When writing the history of legal concepts such as "world cultural heritage", one faces interesting theoretical challenges. How to bring the coming into being of a global normative concept in a historical narrative? A particular challenge for global legal historians is to use local, national, and international frames for the historical investigation of international law.

The traditional narratives of the history of cultural heritage protection suggest that the development of international legal rules was fundamentally driven by codification efforts of the laws of war and customary international law beginning in the 19th century.

Different to this norm-centered approach to the history of international law, the main argument of this project is that the advance of regulations concerning cultural heritage emerged in a complex relation to the discourse of "civilization" in international law – with all its colonial implications. Putting the focus on these intersections between law and "civilization" the presumably unblamable purpose of law to protect culture becomes ambivalent. The word "administering" in the title of this study alludes to this uncertain role of the law. It suggests a new narrative that inscribes the colonial encounter into the development of this legal field.

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Administering Culture in International Law: The Colonial Pedigree of World Cultural Heritage

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