

An Interview with Konrad Hirschler

CATERINA BORI
University of Bologna

Konrad Hirschler is a historian of manuscript cultures with a focus on Arabic North Africa and West Asia in the pre-print era. He combines social and cultural history to study what meanings different social strata and milieux ascribed to written artefacts and for what purposes they employed such artefacts. His work has focused in particular on reconstructing vanished libraries. This has led to a strong interest in the question of artefacts' trajectories and provenances. In recent years, he has become increasingly interested in the materiality of the written word. As a result, he strives to develop cross-disciplinary initiatives among various disciplines in the humanities as well as between humanities and natural sciences.

Konrad, you are a historian of the pre-Ottoman Middle East with a strong interest in book and manuscript culture. Our field of research has been undergoing huge transformations in recent years and your work has been highly influential in many respects.

The first challenge I see is the massive irruption of the global perspective into a scholarly tradition – also known as ‘Area Studies’ – where a place-based approach tightly linked to the study of local languages determined the focus and scope of historical practice. How do you think this injection of the global scale is impacting our field?

The break-down of disciplinary silos has certainly been a most positive development. This has meant that theoretical debates, changes in methodology and new topics move at a faster pace across fields of study and more voices contribute to these discussions. This is one of the developments that has driven most innovative work in the field of pre-Ottoman history and elsewhere. In my own work I have benefited enormously from research on book collecting practices in other world areas and, more importantly, on thinking about the materiality of manuscripts in a more systematic fashion. The central argument of my last book, *A Monument to Medieval Syrian Book Culture: The Library of Ibn ‘Abd al-Hadi* really only started to develop after I had read transregional work on the social meaning of book binding practices.¹ Before

¹ KONRAD HIRSCHLER, *A Monument to Medieval Syrian Book Culture: The Library of Ibn ‘Abd al-Hādī* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

that I had worked for two years on this book catalogue without really knowing where this work might take me in argumentative terms.

However, there are three areas where I am not entirely convinced that we have been moving into the right direction. Firstly, the reconfiguration of academic practices inevitably entails institutional reconfigurations. In the past, area-focused disciplines were able to offer numerous languages, even if this was highly loss-making in financial terms. In ‘globalised’ university settings those colleagues studying areas with languages weakly represented in the European or US-American university system have little chance now to get ‘their’ languages taught. It’s a great scholarly loss. Take for instance the UK: History departments across the country have recruited in the last decade many historians working on regions in Africa and Asia. This in turn had a severe impact on the institution that had been the centre for teaching the history of these world regions for most of the twentieth century, the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). Students interested in studying history beyond the UK and Europe now have a much larger choice than before and have shifted in large numbers to history departments other than SOAS. Yet, these universities rarely offer the special range of languages in which SOAS also excelled such as intensive Arabic, Persian, Swahili or Hausa. Thus, there will be a real challenge to prevent global history becoming an academic practice centred on a small range of languages and thus a small range of sources and perspectives.

Secondly, one has to be realistic that the globalisation of history takes place in a setting where universities in Europe and the US still play the central role in the humanities. In consequence, the history of these world regions, their sources, methodologies and debates, tend to dominate ‘global’ academic settings. It will be a major challenge to make sure that the move towards provincializing Europe does not turn out to be globalising Europe once again.

Finally, there is some danger when taking a step back to see the broader picture that phenomena become essentialised in order to make them comparable on a global level. In recent years, I have for instance seen a revival of the category of ‘Islamic X’ where the benefit of seeking common ground between widely divergent phenomena is in my view not entirely compelling.

Global history values broad narratives. It tends to stress circulation, mobility and connectivity. Let’s take somebody like the Syrian scholar Yusuf ibn ‘Abd al-Hadi (d. 1517), whose book collection is at the centre of your last book: A Monument to Medieval Syrian Book Culture. Yusuf was not exactly a ‘globetrotter’. He lived in a Damascus suburb all his life, wrote a lot and was a keen bibliophile. Still, your book suggests that seemingly unconnected spaces or lives can be also worth of scholarly engagement. What are your thoughts on this point?

Well, I am a historian who has primarily worked on the micro level so that the importance of studying unconnected or weakly connected historical phenomena is

for me beyond doubt. Overall, I think it is crucial for the intellectual sustainability of our field that it retains a diverse research culture with a wide variety, including ‘non-fashionable’, approaches and methodologies. Many stories are simply better told and many arguments more elegantly made with a focus that is emphatically local and gloriously parochial. For instance, one of my side-research interests is the presence of Frankish (‘Crusader’) communities in the Levant in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. I study these groups with an emphasis on the question on how they went local and in what ways they became part of the Levantine political, social and economic landscape.

Yet, even if our subjects and objects of study may appear at first as historically unconnected there is usually a chance to generically connect them in terms of methodology or final argument. You are entirely right, Yusuf ibn ‘Abd al-Hadi was as suburban as one might imagine with a distinct disinterest for the world beyond his home turf. It would thus have required a lot of passages with forced and weak arguments to turn this into a story of transregional connections. Yet, on the methodological level it was exactly stepping out of the scholarship of our field that allowed me to develop the book’s central argument. The book suggests that Yusuf’s library was part of his symbolic strategy to monumentalise a vanishing world of scholarship bound to his life, family, quarter and home city. This argument rests to a large extent on an analysis of his binding practices, i.e., how he produced thick books by bringing together what had previously been stand-alone thin booklets. This material logic was neither local nor parochial, but rather a practice that we find in most manuscript cultures around the world at the time. The push for thinking beyond my own field has thus led me to an approach and an argument that would have hardly developed had I stayed in my own disciplinary tradition.

Your research trajectory is also symptomatic of the second big transformation the field is currently experiencing, that is the increasing attention to documents in a field for decades dominated by the hegemony of narrative sources. We were told that up to the Ottomans archives scarcely existed and record-keeping was a marginal activity... When did this change?

As a discipline in European universities, the study of pre-Ottoman history emerged in the course of the nineteenth century. As it primarily emerged out of a combination of philology and biblical scholarship, there was a deeply ingrained disinterest for something like tax lists or legal documents. The argument on the purported absence of documents was never really made in a sustained fashion but was rather taken as a given. This only changed from the mid-twentieth century onwards when social history approaches started to make a stronger impact. Perhaps more importantly, colleagues in the newly independent and decolonising countries of the Middle East started to take a very different perspective on history as their new departments did not stand in the same double tradition of philology and religious studies. Among them was Abd al-Latif Ibrahim in Cairo who pioneered the study of endowment deeds, Abdul-Karim Rafeq in Syria who did the same for court records and my

personal hero Youssef Eche who introduced documentary sources into writing the history of books and libraries.² This is a process that became visible from the 1960s onwards and gained in pace in the 1970s and 1980s. Yet, an explicit debate on archives only started from the 1990s onwards and lasts to some extent until today. At first, this debate was an ‘internal’ one conducted exclusively within the parameters of our field. This was not a terrifyingly interesting debate to be honest, but probably necessary to say goodbye to traditional assumptions on the absence of documents, and thus archives. Since then, our field – as much as many other fields – has discovered the archive as a topic that easily connects to much wider debates such as how knowledge was produced, in what forms political authority was implemented and where economic exchanges took place. It is thus a wonderful example for how Eurocentric scholarly traditions and assumptions on what proper archives were was in dire need of revision to open new avenues of research.

How does this development reverberate in the field?

Numerous documentary collections, which had been known for a long time, were freed from their previous epistemological shackles of ‘trash bin’ or ‘random leftovers’, like the Haram al-sharif corpus from Jerusalem or the Qubbat al-khazna corpus from Damascus. By taking their documentary configuration seriously these collections are now in the centre of our interest. The academic ‘discovery’ of the archive allowed to reconnect documents to historical archives so that they become meaningful again. This in turn has firstly allowed to revise received wisdom in numerous cases. Striking examples of this is Petra Sijpesteijn’s book on the gradual implementation of Islamicate political authority in early Islamic Egypt, Marina Rustow’s book on political practices in the Fatimid caliphate and Daisy Livingstone’s work on the numerous archival sites in the late medieval period.³ At the same time these new archives allow to write into history individuals who had simply been under the radar of narrative sources. This includes the modest Koran reciter Burhan al-Din from fourteenth-century Jerusalem whose life and library Said Aljoumani and I discuss in our forthcoming book.⁴

² ABD AL-LATIF IBRAHIM, *Dirasat fi l-kutub wa-l-maktabat al-islamiyya* [Studies on Islamic Books and Libraries] (Cairo: 1962); ABDUL-KARIM RAFAQ, *The Province of Damascus, 1723-1783* (Beirut: Khayats, 1966); YOUSSEF ECHE, *Les bibliothèques arabes publiques et semi-publiques en Mesopotamie, en Syrie et en Egypte au moyen âge* (Damas: Institut français de Damas, 1967).

³ PETRA SIJPESTEIJN, *Shaping a Muslim State: The World of a Mid-Eighth-Century Egyptian Official* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); MARINA RUSTOW, *The Lost Archive: Traces of a Caliphate in a Cairo Synagogue* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020); DAISY LIVINGSTONE, ‘The Paperwork of a Mamluk Muqta’: Documentary Life Cycles, Archival Spaces, and the Importance of Documents Lying Around,’ in *al-‘Usūr al-wusta. The Journal of Middle East Medievalist* 28 (2020): 346–375.

⁴ SAID ALJOUMANI and KONRAD HIRSCHLER, *Owning Books and Preserving Documents in Medieval Jerusalem: The Library of Burhan al-Din al-Nasiri* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming in 2023).

Your recent work has taken the materiality of manuscript objects very seriously. Why so?

Because of the roots of our field, scholarship has been incredibly text focused. My first book on Arabic historiography and most of my second book on writerly culture and reading practices in the Medieval Arabic world were dominated by this approach.⁵ This text-focused tendency was very much driven by the dominance of print editions as the central point of reference in the twentieth century. We had forgotten that the transition of a text from one medium to the other does not come without costs. Manuscripts are also very much material objects and their materiality tells us as much about their history as the texts themselves: The tear and wear, the invocation against insects, the layout, the effaced ownership statement, the remnants of an old binding, the scribbles on the flyleaf and other signs of engagement are all lost (or at least difficult to grasp) when the text is transmediated into the world of print.

What was it, then, that reminded you of the materiality of texts, and determined your shift of focus from texts to manuscripts as material objects?

As said, while I was working on my *A Monument to Medieval Syrian Book Culture* book, I had for a very long time not the slightest idea where this project would be going in argumentative terms. I was making my way through the fifteenth-century book list that sits at the heart of my book. I struggled to make sense out of it and felt that there was something unique about this book list which I could just not pin down. Only when I materially saw for the first time one of the hundreds of manuscripts listed in this catalogue it dawned upon me that I had just looked the wrong way. The textual configuration of the manuscripts was certainly crucial, but it was not at the heart of this catalogue's logic. It was rather the specific way of how thousands of small booklets had been bound together by Yusuf Ibn 'Abd al-Hadi that made this library historically meaningful. Without the differentiation between a (material) composite manuscript and a (textual) multiple-text manuscript, I doubt that I could have written this book.

Since writing this book, I moved to the *Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures* in Hamburg where interdisciplinary work between the humanities, the natural sciences and IT is very much at the heart of our work. This has been a very steep learning curve, but there is no doubt that integrating the material object into our perspective will open up exciting new lines of research over the next years.

Where are Yusuf Ibn 'Abd al-Hadi's books today?

Yusuf Ibn 'Abd al-Hadi created his library of composite manuscripts as a monument to a scholarly tradition that was about to disappear. In consequence, his books were

⁵ KONRAD HIRSCHLER, *Medieval Arabic Historiography: Authors as Actors* (London and New York: Routledge 2006); HIRSCHLER, *The Written Word in the Medieval Arabic Lands: A Social and Cultural History of Reading Practices* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

rarely used in the subsequent centuries and stayed rather undisturbed in the library of a Damascene *madrassa*. The fact that they were of so limited interest to readers and book dealers meant that his library is arguably the best preserved medieval Syrian library. Some manuscripts made their way on the book market and are today in libraries such as Cairo, Paris, Berlin and Princeton. Yet, the vast majority stayed in the *madrassa* and were moved in the late nineteenth century into the new Ottoman public library in Damascus (today part of the Syrian National Library). Fascinatingly so, after 500 years these books are still standing next to each other in the classmark system that the National Library adopted in the 1980s.

Your interest in the trajectories of written artefacts brings up sensitive ethical questions about how they became or are made accessible, or about their provenance. How can we activate a constructive self-reflecting posture in this regard?

To some extent manuscripts and libraries remained on the margins of the heated debates that are taking place on museums and their objects. This is about to change, and we urgently need to integrate ethical questions of provenance and ownership into our scholarly practices. Whether this debate will lead to large scale reconstitutions is entirely open, as the historical processes that have led to the translocation of written artefacts to European and US-American collections are often more complex than theft and robbery. Yet, the fact that unprovenanced written artefacts are today still traded *en masse* and that even some reputed university libraries buy such objects until today shows that we are in the very first beginnings of this debate. Many of us have been indirectly involved in this market by working on problematic objects and thus contributing to establishing a clean reputation for them. We need to establish clearer guidelines as a field and at least stop working on unprovenanced artefacts that have changed ownership over the last decades. We also need more research on the collections that were established in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries so that we can actually take a position on them. Finally, more shared forums with colleagues from the Middle East who have often a very different position vis-à-vis this issue are an urgent desideratum.

Are there important digitisation projects of manuscripts going on? Or, is it too a sensitive material?

Large amounts of Arabic-script manuscript have been digitised over the last years and this is an important factor that has brought the manuscript back into the focus of our research and teaching. In Europe and the United States this has been a rather embarrassingly slow process that has only recently gained in pace. On the positive side, many of these libraries now make the scans freely available on their websites with some exceptions, such as the British Library. As many of these manuscripts have been acquired in colonial or semi-colonial contexts it is obviously a moral obligation to make sure that researchers from around the world, especially those based in countries that have low GDPs, have easy access to this heritage. It is simply

outrageous that colleagues based in countries such as Egypt are quoted prices of several hundred Euros if they request digital images. Libraries in North Africa and West Asia have generally been much faster in digitising their collections. Yet, they are often quite hesitant to make them freely available as it is seen as highly sensitive material. There are numerous reasons for this and one of them is the perception that as much as unprovenanced written artefacts continue to circulate in Europe and the United States, digital artefacts might also be appropriated in future and put to illegitimate uses.

For a long time, the field of our discipline has typically been borrowing concepts and theoretical frameworks from historians specialising in other regions of the world, the 'West' in particular. Why do you think this happened?

I am not entirely sure that this has been such a clear process. In fact, I think that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century we have also been heavily indebted to Middle Eastern scholarship. Many crucial works of our field could not have been written without including local expertise, but the role of these scholars was often written out of the publication, or their contribution marginalised. For instance, when E.G. Browne catalogued the 'Muhammadan manuscripts' in Cambridge he had 'a helping Oriental hand', but that is nowhere acknowledged in his publications. This is by the way the main problem I have with Edward Said's *Orientalism* as he ascribes way too much agency and expertise to European scholars. However, there is no doubt that since the mid-twentieth century we have heavily adopted methods and theories developed with reference to European history. There are numerous reasons for this, starting from the very simple fact that the number of colleagues working in the Humanities on a rather small part of this world, Europe, has been so much larger than those working on the vast regions of Africa and Asia. It is thus hardly surprising that more methodological and theoretical developments took place in studying European history than in let's say studying West African history. More important was certainly that differences from models familiar from European history were often seen as deviation or deficiencies in the 'what-went-wrong' line of scholarship.

Is this changing?

I think that now there is much more interest in understanding divergence and seeing its argumentative potential rather than side-lining it as a problem. Two examples are particularly pertinent in my view: Work on the transition from handwritten writerly practices to print in the nineteenth century is now not so much studied as part of Middle Eastern societies having failed to do for centuries the 'right thing', i.e. adopting print. Rather, the question is more why handwriting remained so successful there for such a long period. At the same time, the fact that we have here a massive technological change so close to our time is now also seen as an opportunity to study such transition processes in more detail. The second

example is Thomas Bauer's book on what he calls the 'culture of ambiguity'.⁶ Bauer's book is a brilliant conceptualisation of the intellectual world that emerges from Arabic Muslim texts. Here, the 'failure' of many medieval scholars to avoid taking definite positions on legal issues or theological debates is not seen as a short-coming, but rather as a defining trait of an intellectual world that could live with such a degree of ambiguity. In that sense, I definitely feel that scholarship on non-European regions is now much less on the receiving end than it used to be let's say 50 years ago.

So, between similarities and differences you seem to value more the former as an analytical tool for historical investigation.

Yes, sure, differences are easier to conceptualise and argumentatively richer ground...

Which is for you the most urgent challenge historians of pre-modern Islamicate societies currently face?

The fact that we have underperformed in building a scholarly community with our colleagues in the Middle East. In too many areas, discussions in English scholarship and those in Arabic scholarship are hardly interacting. There have been valid efforts in terms of exchanges, institutional partnerships, invitations and so on. Yet, the fact remains that Arabic scholarship is simply insufficiently integrated into our work as much as English scholarship is insufficiently integrated into Arabic scholarship.

Can you tell us something about your personal history? Has there been a scholarly personality who inspired you to become a historian of the Middle East?

After studying with moderate enthusiasm for one year Economics I set my eyes on learning a non-European language to make university more interesting. Arabic was the only language that fitted my economics schedule, so I went for it. In addition to the Arabic courses, I took the introductory lecture by Albrecht Noth on early Islamic social history. This experience simply blew me away: There was nothing more fascinating than to enter such a different linguistic world. In addition, here was finally a professor who talked about research problems rather than presenting facts we were meant to learn by heart. After three weeks I entirely dropped economics. Initially, I was rather interested in modern history (I took Turkish as my second language) and wrote my MA on a twentieth-century topic. Yet, when I thought about a possible PhD it was quickly clear that the period between the twelfth century and the fifteenth century offered so much space for new research.

⁶ THOMAS BAUER, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität. Eine andere Geschichte des islam* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen im Insel Verlag, 2011), Eng. tr. *A Culture of Ambiguity. An Alternative History of Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

Once I started to work on that period it was difficult to let go as fascinating research topics just keep popping up.

A book on Middle Eastern history scholars cannot do without?

Jo van Steenbergen, *A History of the Islamic World, 600-1800: Empires, Dynastic Formations, and Heterogeneities in Islamic West-Asia*.⁷ This is at last a textbook for our field that explicitly states its arguments, that tries to conceptualise broader trends and that gives the reader a feel for what working on Islamicate history entails in practice. With its comparative perspective it makes the history of West Asia much more approachable for English reading (academic) audiences.

What's next?

The project closest to my heart at the moment is a study of the library of Ahmad al-Jazzar, the Ottoman governor of Akkon around the year 1800. This was a breathtaking library that was sadly ripped apart and its 1,800 manuscripts (and 5 printed books) are today in libraries around the world. We do this as a team of more than 20 colleagues and it is just so much fun (before it comes to the editing stage) to collaboratively work on a book project.

And at some point I would love to write a book that some more people might read ...

⁷ JO VAN STEENBERGEN, *A History of the Islamic World, 600-1800: Empires, Dynastic Formations, and Heterogeneities in Islamic West-Asia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020).