

**Documents and History, Islam, VIIe-XVIe s.
International Study day**

16-17 May, 2008

Département des arts de l'islam
Ecole Pratique des Hautes Études

Call for papers

The goal of the workshop in “Documents and History” is to illustrate recent trends in research (early nineteen-nineties until today) on documents for pre-modern Islamic societies. It is intended as a venue where discoveries in particular sources, thoughts about the methodologies to be applied to sources, as well as more general epistemological remarks, may be presented.

As early as the end of the nineteenth century, efforts were made to reconstruct the history of early Islam. Those engaged in such efforts were soon to face the question of how much some corpora, such as the *hadith*, could be trusted as a source. Some scholars in this field, especially during the nineteen-seventies, went so far as to question whether the traditional Arabic sources for early Islam could be used at all, and preferred to base their reconstructions on sources in other languages. Their position has been sometimes described as “skeptical” since they voiced hyperbolic doubts about this material (see Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins. The Beginning of Islamic historical writing*, Princeton, 1998, who provides in his Introduction a critical overview of one century of historiography).

Today, the situation seems less dire. The lack of documents that are contemporary with the events appears somewhat less acute, even for the period which is usually considered poorly documented, i.e. from the beginning of Islam until the beginning of the 16th century CE. In first place, the skeptical position has itself been subjected to bracing criticism since the nineteen-eighties. New readings of texts, and new methods of approaching them, has led to fresh attempts to understand the history of early Islam. Arabic papyrology has recently witnessed a resurgence of interest, leading to the discovery of numerous new documents on papyrus or paper, housed either in Western libraries or in Near Eastern collections. Although the period before Ottoman rule was considered as especially poor in archival material, new perspectives seem to have been recently opened. We are expecting a lot from collections that were well known but hitherto underexploited, as well as from collections that are still to be discovered, and from archives as well as from other kinds of documents. New excavations and archaeological surveys have also brought new discoveries (for example, Umayyad and Ayyubid inscriptions, documents from Fustat, the excavations and documents from Quseir, etc.).

The documents under discussion are of various kinds. They include chancery documents, merchants' letters (often quite difficult to distinguish from personal letters), exchanges

between individuals and state institutions, administrative or legal documents, delivery slips of various kinds, records of accounts, as well as other kinds of materials, all of which are often fraught with surprises for the researcher.

Research in the field of epigraphy and numismatics has also brought its share of contributions. Inscriptions have now been collected over a wider area of the Islamic world, including even Islamic inscriptions from the Far East, and new databases have greatly facilitated access to this information. As far as coins are concerned, we can note for instance a better knowledge of Fatimid coinage than existed even a decade ago.

New procedures in information and computing technology have also been applied in very specific circumstances to enhance the readability of the text found in a document (for example, when the ink has faded away), or to help reconstruct a text that exists in scattered fragments by piecing them together again.

It is the aim of the workshop to explore this “New Frontier” of recent research dealing with the area extending from Iran to the Maghrib. One of its goals is to encourage more interaction between researchers working with different kinds of sources, who in the past were often isolated from one another—whether papyrologists, archaeologists, numismatists, epigraphers, or historians. It used to be customary that papyrologists edited and published their texts, and numismatists analyzed their coins, while historians relied mainly on literary sources, with minimal contact between the groups even when they worked on materials from the same time and place. There was also a difference in perspective on the proper role of philology in such research: papyrologists were naturally keen on it, while historians, archaeologists, art historians, and numismatists tended to avoid its intricacies.

Recent years have seen some improvement in this pattern of isolation. There has been an increased interest in documents or graffiti found during an excavation (rather than documents purchased on the antiquities market), since materials found in an archaeological context can, through cross-dating, shed light both on the objects and on their context. This consideration has encouraged some papyrologists to become more conversant with archaeology. Nonetheless, it remains exceptional to see a true joint effort between scholars in different specialties. The workshop hopes to encourage greater cooperation in the future.

The workshop also aims to address the need for quicker and more systematic processing of the data recovered in the various fields under discussion, through the application of new information technology. A closer cooperation with specialists in computer science is needed.

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Prospective participants in the workshop are encouraged to consider submitting a proposal belonging to one of the following topics:

- New discoveries in the sources.
- The discovery of new corpora of sources.
- Reconstructing archives.
- Documents and manuscripts as sources.
- The relationship between documents and artifacts of material culture.
- New methods of analysis of the sources.

Our key note speaker will be Prof. Geoffrey Khan, Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Cambridge.

The proceedings of the workshop are to be published.

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