

# Beyond the Islamicate Chancery: Archives, Paperwork, and Textual Encounters across Eurasia, a Preface

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PAOLO SARTORI\*

Email: paolo.sartori@oeaw.ac.at

This thematic issue of *Itinerario* brings together a selection of papers presented at the international conference Beyond the Islamicate Chancery: Archives, Paperwork, and Textual Encounters across Eurasia, which was held at the Austrian Academy of Sciences in Vienna in early October 2018. The conference was the third instalment in a series of collaborations between the Institute of Iranian Studies at the Austrian Academy of Sciences and the University of Pittsburgh examining Islamicate cultures of documentation from different angles. Surviving precolonial and colonial chancery archives across Eurasia provide an unparalleled glimpse into the inner workings of connectivity across writing cultures and, especially, documentary practices. This particular meeting has attempted to situate what has traditionally been a highly technical discipline in a broader historical dialogue on the relationship between state power, the archive, and cultural encounters.

**Key words:** archives, empires, governance, mobility, textual encounters

Paperwork is everywhere. Scholars have long emphasised 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.

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of documentation from different angles.<sup>1</sup> Surviving precolonial and colonial chancery archives across Eurasia provide an unparalleled glimpse into the inner workings of connectivity across writing cultures and, especially, documentary practices. This particular meeting has attempted to situate 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 conference served 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 Turkicate 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 civilisational 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 aimed 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, aimed 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.<sup>2</sup>

This heuristic shift is key to expanding 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 sociolinguistic 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 some important ideological baggage: to focus on textual encounters is tantamount to appreciating cultural diversity and envisioning a world of interactions and multiple sensibilities. As per its original design, this special issue of *Itinerario* 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 Asia, and South Asia.

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## Notes

\* Paolo Sartori is Senior Fellow of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. He specialises in the history of the Muslim communities of the Russian empire and the Soviet Union. His latest book is *Visions of Justice: Shari'a and Cultural Change in Russian Central Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

- 1 See the special thematic issue “Islamic Cultures of Documentation,” guest-edited by James Pickett and Paolo Sartori, in the *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 62:5–6 (2019).
- 2 For important, innovative reflections on this subject, see the article by Heather Ferguson in this volume.