As the seat of an independent polity in the 11th and 12th centuries, the port city of Aden developed commercial and fiscal institutions and infrastructure to become one of the most frequented entrepôts in the Western Indian Ocean. This was partly thanks to its strategic geographical location and advantageous natural topography and mostly due to the institutions and infrastructure developed under the leadership of elites either directly involved in trade or profiting from the extraction of commercial taxes. From the middle of the 12th century onward the port became part of larger territorial states—first through the Ayyubid conquest and government of large parts of Yemen in the second half of the 12th and first quarter of the 13th century, and then through the establishment of an important and long-lasting successor state under the Rasulids that administered the port in the following two centuries. My talk will address the balance of local, regional and transregional allegiances of the various groups inhabiting the Yemeni port city in these different periods of its urban history, both in terms of political power-struggles and alliances and in terms of personal, ethnic, religious and professional affiliations. I will examine the overlapping interests of the Adeni participants in the networks of trade, politics and culture criss-crossing the Western Indian Ocean and its tributary seas, and comment on what the relevant sources can tell us about how identities or “axes of belonging” formed and changed for the inhabitants of the well-connected Yemeni port city.

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