

De-centering the Global Middle Ages

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“Late to the (Tea) Party: De-centering Europe in the Premodern Tea Trade”

Abstract:

Considerable evidence exists to demonstrate that a wide variety of Chinese, Indian, and Southeast Asian commodities were transported across the Indian Ocean into the Mediterranean Sea (via the Persian Gulf or Red Sea) and, from there, entered European markets during the period of 500-1500 CE. For example, the spice trade is a key component of scholarly conceptions of a global Middle Ages—both because that trade was so extensive and lucrative and also because it provides a helpful model for thinking about global connections. Spices—including foodstuffs, medicinals, and dyestuffs—were among the most widely circulated commodities across the eastern hemisphere. But one product is conspicuous for its absence from that list of bulk dried items that traveled far and wide: tea. This presentation will examine the concept of the global Middle Ages by de-centering Europe, which provides zero evidence of tea imports in the medieval period, even though other similar products did make that journey. By interrogating the limits of globalization and some of the barriers to long distance connections and transfers, we can better understand the mechanisms by which the period did—and did not—operate as a global or hemispheric “system.” A comparison will also be made to another ritually-consumed beverage that traveled over long distances in a different part of the world. Cacao and the means of its consumption were transferred from prehispanic Mesoamerica to contemporary North America in the years around 1000 CE. The movement not only of chocolate as a substance but also of the ritual of drinking chocolate helps us to think carefully about transfer of goods both as economic commodities and as social commodities, and how or why some crossed cultural boundaries, while others did not.

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