



Call for Papers: Premodern Economic Sanctions (c. 500 BC to c. 1700 AD)

Workshop at the University of Basel, 3rd–5th September 2025

Economic sanctions have become a routine state of exception. Currently, the European Union maintains economic sanctions against almost 5000 individuals and entities of 79 different nationalities; the United States of America list about three times as many active sanctions. What these sanctions do, and whether they work, however, has been the subject of intense academic debate for decades. Economic sanctions are employed increasingly frequently, yet in sanctions research they can be regarded as wholly ineffective or, alternately, as unethical and cruel in causing indiscriminate suffering. Over the course of the past century, moreover, economic sanctions have morphed from a measure of war (Mulder 2022), into a power-political alternative this side of war in the guise of economic statecraft (Baldwin 1985), into the economically potent world's default reaction to international challenges. The political practice of economic sanctioning is clearly Protean, and it has a history.

This workshop seeks to draw together case studies and studies of specific aspects of the premodern history of economic sanctions. Although the label “economic sanctions” is a modern one, a commonly named distant ancestor is the Athenian Megara decree of 432 BC. Medievalists have worked on the sanctioning practices and legislation of, for example, Italian city states, the Hanse, the high medieval popes, or political entrepreneurs in the Eastern Mediterranean. These studies have enriched the conflictual histories of the contexts they sprang from, while much regarding the shapes and outlines of the history of economic sanctions, which they are also part of, remains to be explored.

For these purposes, we explicitly understand “economic sanctions” to encompass the whole catalogue of economic sanctioning practices in use today, such as embargos, boycotts, punitive tariffs, import or export quotas, import or export licensing systems, dumping, preclusive purchasing, prohibitions or licensing of financial transactions, asset freezes, sequestrations, expropriations, blockades and travel restrictions; further practices of economic coercion for political purposes are also of interest. The focus of the workshop is on the European Middle Ages, but we also welcome case studies from contexts beyond Europe, and contributions from neighbouring disciplines, on sanctions anywhere between c. 500 BC and c. 1700 AD.

We are particularly interested in case studies that also address one of the following questions:

- How did premodern economic coercion compare to the sanctions we know regarding the people engaged in (or targeted by) them, or the forms they took?
- What kind of (political, moral, social) beast were these economic sanctions in contemporary discourse?
- What particular premodern logics are in evidence, for example regarding the role of markets, of borders, of patterns of (economic) interdependence, etc.?

Papers should be 20-25 minutes in length. The workshop's main language of discussion will be English, but contributions in German, French, or Italian are also welcome. Proposals should include a title, an abstract of no more than 200 words, and a short biographical sketch of no more than 100 words, and should be sent to maximiliane.berger@unibas.ch by 15th December 2024. We aim to get back to you by Christmas.