JTH Special Issue: Railways, Empire, and Visual Representations

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Railways, Empire, and Visual Representations: Perspectives across Imperial-Colonial Contexts

This proposed special issue investigates the visual representations of railways and railway architecture in imperial and colonial contexts. Railways were key transportation infrastructures that shaped nation-building processes in the nineteenth century and facilitated the establishment and consolidation of colonial control. They were seen as instruments of progress, civilisation, and modernity, and this narrative was projected in imperial contexts, such as the British, German, French, and Austro-Hungarian Empires, and even more strongly in railway developments in colonial contexts in Asia and Africa. Railway projects also played an important role in informal imperialism, as in the Ottoman Empire and Latin America, where external imperial actors exercised forms of influence other than formal territorial control, creating networks of dependency through which they pursued economic, political, and strategic interests. The role of railways in nation-building and imperial expansion has been extensively studied. Building on this, the special issue focuses on how visual representations were entangled with railway construction and participated in legitimising these projects across both formal and informal imperial contexts, as well as the discourses underpinning them. By examining the intersection of railway visuality and imperial practices, this special issue of The Journal of Transport History seeks to address a significant gap in the existing scholarship.

As infrastructures of mobility, railways enabled the circulation of people, military forces, pilgrims, labourers, goods, cultural artefacts, and ideas, while simultaneously forming part of the broader visual, material, and discursive apparatus through which imperial authority and colonial modernity were enacted. Railway infrastructure was represented through texts, sounds, images, and physical artefacts. Railway architecture, such as stations, bridges, and other built elements, became key visual regimes through which the ideological role of railways was articulated and reinforced. At the same time, visual media—including photographs, posters, postcards, paintings, games, and other forms of representation, constituted archives through which imperial-colonial agendas were disseminated and reinforced. As the railway historian Ian Kerr points out, "…the study of representation and representations opens up anything surviving from the past…as potential primary sources" (Kerr 2003). Yet their analytical potential remains comparatively underexplored. In distinguishing between representations and representation, Kerr emphasises the importance of studying images and processes—who was representing, how and for whom were the representations made. This proposed issue engages with both these dimensions, with a particular focus on visual narratives of railway infrastructure produced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

during the period of rapid railway expansion.

Linked with this is the issue of archives, where knowledge about railway infrastructures is preserved, constructed, and made visible. Railway archives are vast, reflecting the ambitious scale of widespread railway-building programmes and the extensive knowledge transfer and exchange involved. Beyond technical and administrative records, these archives contain a rich visual repertoire—including plans, maps, photographs, and drawings that shaped perceptions of railway development and its imperial significance. Approached critically, these materials reveal the complexities of decision-making processes and the active negotiations of multiple state and non-state actors, challenging simplified metropole–periphery binaries. This volume explores how these visual and material archives are interpreted, contested, and reconfigured within post-colonial contexts.

Along with physical and digital archives and museums, railway buildings, particularly stations, become key containers of knowledge. Railway stations were built to "signify"—be it the achievements of new technology and/or of imperial-colonial prowess. They served as "cathedrals of modernity" (Richards and MacKenzie 1986), gateways to cities and markers of new nations. The complex symbolism associated with railway stations was reflected in their architecture, design and layout, and their elaborate sculptural programmes. The meanings associated with railway stations evolved and became more nuanced over time with use, changing technology, and transforming socio-political-economic contexts. The railway stations thus also become rich visual archives to decode questions of agency and representation not just in colonial contexts, but through examining their (dis)continued uses and functions today.

This special volume follows on from the workshop titled "Railway Representations in Imperial--Colonial Contexts: Decoding Visual Epistemologies in the Mediterranean and Beyond", held in Cottbus in November 2025, organised through a collaboration between the Institute of Building History and Art History at the Brandenburg University of Technology Cottbus-Senftenberg and Research Group MEDMACH (Machinery Rooms of the Mediterranean: Images and Visual Archives of Movement and Acceleration, 1800-present), funded by the European Union, at Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf (https://medmach.hypotheses.org/files/2025/11/Cottbus-Workshop_Detailed-Programme-07112025.pdf).

Drawing on the outcomes of this workshop, which took the Mediterranean as a point of departure, the proposed special issue expands both the geographical and thematic scope by inviting contributions from scholars working across the Mediterranean and beyond, including Africa, Asia, Australia, and Latin America, bringing together diverse imperial and colonial contexts. We seek articles that critically interrogate visual sources in the study of imperial and colonial transport infrastructures using interdisciplinary methodologies and approaches, including but not limited to visual and material culture analysis, architectural and art-historical methods, spatial and cartographic perspectives, and critical readings of photography, representation, and archival practices.

The special issue foregrounds a transregional perspective and examines the circulation of knowledge and shared visual practices across diverse imperial and colonial networks while simultaneously exploring local appropriations, adaptations, contestations, and forms of resistance. We particularly welcome contributions that highlight Indigenous and marginalised local perspectives and

focus on forms of knowledge, visuality, and agency that challenge or complicate dominant imperial and colonial representations.

The scope of this volume extends to the afterlives of railway infrastructures in post-imperial contexts, where their meanings and associations may have been reinterpreted, contested, or transformed over time. Museums, heritage sites, and other forms of cultural practices play an important role in shaping these contemporary understandings, raising questions about how railway infrastructures are preserved, curated, and represented. Examining these multiple and layered meanings offers a way of tracing the entangled histories of technology transfer, adaptation, and knowledge exchange across imperial and post-imperial contexts, while also reflecting the ongoing debates around heritage, memory, and decolonisation.

Although visual representations offer important insights into the histories of railway infrastructures, they also demand critical scrutiny. Rather than treating images and visual archives as objective evidence, this volume examines how they constructed particular ways of seeing empire, mobility, and modernity, while simultaneously obscuring alternative experiences, actors, and histories. It therefore considers both the epistemic potential of visual sources and the limitations and silences embedded within them, asking how they may both reinforce and challenge dominant narratives.

Taken together, this special issue contributes to scholarship on how railways simultaneously functioned as transport systems and as visual and material means through which imperial-colonial practices and power relations were imagined, legitimised, contested, archived, and remembered. In doing so, it seeks to develop shared methodologies for critically engaging with visual sources in order to reassess notions of metropole and periphery, nation-building, and modernity, and reflect on the ruptures, continuities, and entanglements of imperial and colonial legacies in post-imperial and post-colonial contexts.

Questions that individual papers may explore include, but are not limited to:
-What can visual representations of railway infrastructures reveal about the relationship between mobility, power, and imperial authority in formal and informal imperial contexts?
-In what ways did railway stations and other infrastructural architectures function as sites of representation, memory, and imperial or national identity?
-To what extent can visual and material archives of railway infrastructure challenge dominant imperial and colonial narratives and recover Indigenous, local, and everyday perspectives?
-What do visual archives of railway infrastructures reveal about the actors, negotiations, knowledge transfers, and power relations underlying imperial and colonial railway projects?
-How are visual and material archives of railway infrastructures preserved, interpreted, and mobilised in post-imperial contexts and through contemporary heritage, memory, and decolonial practices?

This special issue will be guest-edited by Dr. Shraddha Bhatawadekar, Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf, Prof. Dr. Turgut Saner, Brandenburg University of Technology Cottbus-Senftenberg, and Prof. Dr. Eva-Maria Troelenberg, Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf, who will select papers (with JTH´s editorship) based on their thematic fit, originality, and scholarly rigour.

Abstract deadline: 31 October 2026

Your abstract should include:
1.Name, affiliation, and email address
2.Short biography (150 words)
3.A 500-word abstract, including the article title, research question(s), key theme(s) addressed, an outline of the case study and central argument(s), and a brief statement of the relevance of the chosen topic
Please send the required materials as a single PDF document to Dr. Shraddha Bhatawadekar shraddha.bhatawadekar@hhu.de.

The authors will be notified of the acceptance status of their proposals approximately four weeks after the deadline.

The deadline for the submission of full articles will be 31 March 2027.
Full papers should be submitted before 31 March 2027 through JTH's platform (https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/jtrh). The articles (up to 8,000 words, including footnotes and abstract, but excluding references) must be based on original archival research and primary sources.

Papers will be subject to a double-anonymised review process. About JTH, its indexing and metrics and submissions guideline refer to https://journals.sagepub.com/home/jth.

Queries before the abstract submission date can be directed to guest editors.

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