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## Présentation - Journées d'été PHEDRA

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Gilles Hebben, CHJ

My subject is the following: "The Levant Company (1592-1825), a charter company, supervising in law the British merchants in their trade with the Levant" To introduce my subject, it is the study of the legal mechanisms of the Levant Company. The Levant Company was an English charter company which was trading with the Ottoman empire between 1592 and 1825. In order to do so, it received a charter from Queen Elizabeth the 1st in 1592 which gave to the company, a monopoly on the eastern part of the Mediterranean sea and the entire Levant and the possibility to self-regulate by making its own rules, the bylaws (as long as it was not opposed to the laws in force). The commercial company was a regulated corporation, that is to say, a company in which each merchant trades for his own account, on the condition of respecting the rules enacted by the general court (the supervision organ of the company composed of all the merchants of the company), but also the rules enacted by the Kingdom, the charters and the capitulations. The company was also a tool of English diplomacy because it paid the diplomatic fees in the region (ambassadors and consuls), and it also appointed consuls. My study, initially intended to cover the period from 1592 to 1825, but it was decided to limit it to the period from 1592 to 1700, to be more focused on the beginning of the creation of the great English commercial companies.

My thesis work for now, was divided into four phases.

The first one consisted of reading many works related to the period of my subject, and not only on my subject itself. The purpose was to obtain as much information as possible about the context in which the Levant Company did operate. Whether at the historical level, in order to understand the context in which the company did evolve and the actions of it to prevent some situations. Because in fact, some of its actions are largely linked to both the international context (the conflicts with Spain and France for example) and to the English

domestic context (the civil wars, the glorious revolution ...). But also, the study of the economic context, with the research of the economic situation of both the Ottoman Empire, and England, as well as the economic doctrines in force, and in particular the mercantilist doctrine. Finally, I became interested in the study of the laws in force at the time (Holdsworth in particular).

The second phase took place when I went to Scotland. My purpose was to obtain even more specific books that are difficult to find in France. The United Kingdom has many books available via its university intranet network which are vital for the pursuit of my thesis. In particular from William Pettigrew. I therefore obtained in Edimbourg a large number of books on the English corporations, speaking of the special rules concerning large English commercial companies and their possibility of taking legal action via the concept of incorporation.

Then, the third phase. Which was the examination of the British national archives, in London, and more precisely in Kew, in west London. For my first trip, I did recover thousand pages of archives in the following forms: several minute books covering the entire 17th century (the minute books contain the summaries of the decisions and meetings of the general courts, the governing body of the Levant Company, as well as the ones of the courts of assistants, an advisory body for the general courts), the official correspondence books of the company over this period (although the majority concerning incoming and non-outgoing communications, even if the minute books establish outgoing and incoming correspondence, mostly incoming,), the registers of the Chancellery of the Constantinople factory (where I find the decisions of the Ambassador in matters of commercial disputes, his decisions within the Levant, his correspondence, etc.), registers of orders and instructions from the company (these are all the rules put in place by the Levant Company, what are now

called bylaws). This was the result of my first trip, which took place just before the Covid-19 epidemic.

My fourth phase was my recent trip to England, in February, in order to obtain new archives. The nature of the documents recovered is different from the elements that I was able to recover during my first trip at that time, it is mainly correspondence between the company and the official English institutions, I was able to recover documents linked to the ambassador (with the registers recording the commissions and the instructions to the ambassadors and consuls; the agreements; petitions and memoranda to the government) and the decisions of the ambassador aimed at regulating trade in the Levant. All these documents direct my thesis work all the more in the direction of using the commercial company as a mirror of the English commercial law of that time.