

“Rivers and forests. Katia Occhi presents the latest issue of the Annali ISIG

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The 2025–1 volume of the Annals of the Italian-German Historical Institute (ISIG) at FBK has been released in recent weeks. Curated by Jawad Daheur and Katia Occhi, the issue features a dossier titled "Rivers and Forests. Historical Perspectives on timber floating in Europe." FBK Magazine spoke with Katia Occhi to take a closer look at the themes explored in this publication.

Let's begin with a term that may be unfamiliar to those outside environmental or economic history—“timber floating.” What do we mean?

The term refers to the historical timber transport system in which logs were carried downstream by river currents. Timber floating could be either free or bound. In the free form, logs were simply released into the river to float on their own. In the bound form, they were tied into rafts, guided downstream by a raftsman—known locally as *menadàs* or *liner*. Before the development of modern infrastructure, this was one of the main economic activities shaping the landscape and transforming ecosystems. It came with significant human and economic costs and was carried out in difficult environmental conditions. Yet, in the absence of roads, it was often the only feasible method of transporting timber.

Many chapters of history reveal strong connections between rivers and civilizations.

Indeed, it's important to reflect on the symbiotic relationship between human societies and rivers, which have always influenced settlement patterns and the development of civilizations. Recent studies in environmental history encourage viewing rivers as a kind of “organic machine”, where natural forces and human labor are deeply intertwined. These interactions transformed surrounding landscapes through irrigation, energy production, and transport networks.

From this perspective, rivers and streams can be seen as parts of complex hybrid infrastructures that played crucial roles in both urban and rural areas. Until at least the late 19th century, rivers offered cities key communication routes to the surrounding regions, enabling the import of raw

materials and the export of manufactured goods.

In Mediterranean Europe, these systems date even further back. Pliny the Elder, in *Natural History* (77–78 AD), described a transport system on the Tiber River that used natural currents and artificial barriers—*piscinae*, what we now call *locks*—to facilitate timber movement.

How did the idea for this [issue](#) of the *Annals*, involving scholars from across Europe, come about?

The idea emerged from a call for papers by the *European Society for Environmental History* for its 2023 conference in Bern, focused on [“Mountains and Plains. Past, Present and Future Environmental and Climatic Entanglements.”](#) I organized a panel for that event, and it provided the ideal setting to bring together researchers working on these themes. Some of them also presented at the recent [European History Conference in Coimbra](#), continuing the scholarly dialogue that led to this special issue.

Can you tell us more about the contents?

First, a note on how the contributors were selected. As readers will see, most articles focus on timber floating in mountainous regions—Savoy, Friuli, Trentino, and Galicia, for example. That’s partly because there is more documentation (ethnographic, linguistic, etc.) available for these areas. Most historical research on timber transport tends to center on regions where the practice continued into the mid-20th century, such as the Alps and Scandinavia—and in some cases, into the 1970s in the Carpathians. The decline of this practice in European rivers during the late 19th and early 20th centuries—before the rise of ecological awareness—likely explains why it hasn’t been widely studied in other regions. This issue aims to help fill that gap.

Geography plays a key role too, not just history.

Absolutely. In pre-industrial times (and even today), timber was a central product in mountain economies. It was transported downstream in large quantities, while essential foodstuffs were brought back up to support communities with limited agricultural space. This is why it’s essential to also use tools from geography—like cartography and GIS (Geographic Information Systems)—to reconstruct historical trade networks, routes, and infrastructure. Nicolas Jacob-Rousseau’s introductory essay takes this approach, offering a comparative analysis of engineering structures such as locks, which controlled river flow to facilitate timber exports.

Rivers, forests, timber transport... Is this just a historical topic, or does it have relevance today?

From the mid-19th century onward, with the rise of new transport infrastructures—particularly railways—and large-scale hydraulic works, the old timber-floating methods became outdated. The market shifted toward the large forested areas of the Habsburg Empire and Eastern Europe. These developments are explored in the essay by my co-editor Jawad Daheur, a historian at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* in Paris.

Today, very few people remember timber floating. However, some of the same river routes have been repurposed for recreational activities like rafting. In the Alps, for example, rafting is now

popular on the Avisio, Noce, and Noana rivers in Trentino.

There have also been significant sporting achievements in this area. Take the recent [Junior & Under-23 World Rafting Championships on the So?a](#) (Isonzo) River in Slovenia, where the Italian men's Under-19 team ("Italia 1") won three gold medals. On the women's side, Italy secured two silver medals in both the Under-19 and Under-23 categories.

Is there more than just sports?

Yes. While the memory of timber floating has largely disappeared—except among historians or in places like Burma where it's still practiced in remote tropical forests—there's renewed interest in traditional knowledge and practices. These are now viewed as a form of common good, especially relevant to researchers studying renewable energy, historical ecology, human geography, and environmental history. One example is a [recent European-funded project](#) on the crucial role of timber during industrialization. This project helped co-finance open access to the essay [Timber floating in the Eastern Alps. Between Continuity and Discontinuity \(15th–19th Century\)](#), co-authored by Claudio Lorenzini and myself.

Have a pleasant reading!

Cover Image: Detail of a raft on the Adige River near the village of San Martino, with three boats on the shore. From Franz Hogenberg's perspective plan of the city of Trento (1581), published in Civitates Orbis Terrarum by Georg Braun, Cologne, 1640. (David Rumsey Map Collection, David Rumsey Map Center, Stanford Libraries.)

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