

Zukunftsphilologie: Revisiting the Canons of Textual Practice

Lecture cum Seminar

Thursday, May 5, 2011, 16.00 – 19.00

Freie Universität Berlin, Raum JK 24/122d, Habelschwerdter Allee 45

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Of Palimpsests and Acephalous Texts: Tracing the Limits of Early 'Abbāsīd Geography

Chair: **Manan Ahmed** (Freie Universität Berlin)

Geography has always been the space of translation. As a discrete field within 'Abbāsīd letters, geographical writing, and its encyclopedic discourse on marvels, built upon a broad network of imperial administrators and intrepid adventures, who translated the exotica of precious metals, jewels, perfumes, textiles, rare foods and spices, strange animals and peoples into the discrete, and thus manageable, form of the anecdote.

In the ever-expanding boundaries of this geographical corpus, with its territorial desire of possession, stands the translator, who negotiates the space of the frontier. Valued most in this process of exchange and control is the authority of eyewitness empiricism, which beholds and authenticates the reality of the marvelous. As with any process of translation, the interpretive acts that shaped early 'Abbāsīd geography were marked by both loss and gain, through a discourse that not only described the world but also sought to shape it.

In a not entirely unrelated vein, the nineteenth-century reconstruction of early Islamic geography also reflected a process of translation. The philological foundations for the methods of textual criticism deployed in the modern recreation of this corpus drew upon a basic assumption: the principle of prior simplicity, which privileged, above all, authorial authenticity, through a hierarchical reconstruction of genealogical relationships governing the surviving codicological evidence.

In this discussion, I review the imperial desires and anxieties that animate early Arabic geography and its fascination with the marvelous, while also exploring how this literature was received and constructed within the Orientalist scholarship of the nineteenth century. The codicological problems surrounding *al-Masālik wa 'l-mamālik* by the Persian courtier, Ibn Khurrādādhbih (fl. 272/885), long considered the earliest surviving work of Arabic administrative geography, serve as the center of gravity for a larger reflection on the epistemic limits posed by the archive.

TRAVIS ZADEH is an Assistant Professor at Haverford College, PA, where he teaches courses on Islamic intellectual and cultural history in the Department of Religion and in the Program of Comparative Literature. He received a B.A. from Middlebury College (1998) and an A.M. and Ph.D. from Harvard University in Comparative Literature (2007). His research focuses on the role of translation in the formative stages of Islamic intellectual and cultural history, particularly in the areas of geographical writings on the wonders of the world and scriptural hermeneutics concerning the transcendental nature of the Qurʾān. His first monograph, *Mapping Frontiers across Medieval Islam: Geography, Translation, and the ʿAbbāsīd Empire* (I.B. Tauris, Summer 2011), explores the intersection of scriptural hermeneutics and descriptive geography in the projection of caliphal authority and imperial power during the ninth century. His second book, *The Vernacular Qurʾān: Translation and the Rise of Persian Exegesis* (Oxford University Press/IIS, forthcoming), examines early juridical and theological debates over the translatability of the Qurʾān and the rise of vernacular cultures with the development of Persian exegetical literature and translations of the Qurʾān.

Lecture-cum-Seminar

The Lecture-cum-Seminar series is a central element of the scholarly program of the Zukunftsphilologie project. It is conceived as a working seminar of 3 to 5 hours. The lecture (ca. 45-60 minutes) is meant to introduce the audience to the research problem and provide the general analytical and theoretical framework for the topic. This is followed by a practical seminar, wherein the speaker demonstrates his or her case by reference to texts in the original language and in English translation. It is hoped that this Lecture-cum-Seminar series, a combination of theory and a direct engagement with texts, will enable scholars to examine the comparative aspect of the problematic without neglect of the local and singular nature of the texts examined.

Zukunftsphilologie: Revisiting the Canons of Textual Scholarship

The project Zukunftsphilologie endeavours to promote and emphasize primary textual scholarship beyond the classical humanistic canon. In an age of advanced communication, intellectual specialization, and unprecedented migration of knowledge and people, the discipline of philology assumes new relevance. Zukunftsphilologie aspires to support research in neglected varieties of philology with the explicit aim to integrate texts and scholarly traditions from Asia, Africa, the Middle East as well as from Europe itself.

Zukunftsphilologie refers to the polemic between the classicist Ulrich von Wilamowitz and Friedrich Nietzsche around the method and meaning of classical studies. As a project it sees itself as part of a growing trend towards a more global intellectual history. It is inspired in particular by the work of Edward Said and Sheldon Pollock.

In order to promote historically-conscious philology, Zukunftsphilologie will foster research in the following areas: genealogies and transformations of philological practice, philology's place in the system of knowledge (e.g. its relation to science, theology and jurisprudence), and philology and the university. Furthermore, Zukunftsphilologie aims to support critical reviews of historical and philological practice. In revisiting important „philological wars“, the goal is not to merely evaluate the argumentative worth of these debates, but to reflect on the wider cultural and political context in which these „philological wars“ emerged and how they have shaped our knowledge of the past.

The project Zukunftsphilologie is co-directed by Angelika Neuwirth, Manan Ahmed and Islam Dayeh (all Freie Universität Berlin) and is associated with and located at the Friedrich Schlegel Graduate School for Literary Studies at Freie Universität Berlin. Zukunftsphilologie is a project at the Forum Transregionale Studien.

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For more information please see:

www.forum-transregionale-studien.de

<http://www.geisteswissenschaften.fu-berlin.de/friedrichschlegel/promotionsprogramm/kooperationen/Zukunftsphilologie/index.html>