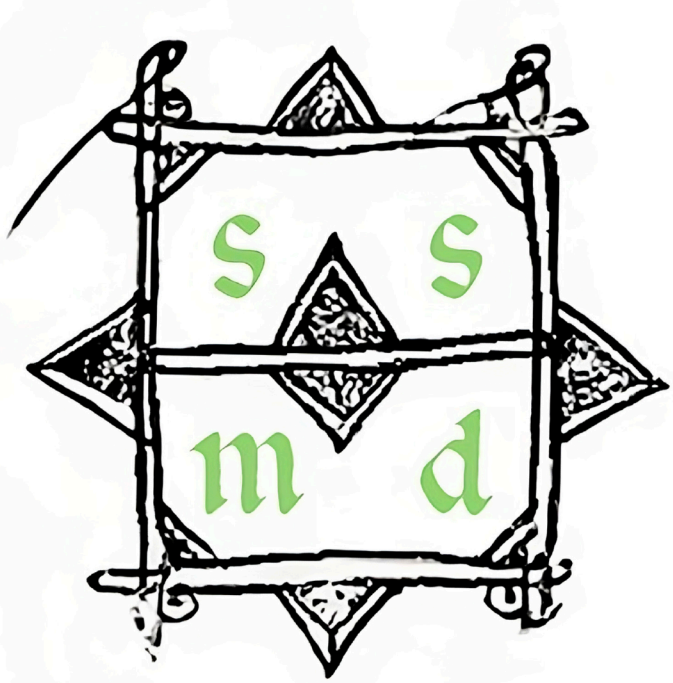
STUDI DI STORIA MEDIOEVALE E DI DIPLOMATICA

NUOVA SERIE VII (2023)



UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO
DIPARTIMENTO DI STUDI STORICI

Milano University Press

Medieval Alpine communal politics under the spotlight. The ERC project DEMALPS

di Marta Gravela

in «Studi di Storia Medioevale e di Diplomatica», n.s. VII (2023)

Dipartimento In terzo luogo, la varietà degli attori e di Studi Storici
dell'Università degli Studi di Milano - Milano University Press

https://riviste.unimi.it/index.php/SSMD

ISSN 2611-318X
DOI 10.54103/2611-318X/20184

Studi di Storia Medioevale e di Diplomatica, n.s. VII (2023)
Rivista del Dipartimento di Studi Storici - Università degli Studi di Milano
<https://riviste.unimi.it/index.php/SSMD>
ISSN 2611-318X
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Medieval Alpine communal politics under the spotlight. The ERC project DEMALPS

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Democracies of the Alps. Issues, practices and ideals of politics in mountain communities, 1300-1500 (hereafter, DEMALPS) is a medieval history research project which focuses on the political life of Alpine communities between the fourteenth and the early sixteenth centuries. Funded by the European Research Council Starting Grant 2022 programme, the project is based at the University of Turin and will last five years, until May 2028[1].

The project's main question arose from observing how mountain areas and their inhabitants' political claims were (and often still are) depicted in current public discourse: an isolated and backward world, fragmented into a multitude of small and frequently conflicting villages; a reactionary world subject to decisions made by central administrators elsewhere, against which resistance and protest emerge as the sole political expressions. It will suffice to observe that the strongest reluctance to the Covid-19 vaccination campaign emerged in European mountain regions during 2021, reinforcing the image of mountain inhabitants as rejecting resolutions taken by central governments; or to consider the different

[1] Funded by the European Union (ERC StG 2022, grant agreement n. 101077793, 2023-2028). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Council. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

views expressed by national or European institutions on the one hand, and mountain inhabitants on the other in terms of exploitation of natural resources to face environmental challenges.

Despite the fact that late medieval and early modern studies have largely investigated mountain areas, the perspective of protest, revolt and conflict against political authorities or between neighbouring communities still prevail, the 1525 Peasants' War or the countless conflicts concerning communities' borders and rights representing the most notable examples[2].

However, this representation of mountain communities – often external and top-down – fails to grasp the complexity of their political ideals and practices. Overcoming this image of Alpine populations is the main goal of the DEMALPS project, which aims to provide a picture from the 'ground up' of Alpine political dynamics and values. How did these political societies work? Which issues were at stake in local politics? How was political participation perceived and practiced? Who had the right to a voice in collective debates? What margins of agency did local polities have and to what extent did they contest such limits? Which values inspired the political action of villagers? To what extent did they differ from those developed in the cities?

On the basis of preliminary investigations, DEMALPS will explore the Alps as the place where new political trends, culture and ideals emerged and shaped communal life which have features we might call 'democratic'. A survey of the surviving sources reveals the existence of innovative forms of government, based on wide political participation as well as horizontal forms of solidarity and exchange. By using the term 'democracies' we do not intend to anachronistically project the modern notion of democracy into the late medieval period; rather, by assessing the 'democratic' features of mountain society we aim to highlight the character of these communities, which might relate to modern political experiences: e.g., wide political participation of villagers, admission of women to assemblies, importance of debate, involvement based on membership rather than wealth, status or lineage[3].

DEMALPS draws on and combines different research lines. First, the studies on Alpine communities, starting from the pioneering research by Peter Blickle, who argued for the substantial political development of Alpine communities between the fifteenth and sixteenth century, also linking this growth to the circulation of the Reformation values[4]. An approach which was either strongly questioned or applied to new areas[5], such as the Lombard and Swiss Alps thoroughly investigated by Massimo Della Misericordia, who highlighted the complexity of

[2] See for instance the recent collection of studies *Communities and Conflicts.*

[3] On other forms of democracy beyond the Western tradition, see Cacopardo, *Chi ha inventato la democrazia?*

[4] Blickle, *From the communal reformation*; *Resistance, Representation, and Community*; Kümin, *The Communal Age*.

[5] Hattori, *Community, Communication*.

local political culture[6]. Significant research then focused on the Alpine economy and social structures, as well as on the relationships between the Alps and the surrounding territories[7].

Second, new research lines emerged since the 2000s, more broadly devoted to rural communities, from those exploring the 'spatialisation' of social relationships, to investigations on the multifarious faces of community identity and forms of collective organisation, to studies focusing on the processes of elaboration of local law and the role of written records, which shed light on the peasants' literacy and political action[8]. Increasing attention was paid by historical research to sources, practices of production of documents and record-keeping traditions of rural communities in recent years. Rural archives have been explored from various perspectives and significant importance was also given to the activity of Alpine notaries from the late Middle Ages onward[9]. However, specific research concerning the structures of Alpine municipal archives – probably overshadowed by ecclesiastical and notarial archives – has never been attempted, not to mention an analysis of the records of mountain community assemblies. This is most likely due to the scarcity of such records in large part of the Alps, but can also be ascribed to the great interest of historians in their urban counterparts: city council registers, survived in incredibly rich archival series everywhere in Europe[10].

Studies on urban assemblies' records thus represent the third reference point of the project: not only did they scrutinise councils' composition and political society, but also voting practices, political correspondence, the mechanisms of political debate, and the expression of popular classes[11].

To accomplish its goal DEMALPS will test hypothesis and methodology on a particular Alpine area, the Western Alps. A number of arguments lie behind the definition of the geographical area under investigation.

The shortage of studies. While the Central and Eastern Alps have been the subject of several studies, the late medieval Western Alps are considerably understudied, despite their crucial importance in economic and demographic as well as political terms. This has inevitably led to the lack of a comprehensive perspective: the few existing studies generally examine Alpine areas as distinct polities – even though such political boundaries do not necessarily match those perceived by

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[6] Della Misericordia, *Divenire comunità*, Id., *Le comunità rurali*.

[7] It is only possible to mention here the main synthesis, see Carrier - Mouthon, *Paysans des Alpes* and *Le Alpi medievali*.

[8] *Communautés d'habitants*; Torre, *Luoghi*; Teuscher, *Lords' Rights and Peasant Stories*; Provero, *Le parole dei sudditi*.

[9] *Archivi e comunità*; Del Tredici, *Senza memoria?*; *Il notariato nell'arco alpino*.

[10] Coulet, *Les déliberations communnales*; Sbarbaro, *Le delibere dei Consigli*; Tanzini, *A consiglio*; *La voix des assemblées*; Liddy, *Who decides?*

[11] *Consulter, délibérer, décider*; *The Voices of the People*; *Cultures of voting*; Hebert, *La voix du peuple*; *Words and Deeds*.

local populations themselves – and mostly with a focus on their place in exterior state formation and administration[12].

The exceptional and unexplored documentary landscape. The bias of the aforementioned research has obscured or hidden the fact that late medieval sources in municipal archives of town and villages are abundant on both sides of the Western Alps. Indeed, this is the only region of the Alps where assemblies' records of communities have survived in large quantity. These specifically allow profound investigation into decision-making practices and political ideals of villagers: council proceedings reported the assemblies' composition, debate, and decisions, lists of officers, correspondence with other communities, lords and dukes. It is an outstanding corpus of sources, whose analysis can produce significant advances in historical, social, and political studies. Other significant sources preserved in municipal archives include local fiscal and accounting records, as well as notarial deeds dating back as early as the thirteenth century.

The cultural and political complexity. In the late Middle Ages this large area included several polities, as well as a peculiar mixture of cultures, languages, religious beliefs, and political traditions. The region included populations speaking various vernacular languages, from French to Occitan, from *Francoprovençâl* to Walser German, and religious minorities, even heresies, such as the Waldensians; different cultural influences derived from their proximity to the kingdom of France, the Empire, and the Italian city-states. A few territorial princes (Anjou, Dauphiné, Saluzzo, Savoy and Savoy-Achaea, the bishop of Sion) and numerous seigneurial lords exerted control over the various Alpine valleys, while some communities obtained forms of autonomy and self-government – such as the Swiss Confederacy, the so-called Republic of the *Escartons* – or repeatedly attempted to obtain them, like the rebellious communities of the *Tuchini*[13]; surprisingly, this remarkable trend towards self-government, which seems to link these various political expressions, has never been considered holistically by scholars, in contrast to the treatment of the Peasants' War and Central-Eastern Alpine revolts which were at the core of extensive research.

DEMALPS will thus examine the Western Alpine arc as a whole, investigating the two sides of the Alps in its entirety for the first time. The area under study includes all mountain communities from the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region at the southern end to the Wallis region at the northern end, an area whose boundaries have been identified on the basis of the Alpine Convention signed in 1991 by all the countries sharing the Alpine territory (https://www.atlas.alpconv.org/info/, see figure 1 in the annexes).

Available catalogues, inventories and preliminary *in loco* surveys allow us to identify more than 80 archives thus far for research, providing an estimated 400

[12] Barbero - Castelnuovo, *Governare un ducato*; *De part et d'autre des Alpes*; Barbero, *Il ducato di Savoia*.

[13] Vaillant, *Les libertés des communautes*; Barbero, *Una rivolta*; Gravela, *La semina del diavolo*.

registers and deeds of communities' assemblies' proceedings for research, with more likely to be found through the complete analysis which will be carried out during the first year of the project (see figure 2 and 3 in the annexes).

By studying unexplored Alpine assemblies' proceedings and other sources bearing traces of political actions and ideals, DEMALPS will search for the inhabitants' voice. In order to do this on a large scale, the project takes a leap forward, developing innovative research based on collaboration between researchers in medieval history, digital humanities, diplomatics, and archival science.

The project has been conceived as a native digital project specifically designed for collaborative work and sharing data, to allow the team to collect, integrate, and analyse a huge amount of information from archival sources scattered in several archives, and share them with the scholarly community during the course of the project. DEMALPS thus embeds principles of FAIR data (findable, accessible, interoperable, and reusable) in the very research process. An online application (XML-TEI database and website interfaces) is being designed to enter archival information as metadata, to make it subsequently available from the get-go for analysis with GIS and network analysis tools, as well as in PDFs. The data will be exported, with stable identifiers and according to Dublin Core metadata standards, to a long-term archival storage service, and digital tools will also enable the team to shape specific research questions and adjust them according to trends emerging from the sources.

The second stage will entail extensive archival research in municipal archives in France, Italy and Switzerland engaging researchers in two ways. First, carrying out thorough investigation of surviving sources produced between 1300 and 1530 by the Western Alpine communities, in close collaboration with institutions like the *Soprintendenza archivistica per il Piemonte e la Valle d'Aosta* and the Archives Départmentales: aimed at revealing not only the volume of assemblies' proceedings, but also the amount and types of other late medieval documents, it will be the first comprehensive survey on such a scale, helping archival institutions to better preserve records in the future.

Second, the investigation of local assemblies' proceedings will be undertaken. Which offices and tasks were entailed in local communities? Who could obtain them? To what extent was political participation open and how was turnover practiced? Were there any discriminations in terms of gender, wealth, and social strata? Which were the main themes at stake in the collective debate? How were collective resources managed? What type of relationship did communities establish with superior authorities and among themselves? These registers provide a significant amount of data in relation to community assemblies and representatives, mechanisms to elect and replace them, different local offices, questions debated by the community, discussions and voting procedures; data related to practices of democracy, the foundations of political action, and community life issues will be entered in the online database and subsequently analysed through digital tools.

The project will not only address questions about the values and practices of Alpine politics, but also provide innovative diplomatic and archival analysis of Alpine sources in comparative perspective. The third stage will thus be devoted to investigating record production and record-keeping practices, crucial issues to understand the political values and influences of the Alpine communities. How were records produced and preserved? In which period did these registers emerge? Did they have the same structure in the different Alpine areas? Did they adopt the urban model or elaborate autonomous forms? Were communities influenced by the type of authority they were subject to? Which language, Latin or vernacular, was used? Which cultural and administrative influences do records reveal in the various parts of the Western Alps? The methods of archival science and diplomatics will be employed. A diplomatic analysis of assemblies' proceedings produced by mountain communities is still missing: the abundance of sources in this region offers an unprecedented opportunity to bridge this gap. Furthermore, DEMALPS will carry out a comparative study aimed at defining the development of municipal archives in the different areas under scrutiny, in strict connection to the local socio-political structures. Updated collections (searchable inventories and maps) aimed at making scholarly research in these archives more effective will be realised.

The last stages of the project will be more strictly interpretative. Drawing on the large set of collected data, the fourth stage will entail specific investigation on the foundations of political action of Alpine populations, as well as the ways in which local culture and religion influenced them. Which values inspired mountain populations? Which were their political ideals? How did these values and ideals differ from those of urban culture? What relationship existed with the political culture of superior authorities? Was it simply a relationship based on resistance and protest? What did a series of concepts (e.g. common good, political representation, social hierarchies, ideals of social inclusion and exclusion) mean in local society? Was their meaning different from what authorities conceived? Special attention will be devoted to the multiple relationships between different Alpine communities or valleys, and to the use and production of laws. Through digital elaboration of data, glossaries and maps of political references, language, and networks will be produced. The final stage will involve all team members in wide comparative investigations in their respective domains, to assess the relevance of project results in the wider European context.

A team of early career researchers is being recruited to carry out specific parts of the project under the supervision of the Principal Investigator, Marta Gravela. An expert in Digital Humanities, Jean-Paul Rehr, is working as a postdoctoral fellow on the development of the digital application; a research assistant with expertise in Digital Archival Science, Chiara Corradini, is mapping the surviving archives and will collaborate to the elaboration of the digital tools according to FAIR principles; two postdoctoral fellows in Medieval History, Clément Carnielli and Davide Morra, have started investigating sources in French and Italian archives respectively. Finally, Noémie Lacroix will soon start a PhD thesis within

the project focusing on the communities of the Briançonnais and Embrunnais. Other postdoctoral fellows with expertise in Medieval History and Diplomatics, as well as another PhD student will join the team during subsequent phases of the project. The team is supported by an Advisory Board of experts in the different research themes and methodologies of DEMALPS, including Marjorie Burghart, Nicolas Carrier, Massimo Della Misericordia, Christian D. Liddy, Lorenzo Tanzini, and Simon Teuscher.

The final goal of DEMALPS is to offer the scholarly community not only a new view of politics in late medieval Europe, assessing the political role of supposedly marginal areas, but also a research instrument to carry out further studies, since research hypothesis, data, and their analysis will be made publicly available online during and after the project through the online application. This will enable a better understanding of the transformations of late medieval Europe, but also foster new research in otherwise neglected archives.

Fig. 1. The western Alpine arc within the boundaries of the Alpine Convention (source: https://www.atlas.alpconv.org/).

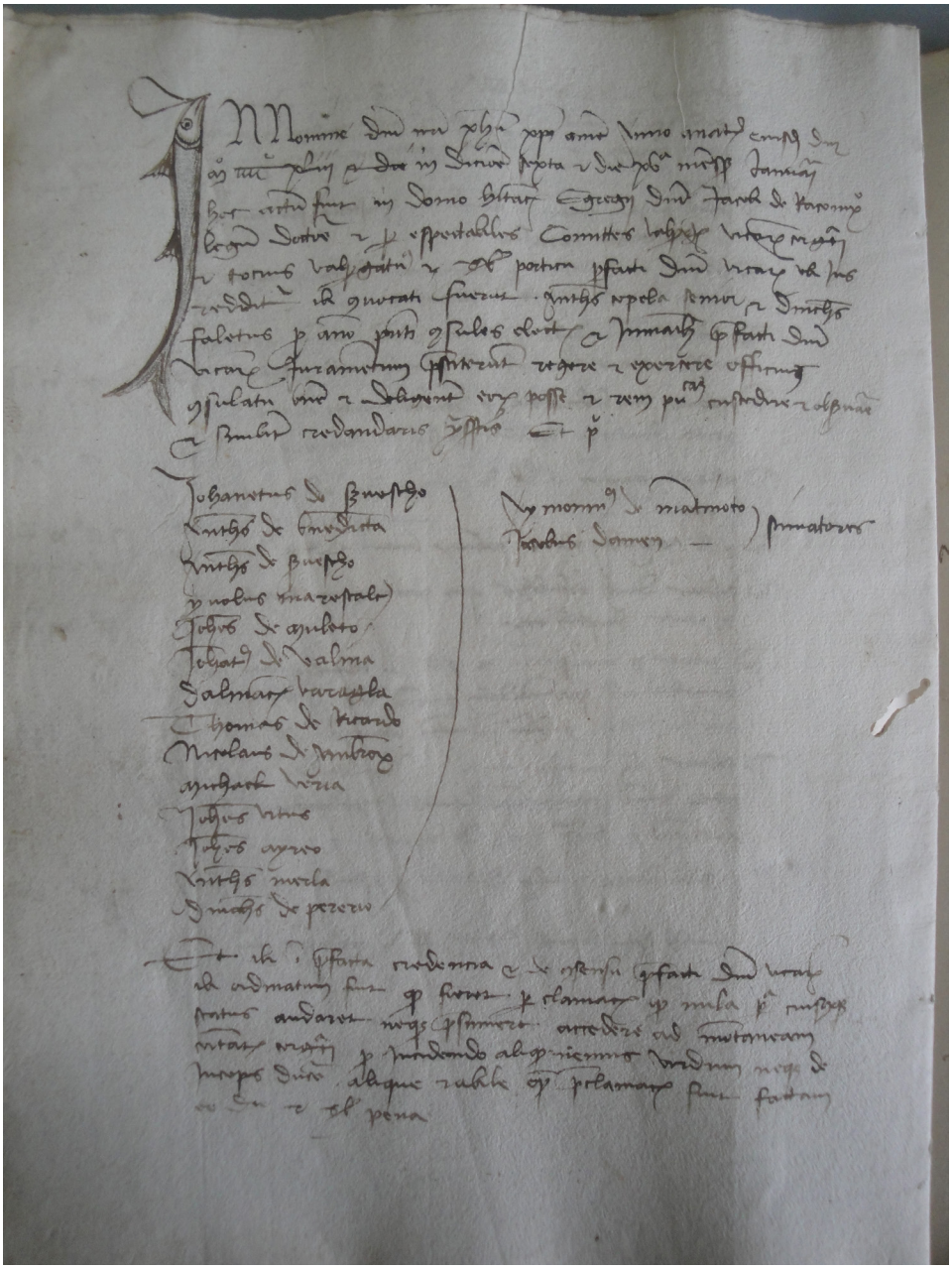

Fig. 2. *Council's proceedings of the community of Cuorgnè*, 1435 (Archivio storico del comune di Cuorgnè, *Ordinati e deliberazioni del Consiglio*, volume 1).

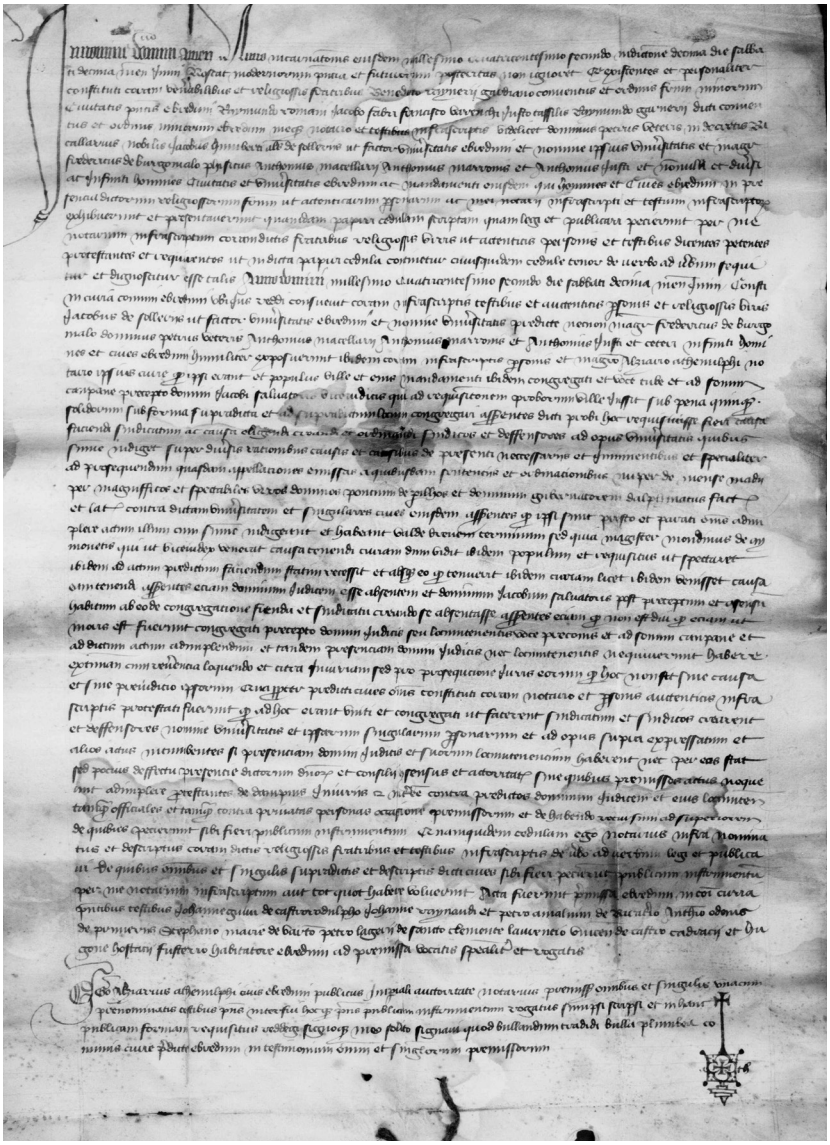

Fig. 3. Proceeding of the assembly of the inhabitants of 1402 (Archives Départmentales des Hautes-Alpes, Embrun, BB 1 Registres des délibérations communales et assemblées générales des habitants).

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TITLE

Medieval Alpine communal politics under the spotlight. The ERC project DEMALPS

La politica delle comunità alpine del medioevo sotto i riflettori. Il progetto ERC DEMALPS

ABSTRACT

The article presents the ERC research project DEMALPS, which studies late medieval mountain areas as the cradle of radically new political experiences, inspired by original values and practices of self-governance. The focus of the project is on the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Western Alps, a broad territory (including modern French, Italian and Swiss regions) which saw unprecedented political unrest and experimentation with forms and institutions. Based on a rich corpus of sources, mostly scattered across local municipal archives, DEMALPS will offer an extraordinary insight into the Alpine inhabitants' political ideals and connections, which will be explored through an interdisciplinary approach combining medieval history, digital humanities, diplomatics, and archival science. DEMALPS proposes to be a native digital project specifically designed for collaborative work, thanks to the development of an online application to collect, analyse and share data within the team and subsequently with the scholarly community.

L'articolo illustra il progetto ERC DEMALPS, che prende in esame le aree montane nel tardo medioevo come base di esperienze politiche nuove, ispirate da valori e pratiche di autogoverno originali. Il progetto si concentra sulle Alpi occidentali dei secoli XIV-XV, un vasto territorio (comprensivo di regioni attualmente francesi, italiane e svizzere) che vide un fermento politico senza precedenti e una viva sperimentazione di forme e istituzioni politiche. Grazie a un ricco corpus di fonti sparse negli archivi delle comunità, DEMALPS offrirà un eccezionale spaccato degli ideali politici degli abitanti delle Alpi, indagato con un approccio interdisciplinare che combina storia medievale, digital humanities, archivistica e diplomatica. DEMALPS è un progetto "nativo digitale", concepito espressamente nell'ottica di una ricerca di gruppo, grazie allo sviluppo di una piattaforma online per la raccolta, analisi e condivisione dei dati all'interno dell'equipe di ricerca e in seguito con la comunità scientifica.

KEYWORDS

Alps, communities, archives, late Middle Ages, democracy

Alpi, comunità, archivi, tardo medioevo, democrazia