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Spotlight on ERC projects

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Introduction

The European Research Council has supported more than 200 research projects so far focused on the study of the human past - history and archaeology. In this brochure, we are presenting a small selection of ERC-funded research in this domain showing the depth and breadth of the grantees' scholarships*.

Gathering and analysing the evidence of past environmental effects on the lives of people living on the shores of the Bay of Bengal – the area of investigation of one of the featured researchers – may shed light on the future reactions to climate change. Analyzing political communication in ancient China – the focus of another grantee's studies - might help maintain stable political systems. Unravelling the haunting effect of the military dictatorship on the Argentinian society, which yet another ERC-funded researcher concentrated on - might enable us to lend better support to the victims of the ongoing conflicts of today. These research projects are making history relevant to our present and future.

** These texts were first published on ERC website in summer 2015.*

The European Research Council (ERC)

Set up in 2007 by the European Union, the European Research Council (ERC) is the first pan-European funding body designed to support investigator-driven frontier research and to stimulate scientific excellence across Europe.

Through long-term grants, it supports the best and most creative scientists of any nationality and age to identify and explore new directions in any field of research - Physical Sciences and Engineering, Life Sciences, Social Sciences and Humanities. There are no thematic priorities and the only evaluation criterion is excellence. In the last nine years, the ERC has awarded more than 7 000 grants to individual top researchers carrying out their research projects across Europe.

The ERC is led by an independent governing body, the Scientific Council, and the ERC President is Professor Jean-Pierre Bourguignon. The ERC has a budget of over €13 billion for the years 2014 to 2020 and is part of the EU Research and Innovation programme, Horizon 2020, for which European Commissioner for Research, Innovation and Science Carlos Moedas is responsible.

'Frontier' research: politics and environment in South Asia

"The next war will be fought over water, not politics," predicted United Nations Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali in 1991. But environmental changes and pressures also have impacts that – though just as important – may be slower and more difficult to spot. Dr Sunil Amrith studies environmental effects on migration in the Bay of Bengal – from the late-19th century to today. By shedding light on the local history of coastal peoples, his findings may offer clues on ways to develop littoral economic activities, based for instance on sea's products or tourism.

"One of the reasons the Bay of Bengal is very interesting is that it is one of the regions that is most vulnerable to climate change," explains Dr Amrith. "It is low-lying, with geographical features that contribute to its vulnerability, and communities there have always lived close to water." His research to date shows a complex relationship between migration and environmental change, so the question is: how have coastal communities experienced this in the past and how might they be affected by crises arising from future environmental and climate change?"

The scale of the question is huge: 500 million people live on this coastal rim, and one in four people in the world live in the countries bordering the Bay of Bengal. Dr Amrith's project is investigating via classical historical research – archives of South

Asian government records and personal papers – combined with a more anthropological approach – oral history interviews in communities along the coast.

Environmental history – with its overlaps with social, economic and political history – is a growing field. Dr Amrith hopes to share some of his findings across such disciplines, and with climate, environmental and political scientists. "We are looking at the frontiers of ecological change, between empires and nations, rivers and seas, and between terrestrial and maritime law," explains Dr Amrith, "as well as the risks to the communities, such as fishermen and migrants, who cross these frontiers."

"India, Bangladesh and China are all staking claims to water resources, so I was tempted to focus the research on conflict and crises," he says. "But our experience so far is that the scope should be wider than this – some of the imperceptibly slow, 'silent' changes are probably the most interesting. I want to ask: how does history as a discipline react to the phenomenon of climate change?" he concludes. "Do we have something to offer? And my answer is: yes!"

Researcher: Sunil Amrith

Host institution: Birkbeck College, University of London (United Kingdom)

ERC project: Coastal Frontiers: water, power, and the boundaries of South Asia (CFRONTIERS)

ERC call: Starting Grant 2011

ERC funding: EUR 600 000 (2012-2015)

Project webpage: <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/history/coastalfrontiers/index.html>





The coastal town of Nagore, Tamil Nadu State, has a deep history of long-distance trade.; it was devastated by the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004.

Ancient manuscripts in Ethiopia: preserving an historical and cultural heritage

Ethiopia has the most ancient tradition of written culture in sub-Saharan Africa. Until today old monasteries and churches, scattered all over the country, hold thousands of precious manuscripts. Yet, for most part, these cultural treasures are stored in precarious conditions. Prof. Denis Nosnitsin intends to preserve and study this rich heritage that soon could be lost forever.

The written sources of ancient Christian Ethiopia (which included part of contemporary Eritrea) are considered by scholars as the most important element of the cultural and historical heritage of the region. Experts estimate that currently at least 200 000 manuscripts from the past millennium belong to local monastic libraries and archives. These collections, including biblical and liturgical texts, hagiographies, legal documents and local historical writings, are the witnesses of an African Christian culture born as early as the 4th century A.D. All these documents are currently insufficiently researched and are in danger of disappearing because of improper storage conditions, fires and thefts.

Supported by an ERC grant, the team led by Prof. Nosnitsin made several field trips to North Ethiopia to identify the most important collections of manuscripts, create inventories and make digital copies. The researchers visited over 100 monasteries and churches, many of them with large libraries, and were able to digitise over

2 000 manuscripts. Next steps have been classification, scientific cataloguing in the project's databases, publication of selected studies and research results. In addition, a unique manuscript conservation programme was carried out in the framework of the project.

The field trips were also an opportunity to train local researchers on preservation and proper cataloguing of manuscripts, so that this work can continue now that the ERC project is completed.

The study of these manuscripts will provide new insights into the history of Ethiopia and the whole region.

Researcher: Denis Nosnitsin

Host institution: Hamburg University (Germany)

ERC project: Cultural Heritage of Christian Ethiopia: Salvation, Preservation and Research (ETHIO-SPARE)

ERC call: Starting Grant 2009

ERC funding: EUR 1.7 million (2009-2015)

Project website: <http://www1.uni-hamburg.de/ethiostudies/ETHIOSPARE/index.html>





China and the historical sociology of Empire

How can we explain the continuity of Chinese empires? Dr Hilde De Weerd, with her project "Chinese Empire", revisits this big question in world history. Moving beyond the comparison of early world empires (China and Rome) to explain the different courses Chinese and European history have taken, the project aims to assess the importance of political communication in the maintenance of empire.

Dr Weerd asks whether and how communication networks and identities formed during the last period of lasting multi-state rule played a role in later Chinese history. The core questions are thus twofold: How can the continuity of empire in the Chinese case be best explained? Does the nature and extent of political communication networks, measured through the frequency and multiplexity of information exchange ties, play a critical role in the reconstitution and maintenance of empire?

The methodology is based on the conviction that an investigation of the nature and extent of political communication in imperial Chinese society should include a systematic quantitative and qualitative analysis of the rich commentary on current affairs in the hundreds of notebooks and tens of thousands of letters written between roughly 1 000 and 1 300.

In the first two years of the project team focused on developing tools and researching data. They have created and made available MARKUS, an online platform for the markup and extraction of information embedded in large corpora of classical Chinese texts. They have also started developing visualization tools of the data thus extracted allowing researchers to create maps, networks, tables, and timelines of their data.

The project has a potential to radically transform our understanding of the history of Chinese political culture and inspire wide-ranging methodological innovation across the humanities. It can also contribute to a broader assessment of the relevance of political communication in the comparative study of pre-modern polities.

Researcher: Hilde De Weerd

Host institution: Leiden University (The Netherlands)

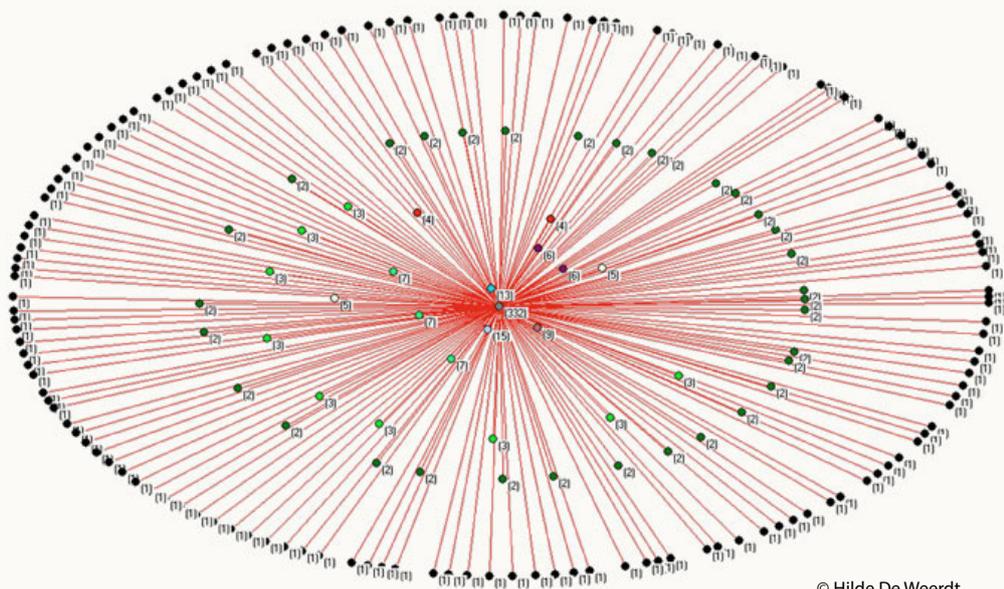
ERC project: China and the Historical Sociology of Empire (Chinese Empire)

ERC call: Starting Grant 2011

ERC funding: EUR 1.4 million (2012-2017)

Project website: <http://chinese-empires.eu/>





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揮塵第三錄卷之一

一 朝請大夫主管台州崇道觀汝陰王明清
佛宇掛鐘之閣多虛其中蓋欲聲之透徹也

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然立于席上略無驚怖之狀此與夫 國史所載

太祖皇帝少年日人馬俱墮于汴都城樓者若合

二 契焉

陳探彥縉云

明清前年風底百僚夏日訪尤丈延之語明清云中

興以來省中文字亦可引證但建炎己酉之冬

When Europeans met Native Americans: cross-cultural transfer in the New World

The discovery, conquest, and subsequent colonization of the Americas gave rise to surprising, multifaceted encounters between the Old and New Worlds. These encounters were not limited to the first-contact phase or to the military subjugation of new lands by the Europeans. They have been long processes of cross-cultural communication—in which both sides participated equally—that continued to develop through the colonial and postcolonial eras up to the present day.

These encounters brought about an inevitable culture change, more striking in the case of the indigenous world, but significant also in the case of the Europeans. The violent clash of two very advanced civilizations, which had not been in any form of communication before, was followed by a prolonged and uninterrupted process of interaction and exchange.

The research led by Dr Justyna Olko and her team in Warsaw, Seville and Mexico reconstructs and tries to understand the nature, exact trajectories, mechanisms and implications of cross-cultural contact and transfers between Europeans and the native people of the Americas. The study focuses on, but is not limited to, the Nahuatl-speaking zone of central Mexico. The meticulous and cross-disciplinary study of an extensive body of texts in Nahuatl (“Aztec”) and Spanish, complemented by present-day ethnolinguistic data, make it possible to deduce and understand patterns across time and space in ways novel to existing scholarship, embracing both micro- and macroregional trends.

Team members document a broad scope of phenomena associated with cross-cultural transfer, recording and analysing in a systematic way attestations of Spanish loanwords, neologisms, semantic

changes in traditional vocabulary, calques, as well as morphological, phonological and syntactic changes. The analysis embraces these same phenomena in sixteenth through eighteenth-century sources and in several selected modern variants of Nahuatl, which have never been compared to the colonial language. An important aim is the correlation of language phenomena with more general contact-induced culture change, including especially evolving forms of political, social and municipal organization in the native world. Such an approach makes it possible to identify and understand factors of cultural and linguistic change; it also allows the team to comprehend processes of cultural continuity in conditions of intense contact.

Breaking existing disciplinary boundaries in the humanities, the project embraces both indigenous and European perspectives. Trends seen in Old and New World encounters will be recognized, adding to the universality of our knowledge of cultural contact worldwide in ways of interest to several disciplines, such as ethnohistory, anthropology, linguistics and philology. The project is carried out together with the scholars and students for whom Nahuatl is the first language as well as with collaborating members from native communities. The methodological innovation of our work transcends the notion of “informants,” seeking an entirely new form of collaboration with native speakers of Nahuatl. Going beyond mainstream research paradigms of “Western science”, an important goal of the project is to enrich it with indigenous research methodologies and ways of generating knowledge.

Researcher: Justyna Olko-Bajer

Host institution: Warsaw University (Poland)

ERC project: Europe and America in contact: a multidisciplinary study of cross-cultural transfer in the New World across time (CULTURECONTACT)

ERC call: Starting Grant 2012

ERC funding: EUR 1.3 million (2012-2017)

Project webpage: <http://www.encounters.al.uw.edu.pl/eng/about-the-project>





Argentina's haunted collective memory

During the military dictatorship in Argentina (1976-1983) around 30 000 people, mostly political dissidents, were kidnapped, tortured, killed and made to disappear. ERC grantee Kirsten Mahlke analyzes the haunting effect on Argentinian society of this mass forced disappearance as well as how it is presented in contemporary literature.

This violent period in the Argentinian history is still present in the people's collective memory. The uncertain status of the Disappeared ("los Desaparecidos") has resulted in continuing trauma in the Argentinean society. Prof. Mahlke and her team combine literary studies with political science and social anthropology to examine the different ways in which the Disappeared shaped the Argentinian society.

For the first time, specific attention is paid to the ways in which fantastic narrative characterizes the narratives of terror and, moreover, whether the fantastic as a mode of cultural communication, tradition, and art disseminates rather than counteracts the experience of horror.

To understand this, the team has interviewed more than 100 individuals - terror victims and relatives, neighbours, lawyers - as well as analysed oral reports and literature, theatre plays, religious rituals, judicial documentation and spatial dimension of terror. The results of the research show that the uncertainty about the faith of the Disappeared has created a specific socio-political and scientific field. Moreover, the Argentine model of dealing with forced disappearances has had effect in other countries affected by similar forms of violence.

The impressive reactions to this project on a political and societal level reflect its high significance and impact. Prof. Mahlke and her team were invited by Argentinean President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, and many other public stakeholders outside the scientific community. The team also presented their research and findings in a TV series for an Argentine educational TV channel.

Researcher: Kirsten Mahlke

Host institution: University of Konstanz (Germany)

ERC project: Narratives of Terror and Disappearance. Fantastic Dimensions of Argentina's Collective Memory since the Military Dictatorship (NoT)

ERC call: Starting Grant 2009

ERC funding: EUR 1.2 million (2010-2015)

Project webpage: <http://www.litwiss.uni-konstanz.de/fachgruppen/kulturtheoriekulturwiss-methoden/erc-narratives-of-terror-and-disappearance/>



© Kirsten Mahlke



Religious minorities in the Middle Ages

How did different religions coexist in past centuries? What were the lives of religious minorities like in Medieval Europe? Researchers will now be able to investigate these questions thanks to the ERC-funded RELMIN project.

European religious diversity has its roots in the practice of medieval societies. Medieval European polities, Christian and Muslim, granted protected and inferior status to selected religious minorities. There is a rich and varied corpus of texts dealing with the legal status of religious minorities in that period, but these testimonies are dispersed in libraries and archives across various countries.

Prof. John Tolan's goal was to catalogue these sources and make them available to scholars in order to enable a greater understanding of religious diversity and cohabitation. During this project, he and his research team compiled a vast body of medieval legal documents on religious minorities from across Europe and the Maghreb from the 5th to the 15th century. The result is a unique online database that contains around 650

entries in the original language - Latin, Arabic, Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, medieval European vernaculars - accompanied by a translation into English and French, comments and an annotated bibliography.

Now scholars from many disciplines all over the world have free access to a large collection of invaluable legal sources that shed light on how minorities preserved their traditions of religious expression and negotiated their place in the legal landscape. The study of some of these historical legal sources has shown that medieval societies, like our own, underwent constant changes, and lawmakers and scholars sought responses to those changes. Religious cohabitation, while of course not always peaceful, has been the rule rather than the exception in European history.

Prof. Tolan hopes to bring a new perspective into the ongoing debates on the place of religion in modern multicultural societies.

Researcher: John Tolan

Host institution: Maison des Sciences de l'Homme Ange-Guépin (France)

ERC project: The legal status of religious minorities in the Euro-mediterranean world (5th-16th centuries) (RELMIN)

ERC call: Advanced Grant 2009

ERC funding: EUR 2.3 million (2010-2015)

Project website: <http://relmin.univ-nantes.fr/index.php/fr/>





Disputation between a Christian and a Jewish scholar (BNF)

“The European Research Council has, in a short time, achieved world-class status as a funding body for excellent curiosity-driven frontier research. With its special emphasis on allowing top young talent to thrive, the ERC Scientific Council is committed to keeping to this course. The ERC will continue to help make Europe a power house for science and a place where innovation is fuelled by a new generation.”

Jean-Pierre Bourguignon
ERC President and Chair of its Scientific Council



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