

ATHENA

CRITICAL INQUIRIES IN LAW, PHILOSOPHY AND GLOBALIZATION

Submitted: 11 March 2026 / Reviewed: 6 May 2026 / Published: 6 July 2026

Globalisation, Interdisciplinarity and Methodology in the Humanities, History and Legal History

A Plea for Quantitative Comparative Methods

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship between globalisation, internationalisation and methodological choices in the humanities, history and legal history. In particular, it analyses and discusses the use and role of quantitative comparative methods in the field of legal history. While globalisation generally would seem to make such research more relevant, the paper shows that it is still very rare in many legal history journals. This is unfortunate, since quantitative comparative analyses can have many benefits, especially when combined with qualitative analyses. Quantitative methods can help researchers reveal patterns that might not be visible in qualitative analyses, analyse complex phenomena involving many variables and offer valuable overviews. There could be many reasons behind this lack of quantitative research, but three factors are stressed here: 1) misconceptions about quantitative methods and a certain bias in the methodological debate, 2) overemphasis of the differences between quantitative and qualitative methods, and 3) systems for research evaluation and funding that are badly suited for quantitative comparative research. Given these impediments, what is needed, it is argued, is development of new quantitative methods adapted to legal history, further debate about methodological choices, increased methodological transparency as well as discussions about the consequences of current funding and evaluation practices.

Keywords: legal history, quantitative methods, comparative methods, humanities, globalisation, interdisciplinary

ATHENA

Volume 6.1/2026, pp. 38-69

Themática

ISSN 2724-6299 (Online)

<https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2724-6299/24400>



Introduction

The issues concerning globalisation and scientific practices and methods raised in this Thematic Issue explore a plethora of aspects and involve an almost immense range of possible sub-issues. One is the connection between internationalisation and an increased emphasis on interdisciplinarity, multidisciplinary, or a generally more *transdisciplinary* stance among researchers, universities and funding agencies.

From a methodological point of view, increased internationalisation also brings comparative methods and perspectives into focus. Since researchers from different geographical areas are increasingly aware of each other's research, comparisons are both more easily made and become more relevant. Source material, that has previously only been available within smaller geographical areas, also increasingly becomes available instantly (digitally) and decodable (translated) for researchers worldwide. This connection is, in my opinion, even stronger as regards quantitative comparisons: more comprehensive intercultural and transnational comparisons must, to a certain degree, be statistical. As A. W. Carus and Sheilagh Ogilvie have stressed in a similar context, such comparisons are “inherently (if in practice not always explicitly)” quantitative, and “must refer to the distribution of some variable of interest over a range of possible values” (Carus and Ogilvie, 2009, 894).

In this paper, the focus will be a small part of this complex of problems: the role of quantitative, comparative research methods in my own research fields: history and legal history. For closer analyses, the geographical context will also often be my own: Sweden. This subject both involves questions about which role such methods actually play in these fields today, why this is the case and, finally, which role I think it can be argued that they *could* (or perhaps *should*) play. The broader aim of the paper is therefore both to offer some initial analysis and discussion of the interaction of globalisation, inter- and multidisciplinary and quantitative comparative methods in these fields,

and to argue for certain methodological rethinking. The discussion will also include some remarks on the new fields of digital humanities, digital history and legal digital history, although the main focus of the discussion is “traditional” quantitative methods.

Below, I will first briefly return to the discussion on the internationalisation of research and inter- and multidisciplinary methods initiated above and elaborate on the current state of internationalisation and interdisciplinarity within the humanities, history and – specifically – legal history. This will be followed by an assessment of the prevalence of quantitative, comparative methods in these fields from two perspectives: a general overview and discussion of their use and role in the humanities, history and legal history, and a quantitative study of the prevalence of *quantitative* (and *quantitative comparative*) methods in different types of legal history research. The paper will conclude with a discussion of possible factors behind the current state of research, and some comments on the value and role of quantitative comparative research in legal history.

1. Internationalisation of Research, Inter- and Multidisciplinary Approaches and Comparative Methods in the Humanities, History and Legal History

There is no doubt that there is a strong current trend within humanities research in general towards internationalisation, as well as a push towards inter- and multidisciplinary methods. Both internationalisation and interdisciplinary methods have been emphasised and promoted by universities, funding agencies and researchers for some time now, resulting in a persistent trend. As for the humanities as a whole, trends in these directions were also clearly identified in the *Humanities World Report*, which assessed the state of humanities research about ten years ago. More specifically, from in-depth interviews with 89 leading humanities scholars from 41 countries, the authors of the Report identified a trend towards

“research cross-fertilisation”, i.e. an emphasis on interdisciplinary, collaborative, comparative and transnational research (Holm, Jarrick and Scott, 2015, 4, 42, 48–52, 63).

These trends are, of course, multifaceted, and can vary significantly in strength and character between disciplines and nations, depending on existing research cultures, institutional factors, financial conditions of research and more. The trends identified by Holm, Jarrick and Scott also involve a number of aspects: the interviewed scholars’ assessments of their own fields, the direction of their own research, statements on productive ways forward, funding opportunities and initiatives, as well as demands on internationalisation from governments, universities and funding agencies. It is, for example, notable that as many as 63 of the 89 scholars interviewed for the Report described their own research as interdisciplinary. Many researchers refer to advantages of interdisciplinary methods, such as their innovative qualities (Holm, Jarrick and Scott, 2015, 111–135). At the same time, the authors also stress that the trends are associated with challenges:

While we conclude that interviewees broadly embraced the opportunities of global and interdisciplinary research, these come with challenges of language, power, finance and culture that are little understood, even within the research communities themselves (Holm, Jarrick and Scott, 2015, 111).

The challenges of one of these developments – the internationalisation of research – have been studied more closely by three Swedish scholars: Magnus Öhlander, Katarzyna Wolanik Boström and Helena Pettersson.¹ In the research project *Swedish Humanities and the Challenges of Internationalization*, they have analysed the responses to increasing demands on internationalisation within three disciplines in Sweden: philosophy, Romance languages and history. Besides identifying differences between these disciplines, they also make some pertinent observations about history

¹ On the practice and challenges of multidisciplinary research, see also Pettersson, 2013.

in particular. For example, they identify a shift in the history discipline in Sweden from a

mainly Swedish focus to a more international, regarding research topics, research cooperation, English as a communication language and mobility through postdoctoral fellowships, scholar sabbaticals, conferences and teachers' exchange programs (Öhlander, Wolanik Boström and Pettersson, 2020, 249).

Alongside this development – and closely connected to it – they also identify a trend towards “commercialisation” of knowledge, as well as a greater emphasis on quantity of production and publication, and on publication in English. That is, what is favoured is, to a great degree, shorter texts, published in peer-reviewed journals, and ideally English ones. At the same time – and in line with the results of the *Humanities World Report* – the full picture they give also includes differing opinions among scholars in the field. Most importantly, this includes a generational divide concerning internationalisation, resistance to commercialisation, as well as a persistent national debate about the “crisis” of the humanities and its perceived lack of internationalisation (Öhlander, Wolanik Boström and Pettersson 2020, 233, 237–240, 248–251).

Moving to the smaller academic field of legal history, internationalisation and an increased focus on interdisciplinarity are clearly noticeable here as well. At a European level, this can, for example, be illustrated by the creation of the *European Society for Comparative Legal History* (ESCLH) in 2009, with the official online journal (*Comparative Legal History*, Taylor & Francis) added in 2013. Although a European society, the purpose of the society was also clearly transnational: to “overcome the nationalistic approach to legal history by emphasizing the need for a comparative approach” (Masferrer, 2019, 69). In their introduction to the Research Handbook *Comparative Legal History*, Aniceto Masferrer, Kjell Å. Modéer and Olivier Moréteau also identify a move towards greater emphasis on

comparative methods in legal history in the new millennium. As the authors note, comparisons have been made in legal scholarship since Antiquity and comparative methods have had periods of increased popularity and use. However, they clearly see the years around the turn of the 21st century as a crucial stage in the development of comparative legal history as a discipline and a more comprehensive and established field of research. The authors emphasise both the transnational and interdisciplinary qualities of the new field, as well as see it as a reflection of broader scientific trends in this direction. In combining aspects of comparative law and legal history, comparative legal history also intrinsically represents a step towards an interdisciplinary approach (Masferrer, Modéer and Moréteau, 2019, 1, 5–8, 12–13; see also Duve, 2014a, 4–6). In the same volume, Adolfo Giuliani makes a similar observation about the development of the field of comparative legal history, noting for example its “exponential growth [...] over the past two or three decades in both research and legal education” (Giuliani, 2019, 30).

The development of one subfield within legal history – Scandinavian and Nordic medieval legal history – can also be taken as a case in point. Since the last decades of the 20th century, Nordic legal history can be said to have developed in a more pan-European and, to a certain degree, more comparative direction. As Per Andersen noted in 2006, Nordic medieval legal history has largely moved from interpreting Nordic medieval law as different, “late”, and peripheral, to seeing it as integrated with Europe and a variety of European developments (although adapted to local conditions) (Andersen, 2006, 10–11, 25–26). This has also included a strong focus on influence from Roman and Canon Law. As Andersen notes, to fully understand a legal tradition, it is of course important to look at both its internal history and possible external influences. Nevertheless, it is clear that this new direction of research has opened the door to a more comparative and transnational/transregional approach in Nordic medieval legal history, although mostly with a European perspective. The trend is reflected in a number of transnational, comparative

monographs and anthologies from the decades around – and especially after – the turn of the century, such as Elsa Sjöholm’s much debated study of the Swedish medieval laws in a European context (Sjöholm 1988) and the two publications from the Carlsberg Conference on Medieval Legal History published 2005 and 2014 (Tamm and Vogt, 2005; Andersen et al., 2014), as well as an increased tendency to publish in English. An even stronger sign of the internationalisation of the field is the project *Medieval Nordic Laws*. The project, which began at the University of Aberdeen in 2009, aims to translate all medieval Nordic provincial laws into English, and publish them with comments. Since earlier translations into modern languages have mostly been into Nordic languages, this will open a large corpus of sources to international researchers. To date, the project has rendered translations of most of the Danish provincial laws, several of the Norwegian medieval laws and some of the Swedish laws. Connected to the project is also *The Lexicon of Medieval Nordic Law* in print and as an online resource, offering translations of terms used in the laws, and comments on more commonly used terms (Love et al., 2020 and online edition).

Despite these signs of internationalisation, increased transnational focus and more opportunities for comparison, change in this direction has also been seen as insufficient or only in its inception. Thus, during the last decades, a number of legal historians have stressed the lack of such approaches and called for more research in this direction. For example, in the seminal anthology *Entanglements in Legal History*, the editor, Thomas Duve, both presents some examples of existing global legal history and proposes an expansion of this approach: a move away from a Eurocentric, diffusionist model of comparative legal history, towards a combination of global legal history and local histories (Duve, 2014a and 2014b). In such an undertaking, he also stresses the importance of interdisciplinary discourses. In line with this, he envisions a legal history that “combines local studies in different areas, analyzes them with concepts and a vocabulary apt for intercultural

communication and tries to integrate its results into a global dialogue on normativity” (Duve, 2014b, 61; see also 38, 54–60).

Other scholars have suggested comparisons between specific geographical areas or argued for the need for more *systematic* comparisons between different legal jurisdictions and over longer periods of time. One example of the former is Susan Reynolds 2013 article calling for a comparison of medieval law in India and Europe. In addition to suggesting some promising areas for comparison between Indian and European law, Reynolds also generally stresses that “the study of any bit of history profits from comparisons, whether they reveal similarities or differences” (Reynolds, 2013, quote on page 18). The lack of comparisons – and lack of *systematic* comparisons – in legal history has also been noted by scholars such as Mathias Reimann, Reinhard Zimmermann and Fredrik Charpentier Ljungqvist. For example, Reimann and Zimmermann stress “past failures to integrate the study of legal history with that of comparative law”, as well as the concomitant failure to use historical analysis to understand differences and similarities in contemporary law. These methodological deficiencies are – furthermore – “not historical relics”, but very much still present. At the same time, they too see some change in the direction of a greater recognition of the need for comparative methods of these kinds (Reimann and Zimmermann, 2012, 763, 772–773, see also 771). Together with my co-author Arne Jarrick, I have made similar observations. In our comparative study of a number of laws from Europe and Asia, we stress the relative paucity of systematic, longer-term, comparisons in history and legal history. Although very widely present in some sort or another in both history and legal history, comparisons are sometimes unfortunately rudimentary or illustrative. Surprisingly, this can be the case also in fora specifically designed for comparative research. For example, a survey included in our study showed that even in a journal such as *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, about one fourth of the articles were actually either not comparative at all, or only very vaguely so (Jarrick and Wallenberg Bondesson, 2018, 20, 72–73,

see also Jarrick and Wallenberg Bondesson, 2011, 185–186).² In his comparative study of the Medieval Swedish provincial laws, Fredrik Charpentier Ljungqvist drew similar conclusions about the *combination of* quantitative and comparative research: “[s]ystematic comparative and quantitative studies are comparatively rare in historical research”. He also hints at a possible connection between quantitative historical research and an interdisciplinary approach, since many authors of existing studies of this kind actually have other disciplinary backgrounds than history (Ljungqvist, 2022, XI (quote), see also 3–6).

Generally, I agree with this description of the state of systematic, quantitative comparative research in these disciplines, and mean that some methodological change in this direction is needed. However, before I elaborate on the grounds for the latter assertion – i.e. the benefits and advantages of comparative quantitative research – it will first be necessary to address the question of the use of quantitative methods more thoroughly. That is, how often have such methods really been used in these fields of research in recent times?

2. Quantitative Methods in the Humanities, History and Legal History. A General Perspective

Quantitative research is – of course – commonplace in many fields of research within the humanities as well as in historical research. In the latter, it includes both the analysis of already quantitative evidence, and the quantification of different types of qualitative source material. The former – common in social as well as economic history – for example includes such things as the analyses of the accounting books of a medieval convent and of price information from different decades. The latter could be exemplified with the quantification of inventory lists, cases in court records or the use of different types of

² Cross-sectional survey of the articles in the journal every tenth year from its start in 1958, as well as scanning of the rest of the articles.

arguments in a political text. The latter – using sources that are not quantitative in themselves – represent what A. W. Carus and Sheilagh Ogilvie fittingly have called “[t]urning qualitative into quantitative evidence” (Carus and Ogilvie, 2009, 893). Among other things, this involves defining the phenomena one wants to identify and count, as well as their relationship to other, related phenomena. One can also envisage a middling form of these quantitative methods, where the source material is not in itself quantitative, but where it more easily lends itself to quantitative analyses. Church records, fine lists and inventory lists of different kinds would be some examples.

However, while quantitative methods definitely belong in the humanist’s and historian’s toolkits, there are also substantial differences in the frequency of use both between the humanities and other sciences, and between subdisciplines within the humanities. That is, different disciplines differ in how often statistical or quantitative methods and comparisons are deemed the *most suitable* or *necessary* routes to new knowledge. While social scientists more often find measuring and quantifying relatively obvious methodological choices, historians generally tend to be more hesitant. Within the humanities it is, for example, often heavily emphasised that quantitative data must be properly contextualised and combined with qualitative analyses. Sometimes it is even claimed that quantitative methods are unnecessary or even inappropriate in the humanities (see e.g. discussions in Carus and Ogilvie, 2009, 893–894; Holm, Jarrick and Scott, 2015, 54–57). As Lianne J.M. Boer has shown in a case concerning international law, there can also be substantial differences of opinion within one field of research. In her review of the anthology *Pluralising International Legal Scholarship* (Deplano, 2019), she notes that the contributors display very different views on the value of quantitative methods. Thus, while some of the contributors find quantitative methods highly promising, others see very little place for them in their specific fields of research. More importantly, Boer means that this methodological dissonance is not acknowledged or discussed enough by the editors or contributors (Boer, 2023, 457–459). This is a good point, and I

think that this is not uncommonly the case. In my opinion, there is generally a lack of more comprehensive discussions of the place of quantitative and qualitative methods respectively in the humanities. I will return to this towards the end of this article.

As regards differences between historical disciplines, quantitative research has had a more obvious, and continuous, role in disciplines such as economic and demographic history, while being subject to greater variation over time, or generally less prevalent, in other fields. Such differences have been noted by many researchers. Social history can be taken as an example of the more varying type, with a surge in interest and practice of quantitative methods around the 70s, siphoning out with “the cultural turn” towards the end of the century. The impression of a tendency for variation in this regard in both social history and history in general, has been supported by a quantitative study by historical demographer Steven Ruggles. In an American context, Ruggles has shown that the use of quantitative methods in history has varied significantly from the early 20th century up until the present. In fact – as I will return to below – he identifies three distinct waves of increased interest in such methods in the US, of which one precisely around the 1970s (Ruggles, 2021, 1, 6–14; Carus and Ogilvie, 2009, 893).

Legal history – my primary interest here – can perhaps be said to fall somewhere in between different patterns. Legal history was, for example, somewhat drawn into the surge of quantitative research in the decades around the 70s, when quantification of court records, fine lists and similar source material drew interest. In Sweden, in the 80s and 90s, this trend for example resulted in a multitude of quantitative studies of court records primarily from the 17th to the 19th centuries, often from a mixed legal, historical and social historical perspective (see e.g. Sundin 1992; Andersson 1998).

At the same time as there seems to be some variation over time, it has also been frequently noted that quantitative methods are generally used less frequently in legal history than in many other disciplines. For example, Daniel Klerman has described quantitative legal history around 2016 as “in a rather

sorry state”, and statistical methods as rarely used (Klerman, 2018, 343, 356). At that point in time, Klerman’s analysis of the use of quantitative methods in recently published works showed that only about a quarter of recent books used quantitative methods at all (in the sense that they had any quantitative table or graph). Much of this was also relatively simple statistics. For articles, the proportion of quantitative texts was even lower: 14 percent. Among prize-winning articles and books during a longer time period (1980’s to 2010’s), the numbers were higher (22 % for articles and 38 % for books). Klerman suggests that this may reflect an earlier, somewhat more frequent use, although he stresses that the number of works analysed is too small to allow any certain conclusions. However, even in the datasets where quantitative methods were more common, the use of more sophisticated quantitative methods (regression analysis) was still very low, only reaching two percent in the case of prize-winning books (Klerman, 2018, 343–346, 356). In the remainder of Klerman’s analysis, he argues that the present state represents “a missed opportunity” and offers some examples of fruitful existing studies and potential sub-fields for further use. He also points to collaborations between legal historians and quantitative social scientists as ways to enrich the field. Generally, he argues that an increased use of quantitative methods could help to “disentangle the influence of multiple factors, to reveal the effect of legal change, and to uncover patterns in large quantities of text” (Klerman, 2018, 343–344, 356).

Similar assessments of the role of quantitative methods have been made by other scholars. A couple of years after Klerman, Fredrik Charpentier Ljungqvist similarly stressed the lack of more systematic quantitative methods in legal history. The exceptions, furthermore, mostly concern studies of case law in more modern contexts. While Ljungqvist acknowledges that, to a degree, “[t]he very nature of legal history [...] and most research problems addressed by this field, preclude the use of quantitative approaches or, at the very least, are ill-suited for them”, he also argues that it could legitimately play a greater role (Ljungqvist, 2022, 1 (quote), 2). As he notes:

Certain research problems in legal history are nevertheless, to a greater or lesser extent, quantitative in nature. Quantitative statements are unavoidably made – even when the framework of study is entirely qualitative – with regard to, for example, differences or similarities of legal phenomena between various laws [...] One typically encounters statements such as ‘this law contains harsher penalties than that law’ or ‘this law has a larger focus on these fields of law’ (Ljungqvist, 2022, 2).

As a (legal) historian who frequently works with quantitative methods, I feel very much at home in both Klerman’s and Ljungqvist’s assessments of the state of quantitative legal history. At the same time, it is still an open question how much both history and legal history are changing in this regard today, which trends the recent couple of years have brought with them, as well as which national and regional variations might exist. There is also some evidence that the tides are changing somewhat, as regards the attitude to quantification in history and the historical sciences. Regarding the field of history in the US, Steven Ruggles has, for example, shown an increase in the use of statistical methods in a number of history journals. He finds the trend significant enough to term it a “revival of quantification” (Ruggles, 2021, 1, 14–21).

Highly relevant for the issues discussed here is, of course, also the relatively new field of digital humanities. Originating in the latter half of the 20th century, it not only represents a quantitative – but also a highly inter- or multidisciplinary – approach (see e.g. Sporleder and Pannach, 2024, 271, 276). Broadly speaking, digital humanities include such things as digitalisation of source material and research results, the development and use of digital research methods such as text mining, the creation of networks and research resources as well as institutional development. On a general level, there is no doubt that the field has developed quickly in later years: research centres and hubs have been created, and methodology has been developed and discussed. Historical text corpora are also increasingly digitalised and

available online. There has also been time for some assessment and reflection on the development of the field. American, European and Swedish digital humanities, digital history and digital legal history have, for example, been studied in 2016 (Robertson; Nystrom and Tanenhaus), 2019 (Golub et al; Küsters, Volkind and Wagner) and 2024 (Sporleder and Pannach; Romein). Generally, all the assessments on legal history note that it has adopted digital methods later than many other fields within the humanities. About ten years ago, Stephen Robertson stated that although “the fields of digital humanities and digital history have grown in scale and visibility since the 1990s, legal history has largely remained on the margins of those fields” (Robertson, 2016, 1047; see also Nystrom and Tanenhaus, 2016, 153). A couple of years later, Anselm Küsters, Laura Volkind and Andreas Wagner similarly noted the lack of discussions of digital methods in recent handbooks on legal history (Küsters, Volkind and Wagner, 2019, 244). Finally, in 2022 and 2024 Fredrik Charpentier Ljungqvist and Christel Annemieke Romein have noted that such approaches are still underused. For example, Ljungqvist notes that “the use of ‘big data’ and the application of methods from the expanding field of digital humanities have hitherto been nearly absent within the study of legal history of the medieval and early modern periods” (Ljungqvist, 2022, 2). Regarding the field as a whole, Romein finds digital tools “somewhat underutilized” (Romein, 2024, 2, see also 3). Additionally, there are also different views on the benefits of digital humanities and digital methods, and criticism is often of the same kind as criticism against quantitative methods in general. For example, regarding the field of international law, Huaxia Lai argues that “data mining’s powerful pattern identification is usually achieved at the cost of forsaking the fine-grained understanding of the data situated in its particular context” (Lai, 2019, 181; Boer, 2023, 463).

At the same time, it is clear that the digital humanities are growing quickly, and that a substantial amount of the research in this emerging field is still in early phases. A sign of increased interest is also the *Journal for Digital Legal History* (DLH, Ghent University, Belgium), founded in 2022, and with the

above-mentioned Romein, Robertson and Wagner currently in the editorial team (“Editorial team”, DLH, 2026-03-07).

It is, however, very difficult to properly describe and assess a field of research in emergence and sharp growth. As Sporleder and Pannach have noted, this is exacerbated by the fact that digital humanities are both inter- and multidisciplinary, and fractured in the sense that different types of digital humanities may use very different types of digital methods (Sporleder and Pannach, 2024, 271, 292). It is also in many ways an open question whether digital humanities and their sub-areas should be seen as separate disciplines, fields of research or as “a methodological approach” (Sporleder and Pannach, 2024, 271, 292; quote from Romein, 2024, 3; see also Golub et al, 2019).

Then, it is clear that many scholars have identified a lack of quantitative research within the humanities, history and legal history, although there are also statements about some change towards greater interest in such research. Since so much is unclear in this regard – not least with the advent of digital humanities – this clearly requires further testing. In the next section, I will do this through a quantitative study of the prevalence of *quantitative* (and *quantitative comparative*) methods in a number of different types of legal history research.

3. Quantitative Methods in Legal History. A Quantitative Survey

Following Klerman’s and Ruggles’ studies, I have chosen to use the presence of quantitative/statistical tables and charts as a measure of the use of quantitative methods. The downside of the method is that it excludes statistical information only presented in the body text. In general, however, I think that it is a good measure of the degree to which quantitative methods have imbued the studies in question. Using the same overall method will also allow for some comparison with the results of Klerman and Ruggles.

To be able to identify possible variations between forms of publications, I have chosen to include a broad spectrum of categories of scholarship. This

means that I have tried to include both shorter scientific works, such as articles in journals and shorter texts in anthologies, and longer texts, i.e. academic monographs by one or several authors. For the shorter texts, this includes all articles published in the above-mentioned journal *Comparative Legal History* (CLH) since 2013, articles published in *Rechtsgeschichte – Legal History* (Max Planck Institute for Legal History and Legal Theory) between 2016 and 2025, as well as the texts published in the Swedish *Olin Foundation* (Institutet för Rättshistorisk Forskning) Anthology Series 2002–2025. The material in CLH gives a unique opportunity to examine the methods used in explicitly comparative research. The Olin Foundation is a prominent Swedish research foundation focused entirely on legal history. Since its inception in 1947, it has also published extensively in the field, with primarily two publication series: one for collections of shorter texts, and one for monographs. For the longer texts, the latter series has also been used. To supplement the monographs in this series, I have chosen to chart the subsection of the field of legal history mentioned above: medieval legal history, as well as include a smaller sample of monographs on legal history from the 16th to the 19th century. The monographs included in the survey have been retrieved through targeted searches for Swedish medieval (as well as early modern and later) legal history in Sweden’s National Library catalogue, LIBRIS.³ Unlike in Klerman’ statistics, *Table 1* accounts for the presence of quantitative methods in each analytical chapter of the monographs.⁴ In this way, there is a greater comparability, since the texts compared are more equal in length (although statistics on full books will also be provided).

³ Searches include monographs (i.e. longer academic works) categorised as legal history concerning Sweden and searches with combinations of search words such as law, laws, legislation, Middle Ages, medieval, Sweden, legal history, Swedish and their Swedish equivalents. For legal history concerning the 16th to 19th centuries, the search includes monographs categorised as legal history concerning Sweden during these centuries. Encyclopaedias, handbooks, general historical overviews and editions of source materials have been excluded, as well as results that did not fit the selection criteria.

⁴ Since what is of interest here is the use of methods and types of analyses, introductory and concluding chapters have been excluded, such as descriptions of the studies, state-of-the-art and summaries.

	With quantitative tables or graphs		Without any quantitative tables or graphs		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Articles published in <i>Comparative Legal History</i> , 2013–2025	3	2,9	100	97,1	103	100
Articles published in <i>Rechtsgeschichte – Legal History</i> ⁵ , 2016–2025 ⁶	8	5,4	139	94,6	147	100
Articles published in Olin Foundation anthology series (“Green Series”) 2002–2025	10	6,0	156	94,0	166	100
Book chapters, monographs on Swedish medieval legal history 2000–2025 in LIBRIS library database	39	32,8	80	67,2	119	100
Book chapters, monographs on Swedish legal history (16 th to 19 th centuries) in LIBRIS database	42	37,5	70	62,5	112	100
Book chapters, Olin Foundation monograph series (“Grey Series”) 2001–2025	15	18,8	65	81,3	80	100,1
All	117	16,1	610	83,9	727	100

Table 1: *Quantitative analysis in legal history scholarship in the first decades of the twenty-first century*

Sources: Olin Foundation, publications on the website; *Comparative Legal History* (Journal); *Rechtsgeschichte – Legal History*; LIBRIS.

Overall, the survey shows that only about 16 percent of all the texts charted contained quantitative tables or graphs. However, as in Klerman’s study, there are differences between articles and monographs. Of the shorter texts, only between three and six percent contained quantitative tables or graphs, while for chapters in monographs, this was several times higher (ca 38, 33 and 19 percent). If books are counted as single units, as Klerman does, the difference is even greater – about 49 percent of the books contained any

⁵ *Rechtsgeschichte – Legal History*. Journal of the Max Planck Institute for Legal History and Legal Theory.

⁶ Articles from the sections “Research” and “Focus”.

quantitative table or graph. Klerman has also noted the difference between books and articles. Hypothetically, he suggests that it might be due to the greater length of books, making it possible to use and include more types of analyses (Klerman, 2018, 345). However, in my sample, this is also the case when attempts have been made to reduce the differences in length of the texts compared (i.e. when the articles are compared with book chapters). Although my data set regarding monographs is small (55 books/311 book chapters), it supports Klerman's results and indicates that this *could* be a general pattern. Needless to say, more studies are needed to verify this.

The consistently very low frequency of quantitative approaches in the article datasets also merits some further comments. To begin with, it is notable how rarely the articles in the journal *Comparative Legal History* (CLH) combine a comparative perspective with a quantitative one. Of the only three articles that could be classified as quantitative in the CLH, it should also be noted that two can be described as digital legal history. Interestingly, they also appear in the years around the creation of the specialised journal – *Journal for Digital Legal History* – mentioned above (created in 2022, articles on digital history from 2022 and 2023). In the *Rechtsgeschichte*, the few articles with a quantitative approach were spread quite evenly over time, while it should be noted that the latest one (in 2025), as well as one in 2019 can be classified as digital legal history. However, even if this means that digital history has gained some ground, this new quantitative approach only represents a part of a very small overall percentage of quantitative articles.

The frequency of quantitative charts and tables can also be compared with Ruggles statistics for history journals. For two American mainstream history journals in the years 2000–2009, his chart shows that the frequency of quantitative articles was between slightly over ten and slightly under five percent. This is higher than my results, but lower than Klerman's. However, Ruggles found a small increase after about 2015, as well as a much higher frequency of such articles in more interdisciplinary history journals, as well as quantitative historical articles in journals for subjects such as demography

and sociology. In such journals, the frequency of quantitative historical articles could be 20, 30, 40 or even 60 percent in the decades after 2000 (Ruggles, 2021, esp. 6–7, 14–18). There is, in other words, substantial variation between datasets and types of journals. It is, however, also clear that the percentages of quantitative articles can be considered low, or very low, in a number of history and legal history journals.

Finally, it should be stressed that the results of these samples not only reflect the tendency to choose quantitative methods to answer questions in legal history. Additionally – and perhaps even more – they reflect the tendency to pose questions that are explicitly quantitative, or to pose questions with quantitative methods in mind. Thus, the results reflect views on quantitative methods and approaches on a more general level.

4. The State and Role of Quantitative, Comparative Methods in History and Legal History

The previous section provided some new insights into the prevalence of quantitative and quantitative *comparative* research in legal history. Although the variation could be large between datasets, the survey also showed that use of quantitative methods can be rare in certain types of scholarship (such as in the shorter academic texts included in the survey).

Why is this? Is there room for more quantitative methods in legal history? Of course, discussion here can only deal with a small part of this vast subject. With this in mind, I will start with some reflections on the role and benefits of quantitative comparative methods in the disciplines in question. This will be followed by some hypotheses on the reasons for the present state of such research. Finally, this – as well as the discussions and surveys of the previous sections – will be summed up, and some general conclusions drawn.

Generally, quantitative methods are beneficial because they allow us to establish patterns and trends that might not be visible in qualitative analyses, as well as “disentangling complex interrelationships among various

variables”. Due to their structured, formal character, they also have the potential to provide precise, replicable results (Sapkota, 2024, 158 (quote); Klerman, 2018, 356; Ljungqvist, 2022, 2). Additionally, both “traditional” and digital quantitative methods can allow us to pose new research questions and complement and broaden legal history. Digital tools also add an increase in efficiency, allowing the analysis of larger datasets, “revealing patterns and insights that would be difficult to uncover manually” (Romein, 2024, 2–3, 12 (quote), 18–19).

As noted above, it is of course clear that many questions in legal history, and problems relating to legal texts, do *not* lend themselves to quantification. However, it is also true that there *are* phenomena in such texts that *could* be measured quantitatively, even if they are usually not. This includes issues very central to legal history, such as the prevalence of certain norms, rules, punishments or arguments in different texts and texts from different times and geographical areas. Eric. C. Nystrom and David S. Tanenhaus have also rightly argued that legal history actually is especially suited for quantitative comparative investigations “because of the number of structurally consistent documents available over relatively long periods of time” (2016, 153–154; see also Jarrick and Wallenberg Bondesson, 2018, 41).

What is needed in such cases, is the development of new methods, or the adaptation of “traditional” quantitative methods or digital humanities methods to the specific characteristics of legal texts. Such development – which would make quantitative studies more common in these fields – are clearly underway in some regards (not the least in the field of digital legal history), although much remains to be done (see also Romein, 2024, 2). The innovative character of such research would also mean that it will be necessary to devote larger parts of the texts to descriptions of methodology than is usually the case in history and legal history. Thus, a change towards more research of this kind, would likely require a rethinking of how texts in history or legal history can be structured. My co-authored 2018 study of laws from a number of legal systems, and Fredrik Charpentier Ljungqvist’s

abovementioned study of medieval Swedish laws, represent two attempts to develop and use such methods (Jarrick and Wallenberg Bondesson, 2018; Ljungqvist, 2022).

Alongside the benefits mentioned above, I would also like to argue that increased use of quantitative methods has the potential to enhance the cumulative nature of research. As noted above, vague quantitative statements and quantitative assessments not based on structured quantitative analyses are sometimes made in legal history, as well as in other fields. This includes statements on the very central issues mentioned above: the prevalence of norms, types of rules, legal concepts, arguments and punishments. From one perspective, such statements are of course helpful, since they give you the assessments of very highly trained experts in their field. However, from another point of view, they can also frustrate subsequent researchers, since they leave them without sufficient means to build on such conclusions. This does not mean that every quantitative statement can or needs to be replaced by a full quantitative survey. However, I think what is required is more reflection and more mindful and overt considerations about whether to include quantitative methods, even in primarily qualitative works. Furthermore, even if no quantitative survey is deemed necessary or possible, more of the reflections and assessments made in the process could preferably be included in the study itself. That way, there will be more material for debate, and problems regarding quantification identified by one researcher can be worked on by other researchers. Thus, even if it is understandable that researchers with deep knowledge of a field want to share their own assessments of the prevalence of certain phenomena, in the worst cases such statements represent a sort of “dead end”. Increasing the proportion of – even smaller – quantitative studies, as well as more methodological discussions, have the potential to reduce such problems. Concerning digital legal history, Romein has recently made similar arguments. In the continued development of digital legal history, she stresses the need for “legal historians to make their

methodology explicit, whether they use graphs, maps or ATR, to foster discussions about best practices and approaches” (Romein, 2024, 19–20).

At the same time, the limitations and weaknesses of quantitative methods must also be fully acknowledged. Problems often mentioned are, for example, reductionism and oversimplification of complex issues, illusions of objectivity and issues concerning sample choice and size (Sapkota, 2024; Ruggles, 2021, 13). Regarding the first issue, it is of course paramount that results – qualitative or quantitative – are properly contextualised. However, many of these issues can arguably be reduced through greater transparency on methods, samples and increased attention to methodological problems. As Carus and Ogilvie have argued, I also think that it is a misconception to see a sharp distinction or dividing line between quantitative and qualitative research. As they argue, “almost any concept used to describe a past society is implicitly quantitative” (Carus and Ogilvie, 2009, 893). The same is also often true the other way around. When a researcher creates quantitative evidence by analysing and classifying phenomena in a source, this is very similar to what qualitative scholars do. Admittedly, a larger, structured quantitative investigation might be more inflexible, and “hinder researchers from pursuing emergent themes or unexpected findings that do not fit predetermined parameters” (Sapkota, 2024, 155). However, it can be argued that this problem can be addressed and reduced, for example by building a certain level of flexibility into research designs. Also, a higher acceptance of the need for revisions and modification of research designs might be needed.

Alongside transparency, these problems can also arguably be reduced by a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods – by utilising the strengths of both methods. This is hardly an uncommon conclusion: many methodological discussions about the concepts of quantitative and qualitative methods end with a recommendation of such methodological pluralism (see for example Sapkota, 2024, 157–158; Carus and Ogilvie, 2009).

At the same time, it is also – in my opinion – common to find a certain “imbalance” in methodological discussions in this regard. Thus, the need for

a combination of methods seems to be stressed more often regarding quantitative studies than regarding qualitative. This is closely related to what Mahendra Sapkota calls the “[d]efensive nature of quantitative research” (Sapkota, 2024, 157). Thus, proponents and users of quantitative research are acutely aware of the types of criticism that are commonly raised against their methods, leading them to feel a greater need than qualitative scholars to defend their positions. With this in mind, I think that it is important to emphasise that the benefits – and need for – methodological pluralism goes both ways. It is important that quantitative research is supplemented with proper contextualisation and with qualitative analyses. However, it is equally important that researchers conducting qualitative studies consider whether supplementing them with quantitative analyses would be beneficial. Quantitative surveys can, for example, be used to create a starting point or give an overall background, which can be elaborated and evaluated using qualitative methods (Carus and Ogilvie, 2009, 897). Quantitative surveys can also provide readers with valuable overviews of complex or vast subjects or developments.

With this in mind, why are quantitative – and quantitative comparative – methods and studies not more common in legal history? Why do surveys like mine and Daniel Klerman’s show a rather low level in some datasets? And why have some researchers observing the field felt that such methods are not utilised to their full potential – at least up until now?

Common types of criticism against quantitative methods have already been mentioned, and discussed, above. Another aspect of this criticism is that the role and nature of quantitative methods sometimes appear to be misunderstood in history and legal history (and in other disciplines in the humanities). Just as there is a tendency to emphasise the need for a multimethod approach more when quantitative methods are in question, it appears that there is also a tendency to assess quantitative methods on the basis of qualitative methods, instead of on its own terms. Unfortunately, this leads to a focus on weaknesses such as over-simplification, lack of nuance

and reductionism. Strengths, on the other hand, such as offering an overall picture and clearer views on variable variation, trends and pattern, are thus somewhat left out of the picture. A similar observation has been made by Fredrik Charpentier Ljungqvist. For example, he notes that quantitative studies “may, wrongly, be perceived as rather ‘descriptive’ if qualitative scholarship is set as the benchmark” (Ljungqvist, 2022, xi.).

Unfortunately, if the focus is on the weaknesses, or quantitative results are viewed as “descriptive” in this way, quantitative studies are not really assessed in a proper way. This may also preclude a fruitful methodological discussion between scholars using qualitative and quantitative methods. In both of these cases, I think that this can lead to an underestimation of the relevance of quantitative methods for the historical sciences, and of the necessity of a *combination* of both methods in the investigation of many subjects within these disciplines.

Such views are also closely associated with certain knowledge ideals and views on the nature of the humanities. In the *Humanities World Report* the authors have, for example, investigated the reaction to the notion of “findings” among scholars within the humanities. Among these scholars, the reactions turned out to be mixed. Of the 89 humanities scholars interviewed for the study, only 35 were positive or mildly positive. One scholar did, for example, comment that they did not think that it was “the function of the humanities to establish findings [...] We talk more about insights, perspectives and points of view. We don’t talk in that quite definitive way about findings and measurable outcomes” (Holm, Jarrick and Scott, 2015, 54–55; see also discussion in van Woudenberg, 2018, 128). Although it is possible that this has changed somewhat during the last ten years, the statement gives some background to the apparent resistance to quantitative methods in the humanities. The respondent not only questions the place of “measuring” in the humanities, but also seems to imply that results in the humanities are less “definitive” than results in, for example, natural and social sciences. Similar views were also expressed by a number of other

respondents, i.e. that humanities research “lacks finality”, and is “provisional and subject to questioning and clarification and change and modification [...]”. This, however, must be considered a misunderstanding of results in the natural and social sciences. As the authors note: “Of course, since researchers in the natural and social sciences would also admit that their findings are subject to revision, this point should not be used to drive a wedge between the humanities and the sciences” (Holm, Jarrick and Scott, 2015, 56; see also Nystrom and Tanenhaus, 2016, 153 and Woudenberg, 2018, 140). Thus, deep-seated views on the function and nature of the humanities, which include a hesitation towards such concepts as “findings” and “measuring”, are one likely factor behind the low level of quantitative research found here.

Alongside the possible effects of criticism of quantitative methods, misunderstanding of their role and views on the nature of the humanities, there are also practical or institutional issues that must be considered. Among other things, this relates to institutional and educational structures as well as funding and career issues. Also in this area, there are, in my opinion, a number of factors impeding quantitative, comparative and interdisciplinary work in the humanities. Above, the increased demands on higher research output (emphasis on quantity) were briefly mentioned. Governments and research funders connect publication to innovation, economic growth and international competitiveness. They therefore put an increasing focus on publication quantity and connect funding to quantitative measures of “the quality of research” such as bibliometrics. This turn/change in publication expectations is plainly obvious and has been noted by many scholars (Ibbetson, 2012, 1; Öhlander, Wolanik Boström and Pettersson, 2020, 238; Hasselberg, 2013, 31). As noted above, among other things, it means that publication of shorter texts is favoured, and publication of shorter English texts in international peer-reviewed journals above publication of monographs in other languages.

Although there are benefits of more frequent publication of research results, there are also many problems with this approach. One is that it has a potential to impede quantitative, comparative work – and in several ways. To

begin with, systematic comparative and quantitative research can be significantly more time-consuming than other approaches (Holm, Jarrick and Scott, 2015, 127–128; Ibbetson, 2012, 1; Masferrer, Modéer and Moretéau, 2019, 9). Particularly time-consuming tasks include the development and testing of new methods and coding to create statistics. Comparisons between different nations or phenomena can also include a very comprehensive state-of-the-art. Thus, such an approach does not square particularly well with a demand for very frequent publishing. In combination with a low approval rate in the big funding agencies (in general and specifically for the humanities), as is the case in Sweden (Swedish Research Council, ‘*Statistics 2025*’), this is even more problematic. Since competition for funding is fierce, even smaller differences in publication rates might matter.

This might also be problematic due to possible differences in the use of quantitative methods between different types of publications. As discussed above, both mine and Daniel Klerman’s study showed a higher frequency of quantitative research in monographs/books, as compared to articles. Although more tests are needed to verify this pattern, this is certainly interesting. At the same time, it is difficult to interpret. It could indicate that quantitative studies require somewhat longer texts, or that research designs of quantitative studies are more compatible with bigger studies/longer texts. Since larger research grants are often needed to complete more comprehensive projects and monograph projects, and the approval rates are low in the large research-funding agencies, this might further add to the difficulties of quantitative comparative research. This being said, the quantitative articles found in the article dataset show that quantitative analyses can work very well in shorter texts. Like the other factors mentioned here, this therefore requires more research and consideration. Hopefully, the comments made here can encourage further debate and study of these issues.

Conclusions

How has increased globalisation changed the methods used in the humanities, and especially history and legal history? I have argued that internationalisation has the potential to foster interdisciplinary and transnational approaches, as well as comparative and quantitative approaches and methods. However, despite such potential links, some of these methods are still very underused in certain disciplines within the humanities.

Focusing specifically on legal history, the paper has shown that there are still many publication venues and publication types in which quantitative comparative research is extremely rare. More specifically, my quantitative survey of two legal history journals and one anthology series showed a very low frequency of quantitative articles.

Although there was significant variation between publication types, the low percentage of quantitative research in articles is unfortunate.

Quantitative methods have many benefits. Among other things, they can help researchers identify patterns and trends that would not be clearly visible in qualitative analyses, as well as provide more precise and replicable results. I have also argued that more quantitative analysis can enhance the cumulative nature of research, making it easier for researchers to build on each other's results. Although quantitative methods also have shortcomings, these can be reduced with more methodological awareness and discussion, increased transparency and – above all – combination of quantitative and qualitative methods.

If this is the case, why are quantitative methods still so rare in some publication types in legal history? In this paper, I have attempted to shed some light on this by stressing three factors: 1) misconceptions about quantitative methods and a certain bias in the methodological debate, 2) overemphasis of the differences between quantitative and qualitative methods, and finally, 3) systems for research evaluation and funding that are badly suited for quantitative comparative research.

As stressed above, the points made here have only addressed a part of this vast complex of issues. However, I hope that it can encourage some further debate about methodological choices in legal history, about the role of quantitative methods in the field as well as about field-specific consequences of funding and evaluation practices.

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