

## MEDALEX Report Summary

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### **Final Report Summary - MEDALEX (Cooperating in Complex Environments: Cross-cultural Trade, Commercial Networks and Notarial Culture in Alexandria (Egypt) : 1360-1450)**

Scholarly results and major scientific conclusions

MEDALEX is a multidisciplinary project on Mediterranean history. By monitoring a whole merchant community instead of single groups through a serial, homogeneous series of records and a coherent methodology, this project has yielded important results in the fields of Medieval trade, business organization, identity and social networks. MEDALEX has contributed to the understanding of how merchants organized business cooperation, by bringing the debate to the arena of the sophisticated and diverse cities of commerce of the late Medieval Mediterranean.

Without relativizing the weight of identity and belonging, my research on the Alexandria/Damascus case puts to test the capacity of individuals to build complex networks in a context of diversity and religious and cultural plurality, yet under conditions of heavy political control and relatively reduced risk and uncertainty, as the Eastern Mediterranean in the 1350-1500 period. The project has stressed the emergence of processes of inter-group cooperation, with a focus on apparently unimportant actors at the fringes of each group, arguing that this cooperation was fuelled by the frequency with which key-players in these networks transgressed cultural and political boundaries, manipulated cultural values and social norms. As a negative side of medieval diversity, the policies of citizenship, status and legal biases towards minorities fostered continuous shifts of actors between networks, creating both bridges and hiatuses between the traditional units of analysis (such as religious or national groups). The outcome of these mixed networks, in this case business-related transactions, happened in the frame of a legitimate authority and under the umbrella of the local law, the Islamic Shari'ah. Yet the examination of conflict resolution suggests that European and Islamic legal institutions and notarial cultures interacted and cooperated, thus raising questions about the validity of the world/global paradigm of competition between cultural unities.

During the last two years, I have attained the project's main scholarly objective; this is publishing its major scientific conclusions in refereed, A-rated international journals rather than collective monographs and conference proceedings. Together with other, minor contributions, the four papers and the respective lines of inquiry are:

Paper#1 deals with the "decentralized" economic and banking international networks of Florence in the early renaissance. This article argues that apparently organized communities backed by state policies and cemented on a strong, unchallenged cultural identity, were instead heterogeneous networks modeled by political strife, lack of state control over the economy, and identity accommodation (preliminary accepted at the Mediterranean Historical Review).

Paper#2 addresses some major cultural issues of the project. It challenges the traditional historical divide between Christians and Muslims adopted by many historians of Islam. In this contribution to a collective volume by Brill's "Studies in Islamic Law and Society" series, I address the persistence of ample areas of intersection, where Islamic and non-Islamic religious and legal concepts and norms overlapped. More specifically, the work questions how did Mediterranean peoples perceive the implications of the Islamic division of the world (Dār al-ḥarb and the Dār al-Islām), and what was the real significance of this division in the Islamic borderlands, as in the cities of commerce of the late Middle Ages. For this purpose, I discuss the behavior of a hitherto unknown Arabic-speaking minority involved in the commercial and cultural crossroads of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Yet the project's major contribution in its second term is a paper on the legal foundations of cooperation in the Mediterranean ( preliminary accepted at Comparative Studies in Society and History, paper#3) Based on the notaries' records, the article examines how interfaith and mixed conflict was dealt with by focusing on the merchant communities of late medieval Alexandria and Damascus. It makes a contribution to the discussion on the role of institutions in governing business relations by describing how Islamic and Western legal devices complemented each other and even cooperated to settle disagreements. For this purpose, it addresses two legal institutions that provided responses to the biases of Islamic law on non-Muslims and overcame the prejudices of Franks against the local law. The first are the notaries sent to the Mamluk cities by the Venetian government to draw up legal documents and to support the transactions of Venetian merchants. The second are the new royal, or Siyasa, courts implemented by the sultans, where justice was dispensed by government officials instead of by traditional judges, or qadis. Specifically, the article

discusses in a comparative manner what constituted proof for Christians and Muslims, whether minorities could bear testimony or not and how notaries and judges dealt with unbelievers. A common notarial culture, it is be argued, arose to prevent and solve disputes and facilitate daily transactions amidst diversity, and this notarial culture fostered extensive interaction between litigants and cooperation between legal institutions. The article raises questions about the resemblances exhibited by Southern European and Islamic legal definitions and attitudes towards justice and diversity, suggesting processes of cross-fertilization in legal reasoning.

Paper#4 analyzes the long-term evolution of Alexandrian business milieu (). It was presented in a comparative panel "Analysing Networks of Political Communication: China and Europe in Comparative Perspective (800-1600)" at the Tenth European Social Science History Conference (Vienna, 23-26 April 2014).

In addition to the 4 foreseen papers, during the first term I edited and published my article on Venetian networks at the Journal of Interdisciplinary History 44:2 (2013), 157-179, an indexed, impact factor journal. The work aims at conciliating historical problems, methods and approaches with those of institutional economists and social scientists now entering the field of Medieval trade. In, my focus has gone to show the crucial importance of lower-rank, unofficial members of the trading nations in the functioning of cross-cultural trade. Through the use of network analysis based on notarial records, the article identifies the role of lower-rank players such as Jews, colonial subjects and uprooted individuals within the exclusive commercial networks of Venice, thus contradicting previous historiography and validating the hypothesis that economic elites did not manage to implement, alone, an effective system of business cooperation. A complementary, micro-analytical focus on individual agency describes how lower-rank merchants and brokers manipulated legal, cultural and religious categories to integrate themselves into the Venetian networks, but also to abandon them when the assets of enjoying a second-rank Venetian belonging proved insufficient.

## Related information

**Result In Brief**

[Cooperating trade communities](#)

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