



**Centre d'études et de documentation
économiques, juridiques et sociales**

On Tuesday November 12, 2024 at 11 am at CEDEJ **Peter Hill** will be presenting his research **Plague and Enlightenment in nineteenth-century Egypt: Mikha'il Mishaqa in Damietta, 1817-20.**

In 1817, aged seventeen, Mikha'il Mishaqa arrived in the port of Damietta, in the Nile Delta. The son of the banker to Emir Bashir al-Shihabi of Mount Lebanon, Mishaqa joined a prosperous community of Syrian Catholic merchants in the bustling commercial town. But he soon found himself preoccupied with two things. One was the bubonic plague, which arrived in Damietta each year for several months – and to which people reacted in a number of different ways, drawing on medicine, religion and magic. The other was a set of ideas derived from the European Enlightenment, circulating in Damietta thanks to the translations of the Greek Orthodox merchant Basili Fakhr and his translation circle. Out of this experience came a major change in the young Mikha'il Mishaqa's life: he came to see all religions as 'false' and adopted a deist position: he would follow only 'the natural light planted within us by God'. This paper will trace the unusual milieu of Damietta in the early nineteenth century, and Mikha'il Mishaqa's interaction with it, presenting material from my recent biography of Mishaqa, *Prophet of Reason: Science, Religion and the Origins of the Modern Middle East* (Oneworld, 2024).

Peter Hill is a historian of the modern Middle East, specialising in the Arab world in the long nineteenth century. He is the author of *Utopia and Civilisation in the Arab Nahda* (2020) and *Prophet of Reason: Science, Religion and the Origins of the Modern Middle East*. He has published articles in *Past & Present*, the *Journal of Arabic Literature*, and *Journal of Global History*.