

Call for Papers
‘Between Institutions and Geography: Cities as Hubs of Medieval River
Transport and Trade’

17th European Association for Urban History Conference (Barcelona)

Dr. Marco in 't Veld (Tilburg University), dr. Bart Holterman (Forschungsstelle für die Geschichte der Hanse und des Ostseeraums), and dr. Maurits den Hollander (Tilburg University) warmly invite all academics interested in medieval river trade in an urban context to submit their paper proposals for our main session (nr. 3) at the [EAUH conference in Barcelona, 2-5 September 2026](#).

Session Abstract

It is commonly acknowledged that waterways are of crucial importance for trade. They allow for relatively efficient transportation of goods. Cities served as hubs in medieval trade, as providers of the necessary institutions and services. While the relation between geography and the early modern economy is well-studied, we know much less about the interaction between geography and these urban institutions. This session will therefore investigate how urban governance was influenced by the geography of rivers. Did cities cooperate to ensure the efficient passage of ships? Were they developing common trade policies, or rather competing? To what extent did they copy legislation or exchange professionals?

In general, cities kept a close eye on legislation and institutions in other cities. Historians, particularly in the tradition of the New Institutional Economics, have underlined the importance of these social and legal norms for facilitating economic growth. Others, like Fernand Braudel, have focused on the more stable preconditions of economic prosperity, such as the position of a city in geographically determined commercial systems. This session draws on both academic traditions. For example, the city of Dordrecht possessed important staple rights in the wine trades along the Rhine river. These privileges were opposed by other cities and would have hindered commercial activity, but on the other hand cities also cooperated to divide the river into spheres of exclusive economic influence, such as Hamburg and Magdeburg on the Elbe or Wroclaw, Frankfurt and Szczecin on the Oder river. As such, they can be considered both as pillars in the economic system as well as crucial institutions in the economic organisation of trade.

However, our focus on cities also raises additional questions. How were privileges concretely enforced and how was infrastructure maintained? Staple rights, as well as toll rights, for example, were mostly privileges of the sovereign. On the other hand, it was often up to the guilds or merchant associations to prevent harbours and canals from freezing up in winter. As such rivers, while crossing several jurisdictions, seem to have necessitated cities to participate in special forms of multi-level governance, both external (inter-city communications, relations with princely authorities) and internal (urban professionals, guilds).

Although these examples are derived from the context of the northern European lowlands, the organisers believe that these questions are relevant in relation to many river systems. It is worthwhile to compare the specific dynamics of rivers from an economic, geographic, and legal point of view. Therefore, we would like to invite scholars from all over the world to contribute, preferably based on original archival research, to the analysis of the role of cities in transport and trade along rivers.

Paper Submissions

We encourage interested scholars with a diverse, global range of perspectives on this topic to submit abstracts for our session according to the general conference guidelines. Presentations should aim to be between 10 – 15 minutes, with additional space for discussion. Abstracts of max. 2500 characters can be submitted through [this link](#) ultimately **Wednesday 22 October 2025**. Please note that you will have to register on the website first, before being able to submit. Select 'session 3' when submitting your abstract.