

TRAVELOGUES: Perceptions of the Other and the Orient in Modern Times
A Mixed-method Approach for the Analysis of Large-scale Travel Account Series

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Travelogues are a highly important source for historical research. They can provide information about other societies, cultures, and religions and also allow insights about the authors and their sociocultural background. However, the heterogeneous origins of these texts, written by different authors, from pilgrims to explorers and scholars, from diplomats to early tourists, about journeys of diverse aims—e.g. commercial, political, leisure—as well as different intended audiences make them a highly challenging source. Thus previous research has considered travelogues as individual testimonies of individual travels of individual people.

This interdisciplinary history and digital humanities project looks at a dominant theme within travelogues, namely the perception of the Other, by analyzing an extensive collection travelogues, originally written in the German language, covering the period from 1500 until 1875. It brings together a team of researchers from the disciplines of history, computer science, as well as library and information science from Austria and Germany. They will jointly develop a novel mixed qualitative and quantitative method for the serial analysis of large-scale corpora and apply that method on a comprehensive corpus of several thousand digitized German-language travelogues drawn from the Austrian Books Online project (ca. 600,000 books) of the Austrian National Library in Vienna. The focus is on the employment and usage of the Other in travelogues about the Orient, which encompasses the former Ottoman and Persian Empires.

This project seeks answers to the following three guiding questions:

- What are the characteristic features and structures of travelogues?
- How is the perception of the Other expressed, and which narrative techniques and sentiments can be identified?
- Which perceptions of the Orient are depicted, how do they relate to the discourses of the Orient, and how have they evolved over time?

The project develops a novel serial analysis method and tools that support historians in systematically analyzing digitized travelogues. To handle the data, scalable text-mining algorithms that engage with the characteristics, contents, and relationships of travelogue collections are developed. We extend these tools by building a database of travelogues and developing a novel adaptive topic-modeling technique that helps historians identify and understand large document volumes. To detect, contextualize, and analyze expressions of otherness, we will investigate a novel neural-network-based expression-detection approach that continuously learns from user feedback.

The support of these digital methods enables the involved researchers to conduct a cross-temporal analysis of how the Other was perceived and described in German travelogues. Moreover, the developed tools are easily adaptable to other purposes, thus providing the base for further research in other areas.