



MICOLL - Migrating commercial law and language. Rethinking lex mercatoria (11th-17th century)

MICOLL will analyze the development of commercial law by means of a tool almost ignored in this field: historical linguistics. The borrowing and transfer of legal terms will be carried out through a comprehensive and systematic investigation of medieval and early modern legal sources, in particular commercial letters, contracts and statutes. Even though legal historians tend to deny the effectiveness of a body of customary laws uniformly adopted across medieval and modern Europe, the “myth” of the ancient lex mercatoria continues to provide historical legitimacy to the supporters of corporate selfregulation. According to a widespread historiographical topos, merchants all over the world “spoke the same language” when it came to what was important for them: to make profits. As legal institutions are represented by technical legal words, an analysis of the terms merchants actually used is a powerful and never attempted way to verify the impact of merchants’ migrations on the development of commercial law, which had, in its turn, tremendous effects on social and economic history. The center of this project will be Venice, for several centuries the mandatory stop for merchandise coming from the East and directed both to northern Europe and to Genoa, from where men and goods would reach other trading centers (e.g., France and the Iberian peninsula). Our time-frame spans from the “commercial revolution” of the 11th century to the beginning of the modern period, when the new dynamics of transoceanic trade left Venice at the periphery of a world that was changing its very dimensions. Did merchants actually use the same legal terms in different geographical areas? And, above all, did they grant these words the same legal meaning? MICOLL will answer these questions by means of two main tools: a “Glossary of medieval commercial law terms” and an interactive digital map of the land routes connecting Venice with northern Europe and the Tyrrhenian Sea.

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