

Conference Report

**Spatial Thought in Islamicate Societies, 1000-1600:
The Politics of Genre, Image, and Text
(Tübingen, 30 March to 1 April 2017)**

Zayde Antrim, Jean-Charles Ducène, and Kurt Franz

For two days in the picturesque Swabian university town of Tübingen, a lively cohort of researchers came together for the first international conference on spatial thought in Islamicate societies, 1000-1600 CE. Organized by Kurt Franz, Jean-Charles Ducène, and Zayde Antrim and funded by the University of Tübingen, the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* (EPHE)—Research University Paris, the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS), and Trinity College (Hartford, CT), the conference schedule was intense, but also left time for informal, if no less vigorous, discussions over walks and meals in a variety of attractive local venues. What was absolutely clear at the end of two days is that a new generation of scholars is challenging traditional approaches to historical geography and cartography, uncovering exciting new sources, and integrating novel theoretical considerations and methodologies into their work.

The presentations were organized in

panels that treated each of the themes in the conference subtitle: genre, image, and text. Kicking off the conference on Thursday evening, Zayde Antrim (Trinity College, Hartford, CT) gave an introductory lecture in Tübingen's historic Alte Aula entitled "Spatial Thought and the Limitations of Genre." Antrim questioned the dichotomizing effects of conventional genre distinctions, such as that between mathematical and human geography or that between geography and history. She also invoked, not for the last time during the conference, the foundational work of André Miquel and its complicated ramifications for the study of spatial thought in the period after about 1000 CE.

On Friday morning, the participants gathered in the lofty tower seminar room of the Institute of Classical Archaeology in Hohentübingen Castle, boasting panoramic views of the surrounding countryside. Opening the first panel on the theme of genre, Emmanuelle Tixier du Mesnil (Université Paris X Nanterre La Défense)

challenged traditional history of science approaches to Islamicate geography that amount to a catalog of discoveries (or, as she quipped, errors) shorn of social or political context. She argued, following Miquel, that medieval Arabic geography was not merely a vector carrying ancient geography to Renaissance Europe, and that its significance cannot be properly appreciated without understanding the social and political context in which it emerged. As a case in point, she demonstrated the effect of the turbulence and fragmentation of eleventh-century al-Andalus on the geographical work of al-Bakrī (d. 487/1094), who, by turning toward the south, was emphasizing its importance in his own political context.

While Tixier du Mesnil critiqued the way geographical literature has been treated as a decontextualized genre by historians of science, Kurt Franz (Universität Tübingen) introduced a new way of reading what might be called a “subgenre” of Arabic geography—the encyclopedia—exemplified by Yāqūt’s thirteenth-century *Muʿjam al-buldān*. Instead of using Yāqūt’s encyclopedia as a “quarry” from which to solve problems in footnotes, he argued that it should be approached as a coherently composed work that conveys meanings and opinions. Proposing narrative analysis as the best way to understand Yāqūt’s project, Franz identified geographical micro-narratives at the level of individual articles and meta-textual master narratives that integrate the book. Although doing so for the entire work brings up problems of scale and methodology, Franz demonstrated his approach with a subset of Yāqūt’s entries for the Arabian Peninsula, Syria, and al-Jazīra. His analysis revealed a

preoccupation with forgotten places and uninhabited sites in the desert or steppe that might be reanimated by a “salvage operation” that featured, most prominently, poetry. These were not spaces shaped by the reach of imperial power, but rather by poetic allusions and the memory of readers whose knowledge of the poetic canon Yāqūt relied upon to fill in the blanks in his entries.

Rounding out the panel, Travis Zadeh (Yale University) used the concept of wonder, often associated with but not confined to the genre of *ʿajāʾib* literature, to interrogate the epistemological basis upon which Western discourse has determined what “qualifies,” drawing from Ann Stoler’s work, as “discovery” and “curiosity.” Opening his paper with the claim made by the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in 2014, that Muslims were the first to discover America, Zadeh argued that this represented a response to a persistent colonial history in which Islamicate society has been deemed inward-looking and lacking in curiosity about the rest of the world. Instead, he proposed the concept of wonder as a discursive formation within Islamicate societies that made possible a serious engagement with the heterogeneity of existence, the ever-shifting boundary between the known and the unknown, and the limits of human capacity. According to Zadeh, meditations on wonder presumed curiosity to be a powerful drive. It was therefore never a matter of lack of curiosity, but of how—or where—to channel it. This was one of the purposes of spatial thought and geographical writing, Zadeh concluded, to establish frontiers as relational concepts—not as barriers to the unknown, but as historically contingent,

and thus always changing, ways of ordering a world defined by its diversity.

The second panel, on the theme of image, was convened after a refreshing lunch at Café Ranitzky in the Marketplace Square of Tübingen. Yossef Rapoport (Queen Mary University of London) opened the panel with a paper on mapping urban space. He began by noting that scholars have frequently dismissed maps of cities as rare or ignored them entirely. In response, he assembled a sampling of maps from manuscripts, such as the “Book of Curiosities,” an anonymous cosmographical work composed in the eleventh century, and Ibn Mujāwir’s thirteenth-century account of the Arabian Peninsula, to show a recurrent pattern in the graphical depiction of cities. According to Rapoport, these images focus on protection—walls, harbors—and sites of political authority. The rest of the urban space is frequently portrayed as empty. This offers a contrast to written representations of cities and urban life, which often emphasize religious structures and markets. This paper prompted a debate about whether or not such maps represent continuity with pre- and extra-Islamic depictions of cities, such as the Madaba map.

Next, Feray Coşkun (Freie Universität Berlin) addressed world maps in manuscripts of the popular sixteenth-century Ottoman Turkish translation of Ibn al-Wardī’s fifteenth-century *Kharīdat al-‘ajā’ib*. With examples from a variety of manuscripts, Coşkun argued that these world maps are particularly revealing of the historical context of their copying. For instance, the legendary Throne of Iblīs, pictured in East Africa in fifteenth-century Arabic manuscripts,

was moved to northern Europe in one of the earliest manuscript copies of the Turkish translation, mirroring an Ottoman orientation toward the north as the land of the unknown or the dangerous. Another compelling example came from a seventeenth-century manuscript, which features an extremely large depiction of Constantinople, along with additional copyist commentary describing the city as the divinely protected center of the Caliphate. Coşkun concluded that these changing features indicate the flexibility of maps, which can be altered in dramatic or subtle ways to reflect their historical context, and help account for the prolonged popularity of the work in the Ottoman milieu. Like Rapoport, Coşkun showed that maps provide alternate venues for promoting conceptions of space than written works.

In the third and final paper on image, Nadja Danilenko (Freie Universität Berlin) analyzed the manuscript tradition of one of the most frequently copied cartographic texts from the medieval Islamicate world, al-Iṣṭakhrī’s “Book of Routes and Realms.” Danilenko’s paper made three main points: first, that al-Iṣṭakhrī employed a novel visualization strategy that stayed relatively stable across centuries of manuscript copying; second, that al-Iṣṭakhrī’s work was the only tenth-century Arabic geography translated into both Persian and Ottoman Turkish, a fact that reflects the cultural efflorescence of the Mongol and post-Mongol Persianate world; and third, that the continued copying of the manuscript up to 1898 was driven by many factors but perhaps primarily by its aesthetic appeal as a showpiece for elites. Danilenko’s research has uncovered heretofore unknown manuscripts of this

work, bringing the total extant copies up to 51 (Arabic, Persian, Turkish), a major contribution to the field that has entailed painstaking archival work on four continents. Hers was one of the few papers in the conference that addressed the materiality of the sources and their role as commodities in circulation.

A long and lively day was capped by a visit to the Research Unit for Islamic Numismatics (FINT) hosted by the Department of Oriental and Islamic Studies at the University of Tübingen. There, conference participants were treated to a presentation by curator Lutz Ilisch on coins as sources for historical geography. It was a fascinating lesson not only on the ways in which distributions of coins and mints yield insight into political and economic fluctuations, but also on the challenges of assembling and maintaining such an extensive collection, second only to that of St. Petersburg. Afterwards, we gathered in Kurt Franz's office for a brief introduction to "eTAVO" (Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients), the massive geoinformation project under preparation he is coordinating, and the alpha version of the community-building website "Mamâlik: Place and Space in Islamic History," to be launched shortly.

Day two was equally exciting, featuring two panels on the theme of text: a poster session in which four graduate students presented their dissertation work, and an energetic and fruitful summary discussion. The Saturday morning panel was convened by a guest chair, Dana Sajdi (Boston College), and opened with a presentation by Stefan Heidemann (Universität Hamburg) on a digital humanities project that draws from ninth- through twelfth-century Arabic geographies to map the Abbasid Empire

"on its own terms." Focusing on the five regions of Ifrīqiya, al-Shām, al-Jazīra, Fārs, and Khurāsān, the project's preliminary findings show that the locations included in each regional unit varied considerably among the geographers under study. This suggests that such regions did not function as territorially-defined provinces, but were rather administrative projections from the center without defined territoriality. He presented a sampling of maps of al-Shām from the project, which use translucent polygons to represent each of the region's administrative districts (*ajnād*) superimposed on a Google Earth base. This method makes it possible to layer different interpretations of the *ajnād* on the same map. It also has an advantage over previous attempts to map the Abbasid Empire, which have been less successful at conveying ambiguity and territoriality at the same time.

The second paper of the morning on al-Idrīsī's twelfth-century *Nuzhat al-mushtāq* constituted one of the only in-depth discussions of an author's method for integrating word and image. According to Irina Konovalova (Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow), al-Idrīsī used route data to organize space, but this presented problems, since the singularity of each of his sectional maps fragmented long-distance itineraries. He managed the limitations of his cartographic method by taking advantage of the possibilities of the written text for toponym repetition and intratextual cross-referencing, which together allow a reader to keep track of itineraries that stretch over more than one sectional map. Konovalova also argued that toponyms function in al-Idrīsī's work like "geographical objects." Consumers of this toponymy might appreciate the



Conference participants in Tübingen, Germany, 2017.

“idea” of the toponym—the object that it constituted, rather than the one it signified—without having need of detailed locational information about it. This was particularly true for faraway or large and boundless places. She concluded that for al-Idrīsī word and image not only represented two different ways of presenting information but also conveyed two different types of information, sometimes in interdependent and sometimes in independent ways.

The last paper of the morning panel straddled the themes of genre and text, as Jean-Charles Ducène (École pratique des hautes études, Paris) examined a set of works usually identified as administrative or chancellery manuals from the Mamlūk period. While al-‘Umarī’s fourteenth-century *Masālik al-abṣār* is sometimes included under the rubric of geographical literature, in particular because of its maps, other works, such as his *Ta‘rīf bi-l-muṣṭalaḥ al-sharīf* and Qalqashandī’s *Ṣubḥ al-a‘shā*,

not to mention works by their lesser known contemporaries Ibn Nāzīr al-Jaysh and al-Saḥmāwī, are rarely considered in discussions of spatial thought. Indeed, Ducène argued that analyzing these texts reveals a very different approach to space than that of more “universalist” geographers like al-Idrīsī. Mamlūk-era chancellery manuals order space in terms of proximity and relevance to the imperial center—in this case, Egypt—and sketch a geography of “states,” recognized as such by their political, economic, and military power and their diplomatic relations with the Mamlūks. In short, Ducène contended, these authors developed a real political geography.

Before breaking for lunch on the lovely terrace of the Hotel am Schloss, the group assembled for a poster session featuring four PhD researchers who won travel grants to attend the conference. Brief presentations accompanied by compelling visuals addressed the importance of the

qibla as ritual, metaphor, and identity marker in early Islam (Ari M. Gordon, University of Pennsylvania); Bosnian hajj literature and local cosmopolitanism in the Ottoman Empire (Dženita Karić, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London); Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's vision of Southeast Asia as a frontier (Aglaia Iankovskaia, Central European University, Budapest); and a new digital approach to comparing descriptive geographies (Masoumeh Seydi, in collaboration with Maxim Romanov, Universität Leipzig).

The Saturday afternoon panel on the theme of text consisted of two, rather than three, papers, as unfortunately Sergey Minov (Oxford University) was prevented from presenting his work on Syriac cosmography due to last-minute visa complications. The panel was opened by Alexis N. Wick (American University of Beirut), whose paper on Ibn Mājid's fifteenth-century navigation guide to the Indian Ocean moved us from land to sea. Like Konovalova's al-Idrīsī, but unlike Ducène's Mamlūk administrators, Ibn Mājid organized space in terms of toponyms and routes, not sovereignty. His regular use of the first and second person suggested the importance of personal experience in providing practical guidance to others. Such references to firsthand knowledge were, of course, a means of authorial legitimation, but Wick argued that they must also be seen as part of a wider epistemological system in which experience, scholarship, and instruction were seamlessly integrated in the service of ordering, appreciating, and enabling movement through space. This system produced the sea as an inclusive space, mediated by the authority of navigators to be sure, but with the effect of making

it more, not less, accessible outside of limited circles of personal experience and expertise.

The final paper of the conference was also the first one to deal with a text emerging from what has been called the genre of local history rather than geography. In a discussion of Ibn Isfandiyār's early thirteenth-century Persian *Tārīkh-i Ṭabaristān*, Robert Haug (University of Cincinnati) stressed the importance of an author's autobiography to the representation of space. According to Haug, Ibn Isfandiyār's experience in exile, watching the Bāwandid dynasty fall to the Khwārazmshāhs, caused him to represent Ṭabaristān as a place of sanctuary. By narrating anecdotes about foreigners seeking refuge in Ṭabaristān over the centuries, Ibn Isfandiyār inserted his home region into the larger political dramas of the time. Haug concluded by speculating that this may also be a clue as to Ibn Isfandiyār's intended audience, a circle of fellow exiles for whom the ill treatment of refugees was a pressing concern.

The closing event of the conference was a summary discussion led by Nasser Rabbat (Massachusetts Institute of Technology). Rabbat began by sketching three modes for depicting space in Islamic societies between 1000 and 1600. The first, "verbal," consisting of oral or written descriptions of space, was already highly developed by the beginning of this period. The second, "graphic," consisting of non-mimetic visualizations of space, was gathering momentum over the course of, but especially toward the end of, this period. And the third, "representational," consisting of mimetic, perspectival visualizations of space, became important

only from the sixteenth-century on. Rabbat cautioned that this typology should be seen along a historical continuum, not as a template for discrete, consecutive periodization. Indeed, the “verbal” persisted as, arguably, the dominant mode for expressions of spatial thought until the modern period, and there have always been overlaps between the three modes, both within the sources themselves and within historical periods. Nonetheless, Rabbat contended that a pressing question for the study of spatial thought after circa 1000 is why—and in what cultural or historical circumstances—one mode was chosen rather than another. What do these choices tell us about, for instance, the development of genres, technologies, and divisions of labor?

Rabbat then provided some comments on recurring themes over the two days of paper presentations. He noted the importance of the political context to the production and circulation of spatially oriented texts, as well as to the shaping of their contents; he suggested ekphrasis as a conceptual tool to understand the rhetorical purpose of many of these texts; and he emphasized the significance of the concept of wonder and questions of the unknown—or unknowable—in spatial thought. The discussion that ensued was extremely vigorous and thought-provoking, as the group grappled with questions of epistemology—what “counts” as geography or cartography? How do we respond to persistent discourses that identify “absences” in Islamicate societies? Do we respond with “presences”? Or do we reject the epistemological terms that such questions force us into? The issue of genre was one of the more contentious, with some participants insisting on the usefulness of

generic distinctions between, for instance, mathematical and human geography and others seeing such distinctions as problematic or ill-suited to the sources. Rabbat asked whether it is even possible for us to identify “indigenous” genres of medieval spatial thought or whether we are trapped between two options, imposing our own genres or defaulting to assumptions of “genre fluidity.” In other words, have we arrived at limits of our own, a frontier behind which lies the unknown—or unknowable?

While leaving this open to future debate, the conference did generate consensus in several areas. The period 1000-1600 proved productive, despite often-heard classicist opinions of a deep decline following roughly the year 1000. Instead of denigrating “post-classical” geographies as derivative or inferior, participants stressed the ability of authors to innovate and adapt to a variety of contexts in a changing world. Also, it was consistently emphasized that the stock of relevant books and maps from this period is by no means exhausted. Making more manuscript materials available was deemed a prerequisite for understanding better the significance of spatially oriented works. Third, it went almost without saying that the multifold linguistic and cultural character of these centuries calls for more cross-sectional and interdisciplinary study. This pertains not only to the movement of spatial concepts between Arabic, Persian, Ottoman, and other literatures, but also to intertextuality among works composed in different genres or for different audiences, and, it may be added, even among literary or cartographical sources and spatially-relevant objects or buildings. Finally, the wrap-up session allowed participants to

place the discussion in a larger framework. Some of the most frequently raised questions during the conference addressed the social context in which geographers and mapmakers worked, to what extent their thought was shaped by practical needs, and what impact their products had on others and on the physical environment. These questions, as Franz put it, implied that the spatial thought of expert literati should be seen as but a very specialized and visible expression of the basic human activities that are movement and spatial cognition. As such, Franz concluded, the conference provided an incentive to integrate the study of spatial thought more fully into the field of social history.

If two days of papers on these topics taught us anything, however, it was that frontiers are always shifting. This represents both a challenge and an opportunity, and the group resolved to continue such discussions with the goal of reconvening in some form in two years. A celebratory farewell dinner at Tübingen's culinary treasure Le Romarin cemented this resolve and we dispersed into the night, some to early morning flights and others to a final day of spring weather on Tübingen's River Neckar, but all looking forward to future work on the frontiers of Islamicate spatial thought.

For the full conference programme and paper abstracts, see: <http://www.spatial-thought.uni-tuebingen.de/>