

# Dynamics Of Protection. Asylum In The Medieval Arabic-islamic World

[10.5339/qfarc.2014.SSPP0970](https://doi.org/10.5339/qfarc.2014.SSPP0970)

Jenny Rabel Oesterle

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR :

oesterle@uni-heidelberg.de

University Of Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany

## **Abstract**

### Background & Objectives

Anthropologists describe Asylum in various societies across space and time. My approach to evaluate Asylum in the medieval Islamic World takes advantage of this "universalism of protection". The proposed presentation will take its starting point with an evaluation of protection in late antiquity and the period of the Early Middle Ages to discuss the preconditions of the cultural and religious encounter during Islamization in these areas. Moving onwards to the period of Islamic expansion and finally to the imperial period of the Caliphates, the problem of protection for refugees is related to political power and the acceptance of authority, to the role and function of various institutions and processes of institutionalization, to coexisting spaces, competing values and norms, and to a variety of legal exemplifications accompanied by a spectrum of local traditions and life habits, and finally to histories of single actors, whether mediators, refugees or persecutors. The presentation will outline the variety of forms of protection for refugees in the medieval Islamic world with a special focus on the medieval Gulf region and Northern Africa.

### Methodology

Comparative research on Protection for refugees carries the risk of a monolithic understanding of "religion" and "culture", the essentialistic description of separate cultural spheres and the improvident use of western concepts for labeling "the other". My research takes as its starting point the understanding of an entangled history. Asylum is a problem on a "global" scale; thus it is always related to aspects of cultural transfer and exchange of ideas. Refugees are people "on the move". In fact, refugees covered far distances to reach a safe place, carrying with them not only their material goods but also their traditions, experience, ideas and knowledge.

The main methodological focus is therefore anchored within transcultural history but combines a macro- and micro-historical approach. Methodologically I follow Natalie Zemon Davis in connecting research on Alltagsgeschichte with the use of relevant theoretical models which seems to be especially fruitful for the study of transcultural dynamics (Zemon Davis 1975), learn from the anthropological "thick description" (Geertz 2007) and Carlo Ginzburg's famous approach on Alltagsgeschichte (1979), that is a precise description of daily life cases.

### Conclusions

Asylum is a seismograph how societies deal with conflicts, violence and deviance. Asylum has the potential to transform physical violence into communication and mediation. It indicates processes of transgression and demarcation, adoption and rejection as well as the various ways in-between. Presumably Asylum mirrors the chances and conflicts of entangled societies. To study Asylum in the medieval world means: to focus on the actors who are involved in conflicts. It means to concentrate on "daily life cases" of refugees, criminals and on different perception of their deeds and on the other hand to contribute to a history of conflicts and conflict solutions, mediation, on the role of protected spaces. Finally: A study on Asylum sheds light not only on dynamics of transcultural interaction but Asylum itself is a catalyst of dynamical processes in entangled societies.