



IRHA International Railway History Association

9th Conference

Railways and Environmental Sustainability. A long-term view on a global scale from the origins of railways to the present

Siena (Italy), 7-10 November 2024

Conference Organization

The International Railway History Association (IRHA), together with the University of Siena, will hold a scientific conference in Siena (Italy) in November. The title of the conference is *Railways and Environmental Sustainability. A long-term view on a global scale from the origins of railways to the present*. This is the first IRHA conference to be held in Italy since its foundation in 2002; the choice of Siena is primarily a scientific and intellectual one, but it is also an excellent location from a tourist and logistical point of view (accessible from Florence, Pisa and Rome airports). In accordance with the customs and convictions of the Association, as laid down in its Statutes, the Conference will be open to anyone who wishes to attend and to anyone who wishes to present a proposal, without any exclusion or

prejudice against anyone. No distinction will be made between academics, researchers working in museums, archives and other cultural institutions, professionals and scholars of railway history in general from all over the world. There are no restrictions on the historical periods studied nor to the areas of the world investigated. On the contrary, we emphasise maximum opening up to inclusiveness and interdisciplinarity, thus promoting exchanges and collaborations with all kinds of scholars even with different methodological opinions and tools, but interested in this field and eager to establish a scientific dialogue.

The conference will be held from 7 to 10 November 2024. It will include three days of scientific work and a day dedicated to participation in a Sunday excursion on the *Treno Natura*, a historic steam train, in the province of Siena, to look at sustainable railway tourism in practice. The conference will include a session in *Italian*, freely open to all IRHA conference participants, entitled *Un treno per Siena. Passato, presente e sostenibilità delle ferrovie nella Toscana meridionale (A train to Siena. Past, present and sustainability of the railways in southern Tuscany)*, which will take place on 7 November at 17.00.

The conference language is English, no translations and interpreting will be provided. There is no registration fee, but IRHA membership is encouraged (50 Euros) for participation in the conference. Travel and accommodation expenses are the responsibility of the participants; the local organisation will offer *cocktails, coffee breaks and light lunches* on Friday and Saturday; and side events at the conference.

Conference Topic

The relationship between railways and environmental sustainability

seems crucial to try to understand general issues such as globalisation, economic development and the search for new mobility models. In such a context, is also relaunched the methodological debate between public and private transport, which has long been neglected due to the clear dominance of the latter over the former. The inexorable decline in the use of the main mean of public transport, the train, which has suffered a seemingly irreparable defeat in the field of freight transport in particular, is evident in a large part of the world. Railway historians, prompted by the changes in their own job context, are also embarking on new scientific projects, looking at this new historiographic perspective with a fresh investigative eye.

The main objective of the conference is to develop the environmental study of the multiple aspects of mobility, proposing a critical reading of modernity and the economic process. The conference intends to take a long-term view, in practice from the origins of the railways in the world to the present day, following the gradual maturation of the subject and of the fields of study that have gradually developed in the railway sector within the context of the various transport networks. The conference will consider theoretical and methodological proposals as well as case studies, with preference given to the originality of the topics addressed. Particular reference is made to *environmental mobility studies*, which aim to measure the environmental impact of transport, bringing transport and environmental history closer to all social sciences.

The dynamic between the railways and the environment dates back to the early days of the railways. For a long time, individual artefacts, not coincidentally called "art works" in a 19th-century term, were widely appreciated: those extraordinary bridges, viaducts and tunnels that were considered to be impressive technical achievements, but

also, in the long run, irreparable wounds inflicted on nature. Crossing rivers and valleys, piercing mountains and razing land, and gutting cities are actions that accompany the entire history of Western societies in their efforts to secure shorter distances and better communications. The infrastructural epic did not involve mediation. Where railway development has proceeded intensively, the harmonisation of transport with the environment and its insertion into the landscape has largely been lacking, which was not considered as a design problem and as a topic of analysis, even though in many cases scenic routes have turned out to be well inserted into the territory, perhaps not planned in advance. There is no doubt that transport, and therefore also the railways, represented one of the main agents of environmental change through deep and articulated modalities and interactions, but the terms of the environmental issue, whose real value was not grasped, were missing.

In this context, the advent of the motor car and the rise of private road mobility represented an explosion, also in terms of the collective imagination, which drastically shifted the balance to the detriment of the railways. Until the 1990s railway historians did not react to a situation that seemed inevitable and unchangeable. In the last thirty years, the perspective has changed with the various regulations - fundamental, for example, the role played by the European regulation - aimed at limiting the pollution caused by motor vehicles. Hence the new role assigned to rail transport, including intermodality for freight and High-Speed Rail for passengers, which is often seen not only as a way of reducing pollution but also as a new collective environmental awareness.

The conference will also look at urban transport and mass tourism. In the world's major cities today, railways and trams are often called

upon to provide a solution to traffic congestion. Scholars are now talking of a *Light Rail Renaissance*, a rediscovery of the environmental qualities of public urban tram electric transport as opposed to the old polluting bus system, which is also incapable of helping to alleviate urban congestion. On the other hand, the enormous increase in the number of potential tourists has been accompanied by an exponential increase in the risks to the environment: from speculation in tourist resorts, to the environmental damage caused by holidaymakers, to the extraordinary intensification of the use of air and sea - and of course land - for leisure travel, the opportunities for environmental pollution have increased enormously. These issues are clearly closely linked to a rethinking of the role of railways in modern societies, including those of emerging economies. We will also look at the many solutions proposed and practised today in the field of new types of rail mobility, which take the form of reclaiming and reusing disused railway lines for tourist purposes, in the name of increasingly sustainable mobility. As at past IRHA conferences, the organisers will aim to produce an edited book with the best papers.

Call for papers

The Local Organising Committee is chaired by Stefano Maggi (University of Siena) and its members are Eleonora Belloni (University of Siena), Martina Semboloni (University of Siena) and Andrea Giuntini (IRHA President). The general direction of the conference will be overseen by a Scientific Committee whose task will be to evaluate the proposals and make the final selection. The Scientific Committee will be chaired by Andrea Giuntini (Italy); the members of the Scientific Committee are Fernanda De Lima (Brazil), Tony Heywood (United

Kingdom), Csaba Sándor Horváth (Hungary), Stefano Maggi (Italy), Michèle Merger (France), Arnaud Passalacqua (France), Ralf Roth (Germany), Paul Veron (France), Javier Vidal (Spain).

Paper proposals (an abstract of 2,000-3,000 characters and a one page curriculum vitae) should be sent by **31 May 2024** to the following address: andrea.giuntini@unimore.it. The decisions of the Scientific Committee will be announced by **30 June 2024**. Presenters of accepted papers must send a long abstract of 10,000 characters by **30 September 2024**.

International Railway History Association

<https://aihc-irha-aihf.com/>



Scientific Program 7-10 November 2024

Thursday November 7th

17 *Un treno per Siena. Passato e presente delle ferrovie in provincia di Siena*

Friday November 8th

9 Registration. Welcome by the host and by the IRHA president (Giuntini). Introduction by the conference president (Maggi)

10 Keynote speech

Coffee Break

11 Parallel Sessions Each paper: 20 minutes

14 Light Lunch

15 Parallel Sessions. Each paper: 20 minutes

18.30 Welcome Cocktail

Saturday November 9th

9 Parallel Sessions. Each paper: 20 minutes

11.30 Coffee Break

12.00 Final Round Table

15 City Tour

19 Accademia Chigiana Concert

Sunday November 10th

9-17 *Treno Natura* Excursion