

15 September 2026 | Angelo Caglioti
Empires of Science: Knowledge Infrastructures and Colonial Collecting in Liberal and Fascist Italy

This talk argues that the interpretation of colonial collections offers new research opportunities for historians of science to push the traditional boundaries of space, chronology, and actors in the history of imperialism. While state institutions dominate political and military accounts of colonialism, the inclusion of scientists, data, and objects in its history allows us to reconstruct how “empires of science” transcended political boundaries and provincialized the state’s role.

Rather than just a tool of empire, scientific knowledge constituted colonial power by defining imperial epistemologies of race and environment. Drawing on the organization of scientific institutions and expeditions in liberal and fascist Italy, the talk suggests that the history of collecting challenges the distinctions between local, national, and colonial spaces, between different scientific disciplines, and between formal and informal imperialism. I argue that the category of “knowledge infrastructure” is crucial to understanding how scientific objects and data were collected, dispersed, used, or ignored by the state.

7 October 2026 | Tatiana Tabacchino
A Global Visual Database: The Network of Colonial Zoological Museums as a Resource for Applied Entomology in the Thought of Filippo Silvestri

A proponent of natural methods for the control of crop-damaging insects and convinced that phytophagous infestations were rooted in imbalances between the latter and their parasitoids – caused by the introduction of crops into regions lacking natural enemies –, Filippo Silvestri undertook many journeys in search of beneficial insects to restore natural biocenotic balances. His reflections on colonial museums as a showcase for tropical species and their infinitesimally small morphological peculiarities – through the observation of which the entomologist could find insects with morphological details adaptable to the specific host-parasite-plant setting – allow us to look at colonial museums through the eyes of the scientists who often encouraged their creation.

27 October 2026 | Catarina Madruga
What is Global about Global Biodiversity? Collection-Based Knowledge as Colonial Resonances

For the last two hundred years, the history of natural history collection-making has revolved around the physical dislocation and reorganization of landscapes and environments. Colonized territories and environments from the so-called Global South were extracted, re-valued and re-interpreted as part of the compelling project of amassing knowledge on global biodiversity. This talk will showcase concrete examples from physical specimens and their digital meta-data to consider the ecologies of biodiversity data available in European museums that represent non-European colonized territories and landscapes.

11 November 2026 | Sarah Easterby-Smith
Recontextualising the Royal Horticultural Society Plant Collector Archive

This paper discusses the relationship between nineteenth-century scientific archives and local/Indigenous knowledge. It uses the Plant Collector Archive of the Royal Horticultural Society (UK) as a case study.

Focusing on examples of collectors sent out by the Society in the 1820s, I explain how the collectors interacted with local populations and how their social and scientific backgrounds influenced the way that they perceived and described both people and plants. I then recontextualise the sources they produced in the light of recent botanical and historical evidence. The proposed approach offers a means of acknowledging local/Indigenous botanical knowledge that is otherwise obscured within a deeply colonial archive.

3 December 2026 | John van Wyhe
A. R. Wallace and the Biography of Natural History Specimens: From Forest to Museum Drawer

This talk will briefly outline what happened to a plant or animal that was collected by a 19th-century naturalist, in this case Alfred Russel Wallace in Southeast Asia.

Specimens collected went through a process of preparation, labeling, recording, transport, often publication and then perhaps an afterlife as an object of public display and re-appearances in the scientific literature.