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Academics to investigate Arabic piracy and sea-trade

ACADEMICS will investigate the history of piracy and trade routes on Middle Eastern seas during a major three-year project at the University of Exeter.

The university's Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies has launched its £750,000 Maritime Ethnography of the Arabian and Persian Gulf and the Red Sea project (MARES). The project focuses on the maritime traditions of people travelling on the sea routes of the Middle East.

Millions of barrels of oil pass along the routes each day. Huge container vessels bring Asian manufactured goods to Middle Eastern markets and through the Suez Canal to European consumers and beyond. Strategic control of the Gulf is hotly contested both militarily and diplomatically and the recent capture of the super tanker Sirius Star has drawn attention to the prevalence of modern-day pirates on the busy sea-route.

The routes were no less important in the past, although different commodities passed along them. These included Mamluk metalwork, Chinese porcelain, Egyptian grain, African slaves and incense.

The MARES project will draw on ethnography, anthropology, archaeology, history and linguistics to try to understand how people made their lives on these seas.

Professor Dionisius Agius, leading the project, said: "For centuries, the Islamic lands stood at the centre of trading and communications networks that stretched across Africa, Asia and Europe. Seafaring was a vital medium in achieving that.

"The sea brought into contact people of diverse identities and traditions, carrying with them goods, technologies and ideas."

As part of the project there will be regular public lectures, as well as seminars and workshops.