

The State of Historical Network Research: A Perspective from the 2024 Conference

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Introduction to the conference

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A community around historical network analysis

The phenomena studied by the historical sciences are, by their very nature, complex situations: they involve, for example, interwoven personal relationships, collective dynamics that structure social and cultural space, or political and economic systems that operate at local and global levels. The network metaphor is frequently used to describe this entanglement. In recent decades, however, historians have begun to think about ways of formalizing this approach, appropriating the concepts and tools of graph theory to provide a new perspective on archives. The application of formal network analysis to history is now a highly fertile field of experimentation and research. It can be used to analyze the geographical logics of major circulation networks, to highlight brokers in affiliation networks, to compile family trees to reveal their points of contact, to study the occurrences and co-occurrences of concepts in serial texts, to show the evolution of personal social networks, etc. And through a great deal of empirical work, the specific features that historical disciplines bring to network science become apparent: particular attention to the modeling of data that is often incomplete and uncertain, the need to take account of temporality in all its finesse, the necessity to find a language that allows mathematical results to be interpreted in a qualitative narrative.

In 2009, following a workshop dedicated to the application of social network analysis to history, a small community of practice, the Historical Network Research community was created.¹ It evolved into a series of workshops and then an international conference, of which the present edition is the 9th to date, after conferences in Hamburg (2013), Ghent (2014), Lisbon (2015), Turku (2017), Brno (2018), Luxembourg (2020, 2021) and Mainz (2023). 2013 saw the creation of the HNR Collective Bibliography, a central tool for sharing the community's scientific output.² In 2017, the first issue of JHNR, the Journal of Historical Network Research was published, allowing everyone to share their research in Open Access.³ Other resources include a YouTube channel⁴ with recorded lectures and a newsletter.

The Historical Network Research Community remains, however, a modest initiative, a group of people with vaguely defined boundaries who all share a common research practice: applying the concepts of graph theory and network science to history and reflecting on the impact of such methods on our disciplines. Around a thousand people took part in an HNR conference, of whom around 300 presented a paper (Figure 1). More widely, several thousand people have already attended training courses in historical network analysis given by people involved in HNR. And for which results? The several hundred abstracts from HNR conferences and the first issues of the young JHNR journal give us a first idea of the contours of this research community, just as a slightly broader panorama can be drawn from the thousand titles contained in the shared bibliography. This overview shows a very diverse field, both in terms of subjects and ways of using network analysis. Above all, it shows the great heterogeneity of our practices, and the highly variable degree

¹ <https://historicalnetworkresearch.org/>

² https://www.zotero.org/groups/209983/historical_network_research

³ <https://jhnr.net/>

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC2QFG7uIVxkFQ3xZbohKl-Q>

to which these analyses have been integrated into more traditional historical research. What emerges is an impression of great vitality, of the gradual standardization of these methods, which are still often considered too new to be fully accepted by our peers. At the same time, however, the fragmentation of a field that has not yet really established a common frame of reference is a source of fragility. Now that we seem to have passed the phase where these methods were "fashionable" and reached a plateau of normalization, we need to build on these achievements to make them standard procedures and avoid having to reinvent the same models over and over again.

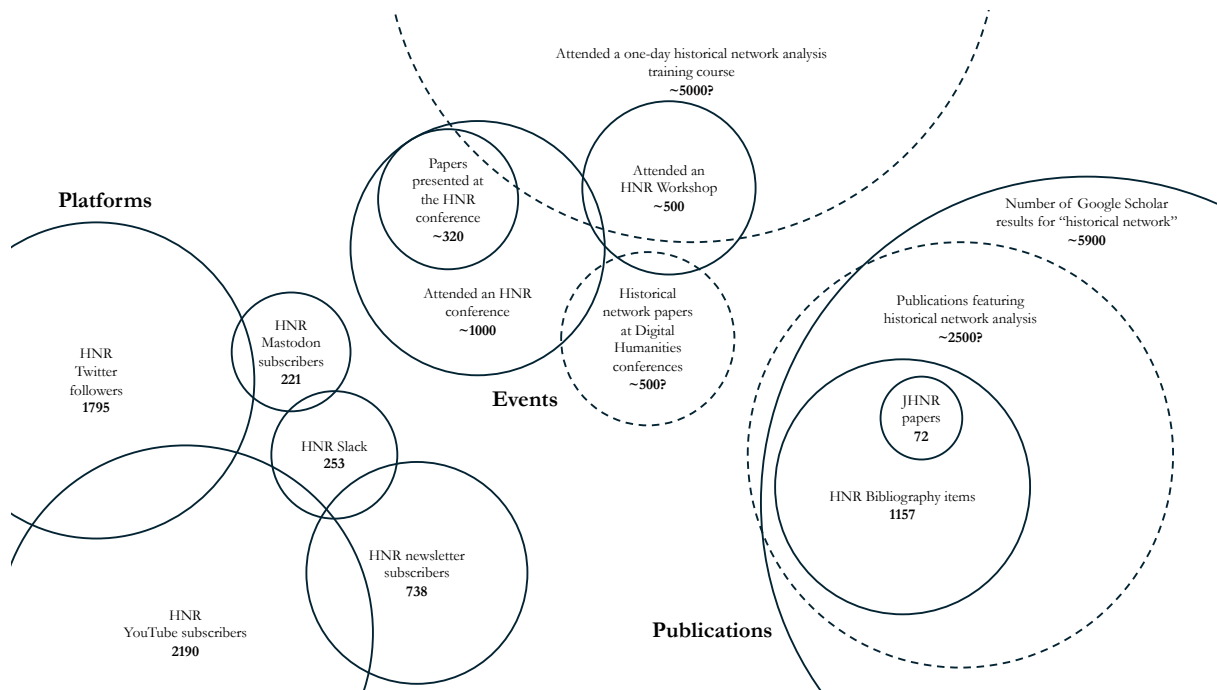


Figure 1. Rough attempt to quantify the HNR community. The dashed circles indicate imprecise estimates.

The HNR2024 Conference

The HNR2024 conference is a continuation of the development of this small community. As such, it is a place where we can observe current trends in our field and identify some of its protagonists. While the previous edition focused on the question of temporality, this year we're particularly interested in our network visualization practices.

Network visualization is often the first thing to be seen, whether it's an illegible but colorful node-link diagram, an elaborate sociogram, an austere matrix or a fancy flow map. Because of our discomfort with basing our interpretation on an object apparently built on somewhat subjective foundations, because they are very likely to be influenced by a graphic bias, we often relegate visualizations to a minor role in our exploratory approaches, preferring the cold (apparent) scientificity of graph metrics. But just because we see naive uses of network visualization doesn't mean it can't be a highly effective tool for understanding, exploring and communicating our research data. One of the ambitions of the conference is therefore to question our use of network visualization in history, a concern that is reflected in particular in the workshops and keynotes.

As for the 45 papers accepted for this conference, they present a colorful and original panorama of what is being done today in historical network analysis. They testify to the diversity of our disciplines and the heterogeneity of our toolbox, while showing varying degrees of sophistication and craftsmanship. A quick tour of the program shows, for example, that in terms of periodization (figures 2 and 4), the more recent the period, the more it is represented: 4 papers for Antiquity, 7 papers for Medieval History (7th-15th centuries), 13 papers for Modern History (16th-18th centuries) and 20 papers for Contemporary History (19th-20th centuries). This indexation is very partial: as it is based on abstracts only, it does not reflect the temporal complexity of the objects covered by these contributions, but it does allow us to take a quick pulse

of our community. The same can be said of the main geographical areas covered by this year's program. Western Europe dominates overwhelmingly, especially around the Italian, French, British and German geographical areas. Switzerland is particularly well represented compared to previous conferences, due to the location of this year's event. And while Northern and Eastern Europe also find their place in the program, there are only a few contributions dealing with the Middle East, but hardly any mention of the rest of Asia, Africa or South America.⁵ So it seems clear that one of the challenges for the HNR community is to build bridges beyond Western academic circles.

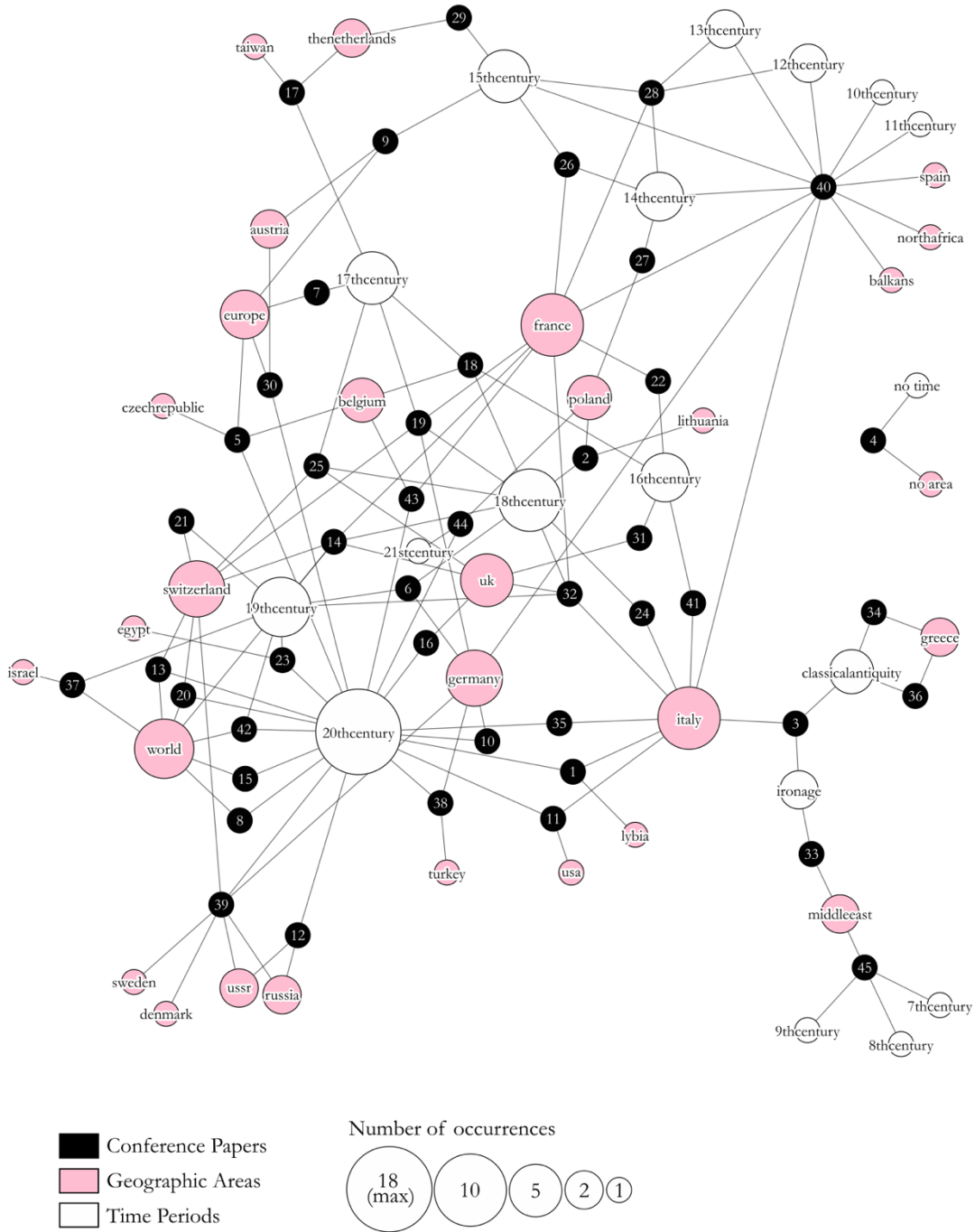


Figure 2. The bipartite network of papers presented at the HNR2024 conference (black), tagged by geographic region (pink) and time period (white). The network has been created on the basis of the abstracts as a subjective exercise to illustrate the diversity of the conference. It is not a faithful representation of the content of the papers themselves.

⁵ It should be noted that the diversity of authors and participants is much greater than the diversity of regions covered by the abstracts.

1	Agir et documenter : la double action du vicaire apostolique de Tripolitaine pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale	24	Mapping the networks of the Accademia dei Nobili della Giudecca: a sous-champ of the 18th Venetian Reforming Era
2	Analysing artistic network of the Basilian order in Eighteenth-Century Poland-Lithuania: a digital humanities approach	25	Mapping Anglo-Swiss Travel Writing in the 17th and 18th Century
3	Archaeological networks in pre-Roman Italy: approaching new visual methodologies	26	Modéliser les réseaux de pouvoir de la fin du Moyen Âge
4	Beyond nodegoat: a critical look at historical network research workflows	27	Network hermeneutics: exploring the meaning of a source using network analysis, case of inquisitorial protocols from 14th century Stettin
5	Cinemas and Films: what can we learn from visualising historical cinema networks based on their programmes?	28	Networks and textual production during the Middle Ages (12th-15th centuries)
6	Communicating about communication: Using graph comics to explore communication networks in letters of Early Romanticism	29	Networks of Confessional Affiliation: Religious Choice and the Schism of Utrecht
7	Complex networks allow a quantitative analysis of historical networks by data mining the Wikipedia corpus	30	Networks of Displacement: Spatial and Temporal Dynamics of Post-WWII Migration and Resettlement
8	Containing complexity: Networks of expertise and the emergence of genetic epidemiology, 1900-1990	31	Our Maist Speciall Freindis: Using historical network analysis to study clan structures in early modern Scotland
9	Emerging Maximilian: temporal co-occurrences network analysis of people mentioned in Regesta Imperii XIII	32	Radical translators (Britain, France and Italy, 1789-1815) through the lens of a network visualisation
10	Exploring Biographical Networks of Person Objects from Newspaper Clippings in Herder Institute	33	Religious Networks in Late Babylonian Period (RelNet)
11	Finance, business and Cultural Cold War: exploring transatlantic associationism's networks in post-war Italy	34	Representing discourses as networks: potential applications of TheSu XML in network analysis for the history of ideas and science
12	Gender diversity in the historical networks of Soviet film production	35	The assistance of the Church to the Jews in Milan during the Second World War
13	Geospatial Network of Internees in Switzerland during the Second World War - A Proof of Concept	36	The diplomatic networks of ancient Athens: the evidence from the decrees
14	Gouverner à distance : analyse d'un réseau d'espionnage contre-révolutionnaire dans l'Europe de la Révolution et de l'Empire napoléonien	37	The networked geography of a newspaper
15	High Density = High Citations? Approaches for Tracking Knowledge Evolution	38	The transfer of German pedagogical knowledge to Turkey through Turkish educators in the Early Republican Era: A historical social network study in the field of transnational education
16	Shaping British Digital Art: The Global Network of the Computer Arts Society, 1968-1985	39	Tracing the Network Continuity: From the Socialist to the Communist Women's Movement (1907-1934)
17	Inclusive institutions? Access to political power in the city of Tainan (Fort Zeelandia) in Dutch Formosa (1655-1662)	40	Using citation networks for viewpoint plurality assessment of historical literary corpora: The case of the Medieval Rabbinic corpus
18	Integrating library and prosopographical data in the publication network of the Old University of Louvain	41	Viewsari: New Perspectives on Historical Network Analysis in Giorgio Vasari's The Lives Using Knowledge Graphs
19	Interactive Visualization of Linked Open Data Networks Representing Historical Writings	42	Visual Exchanges as a Network: The Case of Avant-Garde Periodicals
20	L'analyse de réseaux pour l'étude des coopérations intergouvernementales : le cas du Bureau International d'Éducation (1929-1952)	43	Visualiser le micro-ordinateur DAI par le réseau d'amateur qui l'a fait vivre.
21	Le marché foncier à Lausanne au 19e siècle. Mutations et réseaux des protagonistes.	44	Visualising Bibliographical Data on Polish Literature after 1989
22	Les réseaux urbains lyonnais pendant la guerre civile (1589-1594)	45	Visualization of Early Islamicate Scholars' Network
23	Levantine Transitions. A Social Network Approach to Elite Formation in Urban Egypt, 1890-1914		

Table 1. Numbering of the papers shown in figures 2, 3 and 4.

REGIONAL CARTOGRAPHY

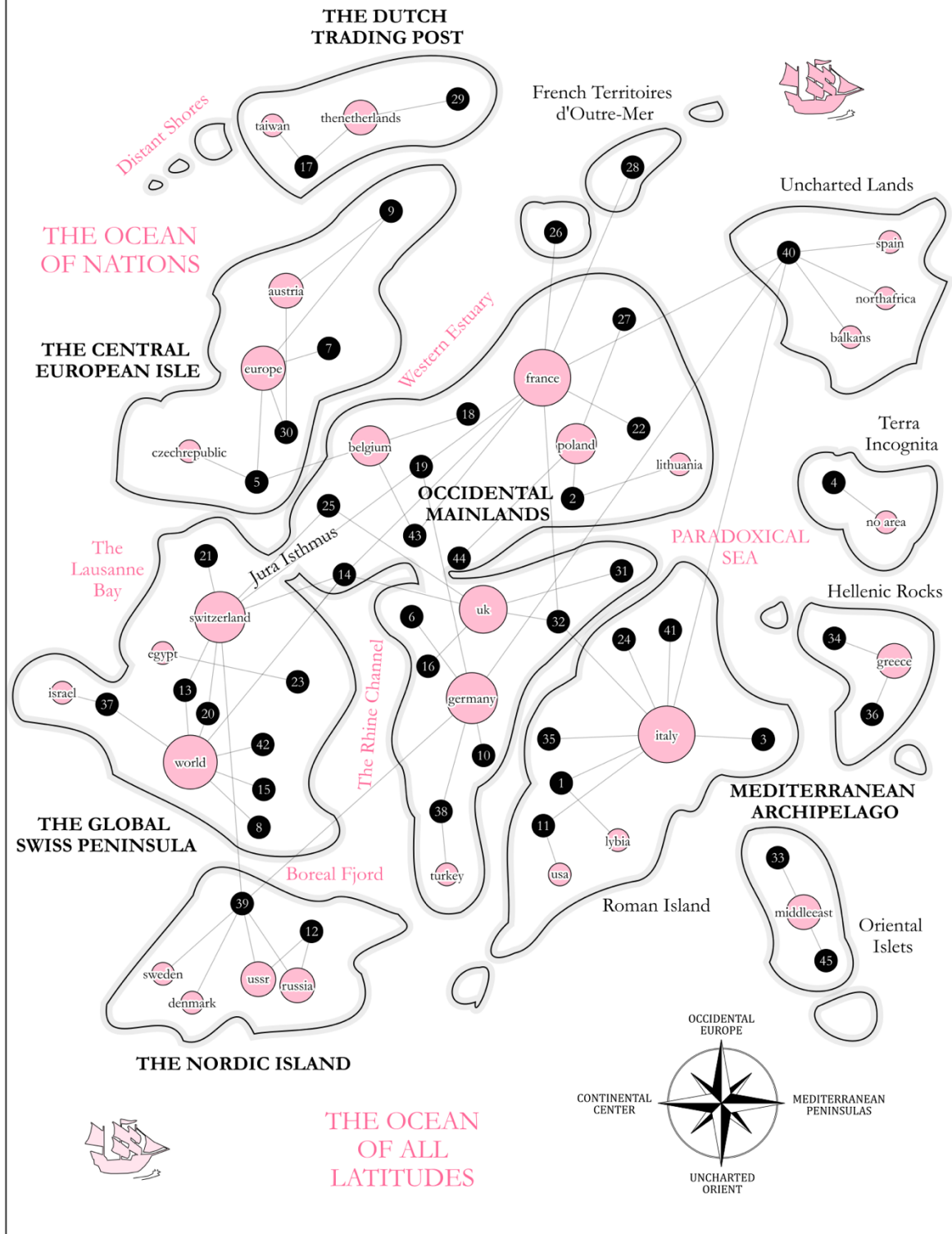


Figure 3. Symbolic "Geography" of HNR2024 conference papers.

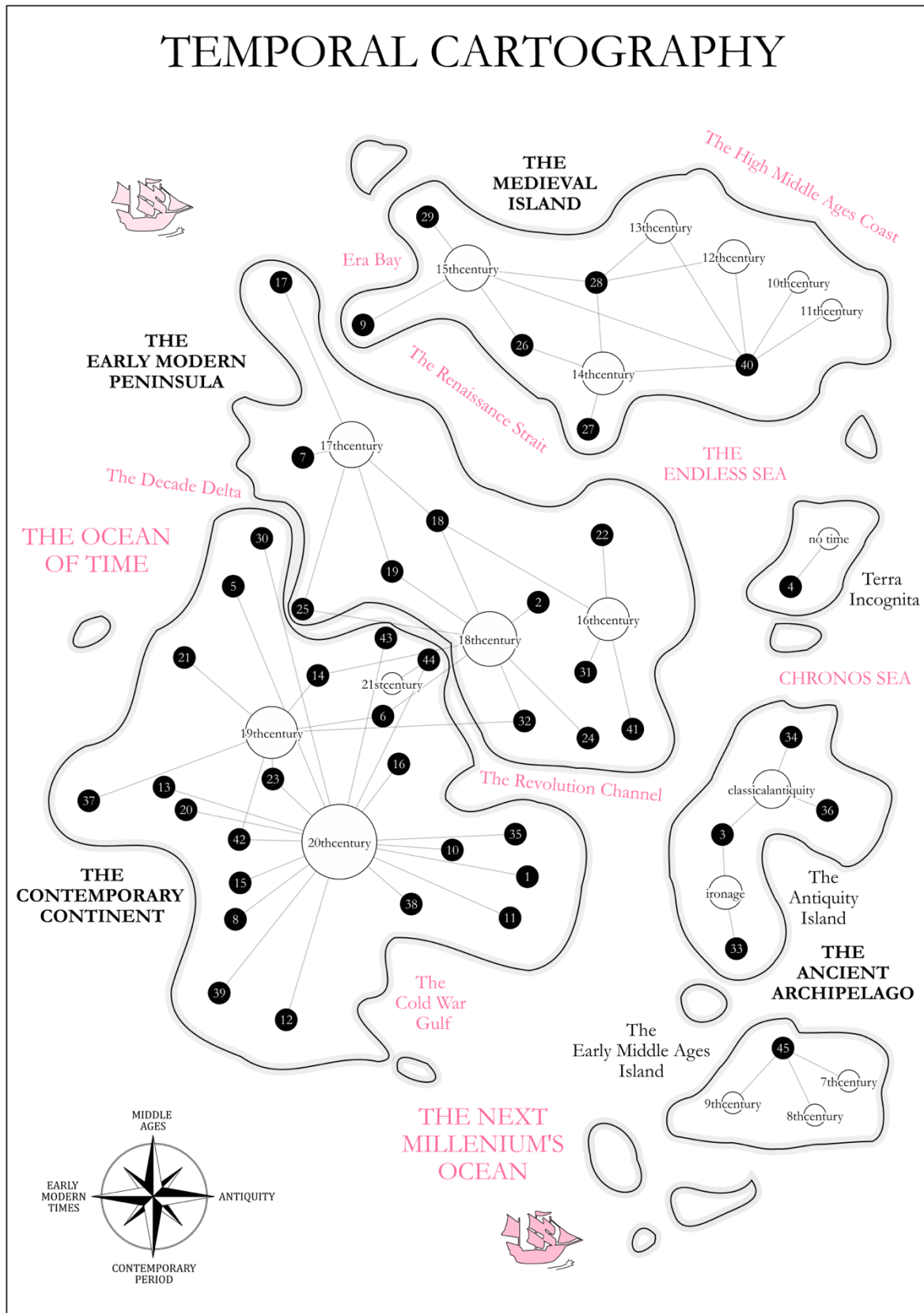


Figure 4. Symbolic "Temporal cartography" of HNR2024 conference papers.