

Call for Papers

Unequal opportunities

Framework conditions and economic change in the Middle Ages

Conference of the Research Group for Late Medieval Economic History
(<https://www.wirtschaftsgeschichte.org/en>), 5 and 6 September 2024 at the University of Innsbruck,
organised by Stephan Nicolussi-Köhler (Innsbruck) and Lienhard Thaler (Vienna)

In the last years, studies on inequality have flourished. New insights into the long-term distribution of wealth or income and new ways of proper measurement allow for a better understanding of the correlation between inequality and economic growth. Whereas debates on historical inequality focus predominantly on differences in income, wealth or legal status, other causes of (social and economic) stratification such as differences in economic scope for action and framework conditions are usually examined with less attention. The conference wants to change that by discussing unequal opportunities as factor for understanding economic change. This is important because of two reasons.

Firstly, differences in origin, gender, religion, or natural landscape conditions created unequal opportunities and social and economic discrimination. The lesson that such kinds of diversity are likely to lead to severe problems and crises can be taught with illustrative historical examples on the subordinate role of women within the patriarchy, the persecution of religious minorities, the social exclusion and legal discrimination of foreigners or the continuous growth of economic inequality. However, many models highlight a single factor or combination of closely related factors (“prime mover”) or focus on specific economic actors (lords, merchants, peasants, etc.), thereby neglecting the importance of other factors or groups.

Secondly, unequal framework conditions are not static. They can change over time through regulation or exogenous factors (e.g. climate). It is necessary to include the dynamic changes within societies in the analysis, as has been shown for example by the recent discussion of the economic logic of feudal societies. Hence, not only assessing unequal opportunities at a certain point in time, but also their adjustment and alteration should be examined in order to get to a better understanding of economic divergences.

All of this can already be observed in the medieval period, when societies and developments were highly diverse. Although theories and hypothesis, especially on the impact of differing starting conditions on economic success or failure, are strong, empirical evidence is often weak. If, why, and how various forms of unequal opportunities influenced these and other economic divergences in the medieval period will be discussed during the annual conference of the Research Group for Late Medieval Economic History in Innsbruck in September 2024. The overall questions are: How did unequal economic opportunities affect economic change? Which kinds of difference in the framework conditions made a difference for economic success and failure in the Middle Ages? Themes and questions to be addressed may include, but are not limited to:

- How did the unequal distribution of means of production (labour, land, capital) influence the economic performance of a society?
- Which role did legal norms play and (how) were they implemented or circumvented?
- In which respects did landscape, geographical position, and climate create inequality of economic opportunities?

- How did cultural concepts and practices, such as rituals or religious obligations, shape economic scopes of action?
- What was the importance of gender and gender roles?
- Which role did unequal access to education and technology play?
- How did membership of certain institutions, such as private networks or legal societies, influence economic opportunities?

Proposals can be submitted until 10 March 2024 via e-mail to stephan.nicolussi-koehler@uibk.ac.at and lienhard.thaler@univie.ac.at and include: A CV, the title of the presentation and an abstract of no more than 500 words. We intend to send notifications of acceptance by 17 March 2024.