

[Call for Papers]

Deadline for submission has expired

Beyond the Islamicate Chancery: Archives, Paperwork, and Textual Encounters across Eurasia (15th-20th Centuries)

An International Conference

4-5 October 2018, Vienna

Institute of Iranian Studies

Austrian Academy of Sciences

Conveners: Paolo Sartori and James Pickett

Paperwork is everywhere. Scholars have long emphasized the importance of bureaucratic practices for enhancing the coercive reach of the state, and even constituting its authority. Throughout history, governments have pragmatically embraced new textual practices with abandon, and Islamicate cultures of documentation were no exception. From India to China to Russia and beyond, the Islamicate chancery was a locus of experimentation and synthesis. This symposium seeks to better understand this dynamic by considering it broadly and comparatively, and we welcome proposals for papers highlighting the interaction of scribal cultures, bureaucratic systems, and textual forms throughout Eurasia from the early modern period through the twentieth century.

This symposium is the third instalment in a series of collaborations between the Institute of Iranian Studies and the University of Pittsburgh examining Islamicate cultures of documentation from different angles. Surviving pre-colonial and colonial chancery archives across Eurasia provide an unparalleled glimpse into the inner workings of connectivity across writing cultures and, especially, documentary practices. This meeting situates what has traditionally been a highly technical discipline in a broader historical dialogue on the relationship between state power, the archive, and cultural encounters.

More concretely, the symposium will serve as a forum to discuss how practices of document writing and record keeping in the Islamicate world were reflective of conversations taking place among individuals and institutions operating across diverse systems of knowledge. Where can we observe examples of cultural commensurabilities that *transcend* the Islamic divide? Thinking of “Islamicate” rather than Islamic, Persianate, or Turkic serves to decouple the prestige of Arabic, Persian, and Turkic languages from dynastic histories and simplified notions of national culture. By conceiving of the Islamicate world as a contact zone, rather than a civilizational edifice, how might we observe the ways in which Arabic, Persian, and Turkic exerted a deep influence on a number of other languages with which they interacted, even as they too were shaped by that process of change? We aim to move away from a static, and somewhat reductionist approach to Eurasian history in which either Arabic, Persian, or Turkic was dominant and which is usually identified with the self-contained area coinciding with the Middle East, Central Asia, and India. In this sense, our use of the notion of “Islamicate” is *inclusive* of the various documentary practices, which manifested themselves in languages written in the Arabic-script. We, therefore, aim to extend the spectrum of comparisons between cultures of documentation in the Arabic-script, which encountered and indeed interacted with other documentary sensibilities across Eurasia and beyond.

This heuristic shift is key to expand the notion of Islamicate cultures of documentation: while studies of archival practices and record keeping activities in the history of Islam are usually premised upon the understanding of a geographically bounded zone of cultural hegemony, the notion of “Islamicate” confers salience upon the very process of socio-linguistic encounters. In other words, the Islamicate world here ceases to be merely a metaphor for a place and begins instead to signal a cultural process of interactions and cross-pollination. This move carries an important ideological baggage: to focus on textual encounters is tantamount to appreciate cultural diversity and envision a world of interactions and multiple sensibilities.

By addressing the following questions, the symposium sets for itself the task of outlining a comparative history of cultures of documentation in early modern and colonial periods across the Middle East, Central and South Asia:

- How did chanceries communicate across cultures of documentation, and navigated through linguistic conventions and systems of knowledge?
- When did textual encounters between chanceries begin to depend more on formal linguistic training than on improvisation and approximation?

- How did chanceries translate foreign notions of sovereignty and taxonomies of authority into their documentary practices?
- Was the process of translation at the chancery level part of a broader ethnographic enterprise?
- Does the preservation of translations in archives reflect a certain historical consciousness?
- How can we take stock of the materiality of documents, and especially translations, when writing about diplomatic history?
- What was the relationship between diplomatic relations, socio-linguistic encounters, and public knowledge?
- Can we point to manifestations of commensurability and congruence between cultures as exemplified by scribal exchanges and documentary practices?

Proposals should include paper abstracts of up to 600 words and a short CV (no more than 2 pages). Please send your proposal to paolo.sartori@oeaw.ac.at and pickettj@pitt.edu by 15 April 2018 at the latest. Travel and accommodation costs for invited speakers will be covered by the [Institute of Iranian Studies](#) (Austrian Academy of Sciences) and [University of Pittsburgh](#). This is an initiative of the START Project “Seeing like an Archive”:
<http://seeinglikeanarchive.wordpress.com>.