corato.org/medias/files/corato-indexing-and-matching-system-250707-copie-2.pdf.

Familysearch could also seek to index the large number of *Catasti Onciari* which were digitised by the Archivio di Stato 20 years ago, and disseminate the results worldwide. In the immediate future, as an initiative that could have great symbolic value, Familysearch could also index and disseminate worldwide the handwritten indexes of the parish archives of Corato (which we put online in July 2025) in anticipation, hopefully, of the parish archives themselves being made available online at some point in the future. If this symbolic indexation were extended also to the Corato *Catasto Onciario,* it would enable advances in the short term which were described in this article by Giancarlo Mainardi : https://www.emigrazione-corato.org/medias/files/corato-dec25-v9.1-en.pdf

In the final instance, it is both the experienced advice and effective participation of the Atelier Généalogique's scientific monitoring committee, validating the described methodology, combined with the necessary knowledge and application of Familysearch's priorities and contractual obligations, that hold the key to the success of a partnership within the Corato Emigration Project. Such a partnership would surely be exemplary in the Italian context, no doubt justifying the efforts required to overcome whatever difficulties that might arise.

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