

# 18. Crowdsourcing Irish history: the Historic Graves digital project

MAURIZIO TOSCANO - DIGITAL HUMANITIES RESEARCHER

Diaspora irlandese è l'espressione in uso per riferirsi al processo storico di migrazione dall'Irlanda, registrato fin dall'alto Medioevo, ma particolarmente evidente a partire dal XVIII secolo. Attualmente, si stima che circa 80 milioni di persone in tutto il mondo abbiano una discendenza irlandese. Il progetto online Historic Graves ha fatto presa su questo fenomeno globale, riunendo una comunità di oltre 15.000 utenti a livello internazionale, impegnata nella creazione di un dataset di dati genealogici a livello nazionale. Il progetto prende corpo nel 2010, come un'iniziativa con base patrimoniale focalizzata sulle comunità locali, che vengono educate sul campo nell'uso di tecnologie a basso costo per la ricognizione di cimiteri storici e nella registrazione e raccolta della loro memoria orale. L'obiettivo iniziale era pubblicare online le foto di un piccolo cimitero nella contea di Waterford, ma risultò subito evidente che la piattaforma Web poteva ospitare, all'interno della stessa struttura, qualsiasi altro cimitero a livello nazionale. Da allora, la pagina web historicgraves.com ha pubblicato più di 800 cimiteri, registrato la geolocalizzazione di quasi 100.000 tombe e trascritto collaborativamente i dati biografici di 190.707 persone, quotidianamente in aumento. L'iniziativa è incentrata attorno ad una piattaforma online per la trascrizione di epitaffi commemorativi, liberamente accessibile a tutti gli utenti registrati. Vengono inoltre offerti seminari di formazione alle comunità locali interessate a contribuire alla registrazione e trascrizione di cimiteri storici. La combinazione di

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**A bit of history**  
Irish diaspora: a how we refer to the historical process of migration from Ireland, recorded since the Early Middle Ages, but particularly evident since the XVIII century. By the 21<sup>st</sup> century, an estimated 80 million people worldwide claimed some Irish descent. The online project Historic Graves (<http://historicgraves.com>) capitalised on this global phenomenon, putting together a worldwide community of more than 15,000 users, engaged in generating a nationwide genealogical dataset. The initiative started in 2010, as a **community focused grassroots heritage project**, where local community groups are trained in low-cost high-tech field surveys of historic graveyards and recording of their own oral histories.

**Methodology**  
In the project, we record graveyards, mostly over 100 years old, within each graveyard we record all inscribed gravestones (including geocoordinates) and from each gravestone we register the people listed. Training for or alongside community groups on-site takes normally **two days**, and we generally get the graveyard surveyed in that time (i.e. approximately 200 headstones surveyed, photographed and read, and the resulting dataset published online).

**Local communities**  
From the very beginning, the project focused on local communities, a very strong reality in rural Ireland. In the last 5 years, we have worked with over 500 community groups stretching from north Cork in Ireland to Northumberland in England, but the system is global in design. Local communities play a key role in the project, as we rely on them for on-site recording, online transactions, training and to solve sensitive privacy concerns about specific memorials.

**HistoricGraves in numbers**  
Since 2010, historicgraves.com published online more than 800 cemeteries, recording the location of almost 100,000 graves and collectively transcribing the details of **190,207 people**, and counting:

Gravestones	190,207 recorded	148,078 recorded
People	190,207 recorded	148,078 recorded
Cemeteries	148,078 recorded	148,078 recorded
Monthly users	148,078 recorded	148,078 recorded

Statistics show that the majority of Irish graveyards is very small in size, with 53% having less than 50 memorials and over 80% less than 200. The chronological evolution of monthly deaths shows a sharp increase in Winter. Seasonal increases, towards a less biased distribution. This represents just a sneak peak of the informative potential of this crowd-generated dataset, in terms of Irish modern history and genealogy.

**Conclusions**  
The heritage dataset put together by the Historic Graves project has proved to be a valuable genealogical and tourism asset, allowing people interested in tracing their family history to locate the headstones to individual graveyards, as well as being a source for historical analysis on Irish local and global history, for archaeologists and historians. The project evolved from archaeological professional surveys, focusing on studying the headstones, the burial practices and the representation of power and status, to community archaeology focused on graveyards as living heritage, with both tangible and intangible components. Local and family historians abound in Ireland and academic historians have formalised their approaches into what is called the **History of Families** - combining genealogy, social history and public history. We have brought the strengths of archaeological fieldwork to the study of the **History of Families**, whereby we can follow many family groups, via their graveyards, back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century and to the new communities they formed in distant countries.

**Credits and further information**  
by Maurizio Toscano (Digital Humanities Centre for Irish Studies - Universidad de Granada), Irish community archaeologist, John Tierney and Jacinta O'Leary. For further information <http://historicgraves.com/contact>

**Sustainability statement**  
We average one graveyard survey per week and we run funded training programmes approximately 20 weeks of the year, limited only by available funding. So far, we have received support from a variety of sources including Rural Development Leader Action, Heritage Council grants, as well as from a range of other local authority and government organisations. Some groups fund their own projects. In general, we build partnerships where the different partners bring funding, permission and labour, while we bring technology and experience.

**Partnerships**  
<http://historicgraves.com/info/about-us> <https://www.rda.ie/> <https://www.heritage.ie/>

An Dúineál Dúineál The Heritage Council

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interazione online con workshop e riunioni locali si è dimostrata un fattore determinante per garantire una partecipazione efficace. Le procedure di raccolta e gestione dati si sono rivelate anch'esse essenziali, su due fronti: i dati generati sul campo sono normalmente disponibili online in brevissimo tempo; sul sito web, la trascrizione degli epitaffi non è mediata e risulta immediatamente disponibile per essere condivisa. La pubblicazione istantanea è estremamente attrattiva per i gruppi di volontari coinvolti: il risultato del loro lavoro è direttamente fruibile ed i partecipanti sono invogliati a dividerlo con familiari e amici che vivono all'estero. Ogni comunità locale può scaricare l'insieme di dati che ha collaborato a generare, come Open Data in formato tabulare. La comunità globale di utenti si assume la responsabilità del controllo di qualità e della completezza delle trascrizioni.