

The transregional method: a tool and resource for early modern border research

When it comes to early modern border history, the application of concepts used to study the 19th and 20th centuries has obscured more than it has clarified. Scholars frequently refer to the multitude of early modern 'transnational' exchanges, without clarifying how and why such cross-border exchanges differ from their modern counterparts. After all, modernist historians have argued that without strong states and strong borders there can be no such thing as transnationalism, meaning that the application of the label 'transnational' holds an inherent claim about the nature of early modern statehood and the associated borders.

The notion of transregional history offers a way out of this dilemma. Using the case of the Catholic book production in the Ecclesiastical Province of Cambrai – which encompassed the most southern parts of the Habsburg Low Countries and was one of Europe's most complex border regions – this paper discusses how the method of transregional history has clarified our understanding of early modern cross-border contacts, mobility and transfers. By reformulating classic research questions and making different heuristic choices a totally novel image of the publication of Catholic books in Cambrai during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century emerges. Instead of confirming the widely accepted idea that the ecclesiastical province was largely peripheral to book production, the paper will demonstrate that the region was actually at the heart of innovative developments in Catholic literature, which were significantly fostered by lively cross-border exchanges.