

Religion, Urbanity and Trade: Processes of Mercantilisation in Urban Space - Annual Conference 2024

Centre for Advanced Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences “Religion and Urbanity: Reciprocal Formations” (FOR 2779)

Conveners: Heinrich Lang, Susanne Rau

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In November 2024, the Centre for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences “Religion and Urbanity: Reciprocal Formations”, based at the Max Weber Centre of the University of Erfurt and funded by the German Research Foundation, will hold its annual conference on processes of mercantilisation in urban space. The international conference focusses on mercantilisation brought on and shaped by the interaction of religious and urban practices, institutions, and agents. At the core of the conference convened by Heinrich Lang and Susanne Rau lays the triangular relation of economies, religion, and urbanity. This triangular relationship will be approached from different disciplinary perspectives and across historical epochs and regions to come to a more complex understanding of cities in global history.

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Processes of mercantilisation mobilised humans, non-humans and goods within cities, along the (peri-)rural areas bordering cities, and along trade routes linking urban centres. By mercantilisation, we refer to both to the expansion of economic exchange relations into areas of life hitherto understood as exclusively religious or urban, as well as contrary developments. Economic practices like trading with objects and services or the bookkeeping of debit and credit as well as sins and virtues by religious and urban actors alike are just two examples of the mutual interrelation and overlapping of economies, religion and urbanity.

In the long history of urban settlements, markets and their infrastructures developed mainly in the centres and structured the urban surrounding them. Some exceptions like

cattle markets were outside cities, linking urban and rural spaces. Economic practices changed the shape of societies and conflated urban and religious spaces. In the urban context marketplaces and sacred spaces were interwoven and partially overlapped. In many cases, the presence of religious agents and their sites even fuelled economic activities in towns.

In many European cities, marketplaces often surrounded the cathedral or main local church, while the rhythms of the markets or even fairs were coordinated with religious feasts (on co-temporal structures of calendars see for example the [COMOR project](#)). We can observe the same architectural features in Greek or Roman cities regarding the position of temples and economic activities. Another special issue is the place of the mint where precious metals were coined and loaded with a value under the surveillance of the deities. In South Asia, very similar urbanistic arrangements came to structure the cities' shape. In Calicut, the entrances to the Big Bazaar – the city's main street since the fifteenth century – are framed by mosques on either side. Today, the urban expansion financed by international capital re-structures the city or creates new quarters where religious traditions resurge. Souks were also related to the religious spaces like the central marketplace in Sanaa where mosques in a way marked the boundaries between the souk and the rest of the city. In the Islamic context, spiritual time also fostered recurrent patterns of market periods, for example the economy surrounding pilgrimage to Mekka and Medina. Across epochs and regions, the organisation of pilgrimage informed the infrastructure of towns.

Since economic practices re-structured societal and divine orders, mercantilisations were subject to governance – be it urban, imperial, or religious. Trade on marketplaces was regulated by authorities. Privileges approved by rulers also stimulated activities and brought growth or decline to markets and especially to fairs. Economic and religious practices interfered, determined technologies like credit instruments and charity organisation and constituted social groups that defined their operations to special fields of doing credit or receiving/giving alms. A special dimension of the triangular setting of economies, urban and religious spaces is the normative configuration of economic practices.

Apart from the long traditions of religious norms on economies and particularly on profit which we find in any religious context, the economic values of economic practices referred mainly to urban settings and urban societies. Those labelled as poor were frequently coerced into relationships of exchange, usually material alimentation for spiritual or moral 'caregiving'. In terms of institutions, monasteries acted not only as powerhouses of prayer but also of economic power, and often linked urban to the rural spaces.

Since the research group "Religion and Urbanity: Reciprocal Formations" focusses on trans-epochal, global (trans-cultural), and inter-disciplinary comparisons and entanglements – particularly in South Asia, the Mediterranean, and Europe – the conference aims at a broad range of approaches from different disciplines like Ancient History, Global Area Studies, Sociology, Religious Studies, Anthropology, and Economic History. The key issues are the urban spatialisation of economic practices and the methodological reflection on the trilateral analysis embedded in mercantilisations, religion and urbanity. Mercantilisations generated cross-roads in and rhythms of

everyday lives and are manifest in co-spatialities of infrastructures. Economic practices overlapped with aspects of urban-rural exchange and the integration of urban and religious actors into networks (and beyond the city walls like in the case of many monasteries).

Potential topics/panels to be considered include:

1 – *Spaces*: How do marketplaces and the sacred interrelate in the urban context? What kind of architectural arrangements were found for different epochs, regions, and religious practices? In what way town planning interfered with economic practices?

2 – *Markets and governance*: How did the governance of markets evolve? How did religious and urban authorities regulate trade in urban space?

3 – *Mobility and boundaries*: How did economic practices impact on urban and religious spaces? Which boundaries were drawn between and for social and professional groups? How was the urban/non-urban defined through economic practices?

4 – *Mercantilisation and values*: How did religious actors conceptualise and negotiate economic practices? How are religious and economic practices interrelated in urban contexts? How did specific trade practices influence on economic values in religions?