Methodology

Methodological framework

In LOOP, I propose a research design that will combine actor-centred methods of historical anthropology with quantitative methods of economic history and using state-of-the-art digital technology. The following approaches will be paramount.

Linking qualitative and quantitative methods

Historical anthropology (Conermann and von Hees 2007) describes the approach with which most studies in LOOP will start. In rough outline, it can be defined as qualitative research that mostly prefers the microstudy over general surveys. It puts individual and collective actors or individual institutions at the centre of the analysis, and seeks to understand their everyday behaviour, perceptions and lifeworlds. Only from a “thick description” (Geertz 1973; Bachmann-Medick 2016) of a certain field of human activity does it venture into generalisations. In studying a society that has not played a substantial role in social science theory-building, we understand this approach as a corrective to both culturalist reifications and the premature implementation of classification grids that were developed for research on Western societies. Historical anthropology, as we understand it, is closely associated with Max Weber’s notion of “interpretive sociology” (verstehende Soziologie), which is rooted in the analysis of social action (Weber 1985; Adorjan and Kelly 2017).

In that vein, we often work by using what social anthropologists call the “extended case method”, i.e. the study of a particular event in the history of a social group, often a conflict or a situation of rapid change, which provides insight into the workings of society and finally allows for structural observation (Evens and Handelman 2008; Buessow 2011c). In this way, an extended case study proceeds from the micro to the macro level of observation, thereby aiming first to separate the common from the specific and then to extract the general from the unique (Burawoy 1998). One of the main motivations behind our studies is to better understand the specific perspectives of the social actors involved in our cases. We usually try to grasp actors’ perspectives through concepts that they invoke in written statements, be it in an elaborate text (Buessow 2014) or in the highly stylised and restricted code of petitions (Ben-Bassat 2013). In recent years, the history of concepts (or, alternatively, historical semantics) has made great advances towards a truly global perspective and has managed to get beyond its traditional focus on scholarly and normative texts (Pernau and Sachsenmeier 2016). In our studies on late Ottoman Palestine, we shall have to deal with a wide range of actors who include state officials and representatives of local communities, but mainly consist of men and women with little or no formal education. Ideally, we would reach a clear understanding of the notions that informed the thinking and decision-making of our actors. In other words, it is their “emic” perspective that needs to be reconstructed, alongside the further development of the “etic” concepts employed in our own analysis. Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyan have described a complex model of the etic-emic divide, distinguishing between “explicated” and “embedded” emic notions. While explicated emic notions, or rather concepts, are “named, openly defined, discussed and may even have lengthy treatises devoted to them”, the other kind of notions are those that are not verbalised to the same degree and therefore
“must be teased out with subtlety” by historians (Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam, 2007: 422). The methodological approaches of the extended case study and of historical semantics will be especially pertinent in the research area devoted to the census as a social process, where we shall deal with interaction between state agents and the local population, in which a great number of “explicated” as well as “embedded” emic notions are expected to be of relevance.

When it comes to choosing and managing case samples and cases, grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) provides helpful guidelines. Grounded theory in general denotes the approach of developing a “theory” – or, with less far-reaching implications, a “model” – of a certain field of social activity or reasoning out of the research process itself. One of the method’s central principles is theoretical sampling. This refers to a process of data collection for generating “theory” whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyses data and decides what data to collect next. Researchers begin by identifying key concepts and features that they will examine. When collecting material, they must make sure to choose deviant cases that lie at the extremes of a possible spectrum of how to conceive of the topic. When researchers reach a point where new data do not change their theory or model of the field of social activity under survey, they have reached a “saturation point” and are able to publish their findings as an independent contribution to research. We shall apply grounded theory and theoretical sampling as research strategies in the research area on social differentiation, when it comes to surveying a particular societal feature in late Ottoman Palestine, such as the varieties of local villages.

The danger of micro-studies is that they remain in isolation. Researchers lose opportunities to acquire a deeper understanding of their specific cases by failing to note instructive parallels or contrasting examples. In LOOP, while we seek to build on the strengths of historical anthropology – being close to the material and seeking to understand the logic of historical actors – we also aim to understand our object of inquiry both in its own terms and in comparison with larger trends and diverse historical experiences on a global scale. Therefore, we link our insights from historical-anthropological case studies with quantitative and qualitative studies in economic history. This constitutes a novel feature in Middle Eastern history and at the same time the greatest methodological challenge of LOOP. Postdoc 3, a person with social science methodological training and a background in Middle Eastern history, Arabic and/or Turkish, will serve as the connecting link between the two methodological schools. We shall analyse the census data on late Ottoman Palestine according to the two topics on which the records provide most data, i.e. education and health. Regarding education, we shall make use of the “age heaping strategy” to approximate numeracy, i.e. basic mathematical cognitive abilities (A’Hearn, Baten and Crayen 2009). In addition, we shall test the feasibility of using the (occasional) entries on reading and writing abilities and linguistic skills in the registers as proxies for literacy and multilingualism. With regard to health, we shall try to use the indications of body height in the census registers (“small”, “medium” and “tall”) as proxies for nutritional status, as has been done successfully in other cases (Baten and Blum 2014). In a second step, we shall see how far the information on physical disabilities offers clues to health in certain social categories and/or locations. Disabilities include defects of limbs and eyes, but also jaundice, indicating infectious diseases such as hepatitis and malaria (cf. Gratien 2017).

We expect the quantitative studies on education and health to yield two types of results: (a) results that allow comparison with contemporary cases across the Eastern Mediterranean and beyond and (b) results that will point to intra-regional disparities in standards of living or disparities between cities and rural areas. We also expect to find insights such as unexpectedly high levels of numeracy or surprisingly rare occurrences of diseases. In a second step, we shall conduct qualitative studies on potentially relevant factors (such as the presence of schools, medical establishments or availability of per capita availability of livestock) in order to find explanations. Thus, we shall follow a three-step methodology: (1) the use of quantitative surveys to detect phenomena of particular interest; (2) the formulation of new research questions based on these observations; and (3) the conducting of qualitative studies to find explanations and possibly tease out their local meaning and impact.
Figure 3: From the population register to the database: The household of Sa’id al-Shawwa, Gaza, 1905.
Left: excerpt from Census Basic Register (esas defteri), right: entry in the “Gaza Historical Database”.

Fig. 4: The four neighbourhoods into which the city of Gaza was divided in the Ottoman census of 1905. Overlaying an aerial photograph of 1918 with various maps helps to identify locations and to trace changes over time. Source: Ben-Bassat and Buessow, “Gaza Historical Database”.

Fig. 5: Network graph showing signatories to a petition in support of Mufti Muhammad Saqallah (Gaza, 1892). The oval shape highlights important gatekeepers; the house symbol indicates family affiliation. Source: Ben-Bassat and Buessow, “Gaza Historical Database”.

**HGIS, social network analysis, database and website**

We shall analyse the main source corpus using digital tools, such as a **Historical Geographic Information System (HGIS)** (Szoltysék and Gruber 2015; Anbinder, Ó Gráda, and Wegge 2019; Demeter and Bagdi 2019) and social network analysis (Buchanan 2002). Previous work on the city of Gaza can illustrate our approach. A database and GIS analysis of the 1905 census and complementary sources has made it possible to identify a large number of people, including artisans and peasants, who signed mass petitions in support of rival political factions. We were also able to reconstruct strategies of spatial clustering and architectural patronage that empowered local actors to enter into coalitions with the Ottoman government, changed the urban morphology and have had consequences for the city’s
development until the present day (Ben-Bassat and Buessow 2018, 2020). While our work on Gaza focused mainly on urban elite actors, in LOOP we shall concentrate on other actor groups that have been hitherto largely invisible in historical studies. Social network analysis enables us to trace social constellations of families and individuals, within their places of residence, but also far beyond them. Marriage and other family relations present interesting fields of enquiry in this context, as would business or scholarly networks (Loimeier and Reichmuth 2000; Philliou 2004; Chorev-Halewa 2018). So far, we have aimed only for a punctual application of statistical and spatial analysis to historical sources to gain insights into specific trends and dynamics in local society. In LOOP, aided by the expertise of PD 3 and external experts (notably Jörg Baten), we shall apply more advanced statistical analysis to make representative statements and better understand the internal logic of the sources. A tool for network visualisation is helpful for gaining an overview of the complexes of people and families (Ben-Bassat and Buessow 2020; Fig. 5, below).

The planned, purpose-built database will be conceptually based on the Gaza Historical Database (Buessow and Ben-Bassat, GHD). GHD is a PostgreSQL database, including a web-based graphic interface based on the open-source tool dbWebGen. The database contains entries on approximately 2,500 households and around 20,000 individuals. (See Fig. 3 for a screenshot of the user interface.) For the proposed project, a technical overhaul and enhancement of GHD is planned, in order to overcome some limitations and to allow for the use of today’s state of the art web technologies and architectural approaches. In particular, we shall need: a more user-friendly input screen to speed up data entry, a more refined way of tagging data for the analysis of samples (e.g. to select social categories for a specific location or timespan), and more sophisticated tools for statistical computing and graphics (using the programming language “R”). Besides the database, we envisage a public project website, which will include a comprehensive interactive map of late Ottoman Palestine, which will be based on up to 200 historical maps and aerial photographs. (See Fig. 4 for an example.)

Involving international experts: Workshops and final conference

Our team will discuss theoretical, methodological and practical issues throughout the project’s duration within the framework of the weekly reading group. Several times a year, we shall be joined by experts for specific topics. In years 1 and 3, we shall hold interdisciplinary workshops that will feature contributions by team members and about ten external experts. Both workshops are to explore how the project could be enhanced by adopting different questions. They will conclude with a public lecture by one of the invitees at RUB’s conference centre, where it can be simultaneously broadcast online, to reach an international audience. The topics and aims of these workshops are as follows.

Workshop 1 Extraction and analysis of historical data: Challenges and benchmarks (autumn 2022). LOOP’s team members will present their material, the database and their approach to reading, indexing and interpreting census data and complementary sources. International experts with expertise in statistics and digital history methods will present examples of their work and will be invited to comment on LOOP’s work. The incremental stage of the project is an excellent opportunity for me and the LOOP team to develop further both our research tools and the scholarly networks with which we engage. The aim is to push beyond the familiar and to identify new approaches and new possible collaboration partners, as long as we can still make structural decisions about the project and the database with relative ease.

Workshop 2 Social formations in the Ottoman Mediterranean: Interdisciplinary perspectives from history and the social sciences (summer 2024).

By the time of the second workshop, we shall have reached the middle of the project’s duration. This will be the right moment to invite expert feedback on our findings and methodology. The researchers in RA1 will seek critical feedback on our conceptualisation of models of social practices and strategies, the description of which is one of the project’s core goals. PD2 and the PhD student will present their theses on the classifications of the census and regarding land, property and income of late Ottoman Palestinians. We shall also use this workshop to think ahead. PD3, who will have joined the project only half a year before, will have the opportunity to discuss the possibilities of further formalising our models and to study the topics of education and health through census data and complementary sources.

Conference: Towards a global social and cultural history (summer 2026)

This international conference will be LOOP’s concluding event. We shall have fed our results into the ongoing debates on social and cultural history from a global perspective and reported on the insights
emerging from the analysis. The invitees will be leading historians whose areas of expertise cover the greatest possible variety of world regions, with a focus on non-Western societies.

**Output**

The project’s main output will be a monograph with which I aim to synthesise the results of LOOP. Specific case studies will lay the groundwork for the chapters of my book (Fig. 2). One postdoc with a part-time position (PD1) will produce two research articles and will help me with conceptualising, testing and publishing the database. Two postdocs with full-time positions (PDs 2 and 3) will each produce four research articles. In addition, I shall author two research articles myself. The first will deal with the important question of the middle classes, or, more precisely: the issue of how to frame what can be identified as the “middle sort of people” in Palestinian society. The second article will discuss LOOP’s contributions to social and cultural history in a global perspective, focusing on theoretical insights and analytical tools that we have identified as having particular transferability to other regional contexts. Two more articles will be co-authored by myself and external collaborators and will deal with the evidence of the censuses on the important minority communities of Christians and Jews. All articles are to be published in peer-reviewed, top-ranked journals, such as *Explorations in Economic History*, *IJMES*, *JESHO*, *Journal of Economic History*, *MES*, *Die Welt des Islams*, or similar publications.

**Leadership and research environment**

The [project team](#) will consist of myself as the principal investigator, three postdoctoral researchers (PDs) and one PhD student. Each of the four other researchers will support me with specific skills and through tasks that I could not manage by myself, most importantly: development of additional case studies in social differentiation and enhancement of the database (PD1); extensive archival studies regarding the census as a social process (PD2); quantitative studies on education and health and formalisation of our models of social practices (PD3); examination of additional material on landholding, property and income (PhD). A weekly [reading group](#) will bring the team together to discuss relevant theories in the humanities and social sciences and to exchange information on new findings or research problems.

Ruhr-Universität Bochum provides the right environment for this project as it offers **excellent advanced language training in Arabic and Ottoman Turkish**, including intensive Arabic courses at the Bochum State Language Institute (LSI) and courses in [palaeography](#). This means that I can [provide language training](#) for any recruited collaborator in the project who lacks the requisite linguistic skills. In addition, the university has a growing infrastructure for the [Digital Humanities](#). Together with IT specialists at RUB’s Digital Humanities Center, I shall design a new database, based on a critical assessment of the project “Gaza during the Late Ottoman Period”.

**Research vision beyond the project**

My general [vision beyond the project](#) is to contribute to ongoing efforts to write social and cultural history from a global perspective. More specifically, the project aims to set new standards for how to realise the vision of an [HGIS for the entire Ottoman Empire](#) (Ohanian, Başkurt, and Kabadayi 2020). A digitisation initiative of the National Archives of Egypt (Saleh 2013) will soon enable us to compare the census data on late Ottoman Palestinians with that on Egyptians from roughly the same period. LOOP will also offer new perspectives for the study of colonialism: once we have analysed the late Ottoman census, we shall be able to compare our findings with evidence from the two censuses of Mandate Palestine (1922 and 1931). This would provide us with a completely new opportunity to assess the effects of colonial rule on the colonised population. It also seems tempting to think in more interdisciplinary terms and pursue an aspect that this project can only touch upon, namely [the material environment of social, economic and cultural dynamics](#) – both the natural and the built environment. The natural environment includes topographic and climatic factors that influence not only forms of labour, family structure and marriage patterns (Danubio and Amicone 2001), but also architectural styles or types of settlement which, in turn, significantly influence these same social constellations. For example, it would be important to know how the households we find in the late Ottoman population registers looked as physical residential units. As climatic conditions and the availability of building materials varied greatly across late Ottoman Palestine, we expect to find great differences, ranging from the mud huts of peasants on the coastal plain to multi-storey urban stone houses in Nablus, for example. Knowing the kinds of rooms people lived in would give the social historian an important context for
interpreting the household data, while the architectural historian will find important information in the census on how residential buildings were used during the late Ottoman period. As a first step in this direction, I am discussing the possibility of conducting a survey of late Ottoman Palestinian residential buildings with art historian Tawfiq Daʿadli (Hebrew University of Jerusalem) and with the initiative ARCH Jerusalem (https://vimeo.com/archjerusalem). New research using architecture and urban structures as primary documents to understand the social fabric in late Ottoman Palestine (Amiry and Tamari 2003; Allweil 2016; Norris 2020; Daʿadli 2019, 2021) and the wider Eastern Mediterranean (Zandi-Sayek 2011; McPhillips, Meier, and Rabo 2019) makes this look like an increasingly feasible and promising enterprise. Yet again, LOOP’s groundbreaking contribution would be to make largely invisible actors, locations and relations visible.