



Workshop

Freedom of the seas and freedom of the individual: a historical appraisal

School of Oriental and African Studies University of London

7 February 2025

CALL FOR PAPERS

Freedom of the seas is a time-honoured principle of international law and the dogma of old and new maritime powers. Traditionally associated with Western-dominated legal doctrine and imperialist mindset, freedom of the seas allowed European states to expand and engage in direct trade with East and West, eventually leading to imperialism and colonisation. Conceptually, its genesis is generally attributed to the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius and his advocacy in favour of Dutch trade interests in the Indian Ocean in the early XVII century. However, this narrative entirely overlooks forms of State practice and customs developed in other regions of the world, let alone other contemporary or pre-existing scholars.

Generally portrayed in a positive light and recognised as an inherent right of states, freedom of the seas has also benefitted peoples and individuals. Many people oppressed on land have turned to the sea in an effort to leave war and discrimination and to seek refuge and a better future. Starting with Aeneas escaping by ship from the burning Troy, down to the pilgrims of the Mayflower and the thousands of people who have used maritime routes for migration, the free seas have always been the means for trying to reach safety and protection and a way to be able to freely pursue one's opinions and beliefs, ultimately furthering societal change and visions of a fairer world.

However, freedom of the seas has also its dark side. The principle has underpinned colonial domination and allowed the slave trade in the Atlantic Ocean and other seas. These lesser known aspects have remained unresearched for many decades. Only recently did they start coming to the forefront, with scholars drawing parallels between old and new state practices to limit free use of the seas by individuals, while allowing slavery and forced labour.

Starting from these premises, the research project on freedom of the seas and protection of human rights, funded by the British Academy and led by Professor Irini Papanicolopulu at SOAS, organises a Workshop, bringing together leading experts and emerging young scholars to debate the relationship between freedom of the seas and individual freedom in a historical perspective. The workshop will take place at SOAS, University of London (UK) on 7 February 2025.

This call for papers invites young scholars to explore various aspects of the **relationship between freedom of the seas and individual freedom in a historical perspective, focusing on the XV-XIX centuries**. Thematically, we invite participants to deal with aspects relating but not limited to the following topics:

- Historically, who could benefit from the freedom of the seas? And to what purpose?
- What consequences did this produce upon the determination of the rights (and the duties) that states and individuals had at sea and over the sea?
- How does the freedom of the seas reflect the deeply entrenched patterns of domination that characterise much of early international law?
- To what extent (if any) could it be considered to embody also different values?
- What legal tools were developed to allow some actors to freely use the seas while limiting the freedom of others?
- Which actors were most relevant at sea, and how does the private/public divide factor into this?
- Why were some empires/State powers particularly proactive in attempting to legally defend their arguments?

Papers may focus on a specific jurist, geographic area, school of thought, historical period, or may address more transversal aspects across the identified timeframe and regions, and may do so from a variety of approaches. We particularly encourage papers from young scholars based in the Global South.

Abstracts of **800-1000 words**, addressing the theme and methodology of the proposed paper, and accompanied by an academic CV are to be submitted to al77@soas.ac.uk and ip14@soas.ac.uk by Wednesday 20 November 2024. Selected candidates will be informed by Wednesday 27 November 2024 and must submit a 7000-8000 words paper by 6 January 2025. The draft papers will be then distributed to the discussants and will be presented and discussed in the course of the Workshop of 7 February 2025.

Selected participants may be offered a scholarship to cover their travel and accommodation expenses for participating in the workshop. Scholars from the Global South, at early career stage, or belonging to underrepresented groups in Higher Education will be prioritised for the scholarship.

Key Dates

20 November 2024: deadline for the submission of abstracts

27 November 2024: communication of selection outcome

6 January 2025: deadline for the submission of draft papers

7 February 2025: workshop

For further information please contact Dr Andrea Longo at al77@soas.ac.uk