

**Conference Report:
The Mongols' Baghdad:
Knowledge Transmission through Manuscript Cultures
Before and After the Conquest
(Institute of Iranian Studies, Vienna, 1–3 December 2022)**

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The international hybrid conference *The Mongols' Baghdad: Knowledge Transmission through Manuscript Cultures Before and After the Conquest* was jointly organized by the research projects “NoMansLand, FWF-START Project Y-1232-G30” (Austrian Academy of Sciences) and “Bibliotheca Arabica” (Saxon Academy of Sciences and Humanities). The event—hosted in Vienna by the Institute of Iranian Studies (Austrian Academy of Sciences)—focused on the historical significance of Baghdad as a crucial center for knowledge production.

The conference delved into the repercussions of the Mongol conquest of Baghdad, a formative event with complex implications for the Islamic world. The 1258 Mongol capture of Baghdad, leading to the demise of the Abbasid Caliphate, stands as a socio-political turning point. Later narratives on the conquest took on an almost mythical dimension, characterizing the Mongol arrival as a purely destructive event—a “medieval catastrophe”—responsible for the decline of Baghdad’s splendor, which could ultimately only be revived during the Ottoman and Safavid empires.

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In contrast to this perception, more recent interpretations view the period as a multifaceted phase in which the Mongols functioned as cultural intermediaries and facilitated trade and knowledge exchange in a geographical area that spanned from the Mediterranean to China. Despite the upheaval brought by the Mongol conquest, Baghdad remained a pivotal node in the global trade network of textiles, pearls, and manuscripts. Furthermore, it expanded its connection to include the trans-Eurasian trade routes. The city continued to serve as a center of intellectual pursuit, producing scholarly works across an array of disciplines such as history, geography, astronomy, medicine, and music. As a consequence, its intellectual appeal transcended regional and religious boundaries, attracting scholars from various backgrounds.¹

The central theme of the conference was to explore the role of manuscripts in understanding the cultural life of Baghdad before, during, and after the Mongol period. However, participants were also encouraged to consider the interaction between Baghdad and other centers of knowledge, emphasizing the interconnectedness of literatures across different geographical areas. Invited researchers presented papers that analyzed individual manuscripts or collections of codices, providing insights into various aspects of continuity and transformation in the region. These aspects included the roles of authors, copyists, and patrons in knowledge production, as well as the geographical dynamics of production, distribution, and consumption of manuscripts. In doing so, the conference shed light on the role of manuscripts as a means for gaining a better understanding of the history of Baghdad and its intellectual life.

Keynote Lecture (Thursday, 1 December 2022)

The event was inaugurated by a lecture delivered by Dr. Saad Eskander, former director of the Iraq National Library. Iraq's cultural heritage has been deeply impacted by a tumultuous history, including foreign invasions, wars, and regime changes. The preservation of manuscripts and other cultural objects has been challenging amidst these circumstances. In his keynote lecture "Managing Iraq's Cultural Heritage in the 20th Century: Foreign Occupations, Wars and Dictatorships," Dr. Eskander provided insights into difficulties encountered in safeguarding Iraq's cultural heritage, including the Iraqi manuscript collections, considering personal, legal, and administrative perspectives. Starting from the Ottoman period, he examined cultural heritage policies during the British occupation and the Mandate era and delved into the fate of Iraq's libraries during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The presentation provided valuable insights that were pertinent to the workshop's focus on textual production and transmission during times of crises, stimulating discussions from novel perspectives.

1. Among others the following works can be recommended: M. Biran, "Baghdad under Mongol Rule," in *Baghdad: From Its Beginnings to the 14th Century*, ed. J. Scheiner and I. Toral-Niehoff, 285–315 (Leiden: Brill, 2022); idem, "Ilkhanid Baghdad (1258–1335): Between the Local and the Global," in *The Mongol Empire in Global History and Art History*, ed. A. Dunlop, 185–214 (Florence: I Tatti Research Series, 2023); B. De Nicola and C. Melville, eds., *The Mongols' Middle East* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

Baghdad and Its Books (Friday, 2 December 2022)

The first day of the conference focused on the theme of “Baghdad and Its Books.” The event commenced with a welcome address from the director of the *Institute of Iranian Studies*, Florian Schwarz, and principal investigator of the *Bibliotheca Arabica* project, Verena Klemm, who highlighted the collaborative efforts of both the Austrian and the Saxon Academy of Sciences (and Humanities) as hosts of this event and stressed the significance of exploring historical events through manuscript cultures.

In the first panel “Loss of Books in Baghdad,” the participants explored the impact of the conquest on the survival or demise of manuscripts. Notably, interpretations of the Mongols’ victory over Baghdad have varied, with a common portrayal, particularly in Arabic sources produced in the following centuries, depicting it as the commencement of a dark era marked by the ruthless destruction of literature. Metin Yilmaz’s paper showed that the destruction of libraries in Baghdad has been exaggerated and used as a popular narrative in literature. He expressed a need to challenge such an outdated perception of history and pointed out that primary sources indicate that the majority of libraries were not burned by the Mongols but preserved. In contrast, the subsequent presentation by Ghasem Gharib delved into the destiny of a manuscript that may serve as evidence of the fall of Baghdad and the destruction of its libraries. The presentation zoomed in on a codex of *Sunan* by Ibn Māja, which was once part of the caliph’s library, that survived the Mongol invasion and was, according to an annotation, found on the banks of the Tigris. Moreover, the manuscript note spawned an interesting debate about the authenticity of marginalia among the codicologists in the group.

After a short coffee break, the conference resumed with Panel II, focusing on “the production of manuscripts and their transmission.” Bruno De Nicola challenged the popular belief that the Mongols burned the libraries of Baghdad after the conquest, suggesting that this notion is more of a literary *topos* than an accurate description of events. He shared preliminary observations from a statistical analysis of almost 200 manuscripts produced in Baghdad during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries that aimed to contribute to a better understanding of literary production under Mongol rule. Furthermore, he demonstrated that the overwhelming majority of literature produced and copied in the Mongol period in the Persianate regions was in Arabic, while the Persian material constituted only a minor fraction of the surviving corpus. The paper was followed by Michal Biran’s prosopographical approach, concentrating on copyists in Ilkhanid Baghdad. Drawing from various sources, including literary works and manuscript catalogues, Biran’s database served as a starting point to portray the life and characteristics of the copyists and their connections to different institutions and locations. Her discussion also explored the books known to have been copied in Ilkhanid Baghdad. Boris Liebreinz presented the final paper in this panel on the challenges of identifying surviving manuscripts from Baghdad. Liebreinz emphasized the need to move beyond narrative tropes to gain a more comprehensive understanding of manuscript production and book culture in pre- and post-Mongol Baghdad. He demonstrated the advantages of *Bibliotheca Arabica’s* digital database *Khizana*, which aims to provide a platform for catalogue data, as well as manuscript notes such as ownership statements and reading certificates. These are compiled in the project and often give valuable information

on the social history of books. The development of digital tools will prove to be crucial to overcoming the difficulties of identifying books from Baghdad.

The day continued with Panel III, which explored the theme of art and architecture in Baghdad. Shiva Mihan presented insights from a unique Persian manuscript, *Kāghaznāme* by ‘Izz al-Dīn Matla‘ī, which is considered the oldest extant work on traditional paper-making. The text has, despite its edition about ten years ago, barely received attention by scholars. It mentions the gathering of materials from across the region and their processing in Baghdad, as a center of paper production. Mihan’s research explored the treatise in the context of the thirteenth century and investigated the production of cotton paper within the broader context of traditional paper-making in the Persianate regions. In the next presentation in this panel, Eleanor Sims introduced a practically unstudied illustrated Jalayirid manuscript of Nizāmī-i Arūzī-i Samarqandī’s *Chahār Maqāla*. The talk focused on a number of significant illustrations in this Jalayirid volume, which were compared with those in a later illustrated copy made for the Timurid prince Bāysunghur, highlighting the potential influence of the Jalayirid painting style on Bāysunghur’s work. In the final presentation of the panel, Andrew Petersen discussed Baghdad’s architecture as tangible evidence of its pre- and post-Mongol significance as a center for literature and knowledge production. With a focus on the city’s urban layout, Petersen delved into medieval and early Ottoman manuscript illustrations, along with later Ottoman and European maps, and his own photographs of existing monuments to reconstruct the architecture of the medieval city. He argued that Mongol rule contributed to the development of intellectual life and the production of books and manuscripts.

Closing the first day of the conference, Panel IV featured three presentations focusing on historical writing. Jonathan Brack addressed Muslim-Jewish polemics in the Ilkhanate, with specific emphasis on the production and dissemination of Arabic and Persian polemical treatises in Baghdad and Tabriz. The talk focused on a treatise by Ibn Kammūna, a Baghdadi Jewish philosopher, and on a lesser-known text by Rashīd al-Dīn, the prominent Ilkhanid vizier and Jewish convert to Islam. Brack highlighted the importance of examining manuscripts of these literary works to gain insight into Rashīd al-Dīn’s knowledge of Hebrew and his use of quotations from the Bible. Moreover, a close reading of the manuscripts can provide valuable information on the circulation and distribution of polemical treatises within the Ilkhanate. The following talk by Tanvir Ahmed discussed a messianic claim made in 1436. Shedding light on a manuscript of the *Kalām al-Mahdī* attributed to Sayyid Muḥammad al-Musha‘sha‘, Ahmed explored the role the text played in the Musha‘sha‘iyya movement, which exerted governmental authority in Iraq and Iran during the fifteenth century. He analyzed the form of the document and its complex structure to understand messianic speech and the significance of listening to the *mahdī*’s words. The last paper by Stefan Kamola explored the nature of the production of the earliest dated manuscript of Rashīd al-Dīn’s *Jāmi‘ al-tawārīkh*. The manuscript was copied in Baghdad, only a few months after the author’s execution in 1318. Kamola’s arguments were based on information he retrieved from a previously unstudied copy of the work, which is today preserved in the Aga Khan collection. In his presentation, he suggested that this overlooked codex could hint at a consortium of scholars who edited the *Jāmi‘ al-tawārīkh* in Baghdad after the author’s death.

Subject Sessions and Genres (Saturday, 3 December 2022)

On the second day of the conference, the focus was on subject sessions and genres, starting with Panel V, which centered on philosophy and included three presentations. In the first talk, Younes Ajoun's challenge to the thesis of philosophy's decline in post-classical Islam involved highlighting the presence of numerous philosophical works, especially those that originated from the Mongol period and were copied at the Niẓāmiyya madrasa. The research shed light on the comparison of manuscript production between the pre- and post-Mongol periods and the potential role of Mongol patronage in facilitating the circulation of philosophical knowledge. Hadel Jarada followed by addressing controversies surrounding Avicennism and the role of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's philosophical digest in the naturalization of Avicennism into Islamic theology. She explored manuscripts featuring commentaries on al-Rāzī's digest by the Mu'tazilī scholar 'Izz al-Dīn Abū Ḥāmid b. Abī Ḥadīd al-Madā'inī, particularly his yet unedited *Naqḍ al-muḥaṣṣal*. During her analysis, she emphasized and examined alterations to Islamic philosophical concepts developed during the Ilkhanid period, with a specific emphasis on the Mu'tazilī interpretation of *kalām*. The conference continued with a presentation by Gowaart Van Den Bossche who delved into the social life of the most renowned manuscript of *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*, Süleymaniye Kütüphanesi Esad Efendi 3638. Before focusing on this particular codex, he provided a comprehensive overview of the copies that were produced over the centuries. Then, Van Den Bossche traced the manuscript's journey through various circles and brought to light evidence of later interactions with it. In his talk he compared it with a second, lesser-known manuscript (Majlis-i Shūrā Library 4708), reflecting on the reception of the *Rasā'il* in thirteenth-century Baghdad and the broader Middle East.

The following panel focused on the sciences. Nadine Löhr presented on the early transmission of Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī's recension of Ptolemy's *Almagest*. She discussed al-Ṭūsī's recension, completed in 1247 under the patronage of Ismaili rulers, and its influence on the study of astronomy in the Arabic-speaking world. Löhr addressed the history and distribution of extant manuscripts by tracing the influence of al-Ṭūsī's colleagues and students on the dissemination and study of the text. She emphasized the importance of examining marginal annotations and manuscript notes in understanding the transmission and reception of the text. Afterwards, Taro Mimura presented on the efforts of Thābit b. Qurra's family in preserving control over his works. Mimura demonstrated how members of the family such as Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm b. Hilāl al-Ṣābī, secretary of the Buyid court, managed to maintain the author's reputation as an authority on Greek science and philosophy by keeping the autographs. The sources Mimura could use to back up his arguments included manuscripts that were directly copied from Thābit's hand, as well as relevant marginal notes.

During the conference's final panel on religion and schools of thought, Stefanie Brinkmann delivered a presentation on commentaries of al-Baghawī's *Maṣābīḥ al-sunna*, a post-canonical Sunnī hadith collection. Drawing upon extant manuscript copies, her research delineated the geographical and temporal distribution of this tradition, which was

especially vivid in the Mongol and post-Mongol period. Brinkmann placed special emphasis on paratextual elements, such as marginal annotations, *samāʿāt*, and collation notes, as they could indicate the popularity of certain commentaries during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. She paid particular attention to an extensive note documenting in exceptional detail all the sessions in which one of the manuscripts was read. The panel further featured Katharina Ivanyi's presentation. Her research brought to light the significance of ʿAbd Allāh b. Maḥmūd al-Mawṣilī al-Buldajī's *al-Mukhtār li-l-fatāwā* and its role in shaping Ḥanafī doctrine during the transition from the classical to the post-classical periods of Islamic jurisprudence. As she explained, the completion of this work in the immediate aftermath of the Mongol conquest marked a pivotal moment in the historical progression of Ḥanafī fiqh. Its profound impact extended to the broader transformations taking place in the central and eastern Islamic lands, succeeding the Mongol era.

Overall, the hybrid conference provided a platform for scholars and researchers to explore the transmission of knowledge through manuscript cultures before and after the Mongol conquest of Baghdad. The diverse panels covered various aspects, including the loss of books, manuscript production, art, architecture, history, philosophy, sciences, and religion. Researchers offered valuable insights into the rich intellectual heritage of thirteenth- to fourteenth-century Baghdad and shed light on the challenges and opportunities faced during the Mongol era. The presentations sparked meaningful discussions, encouraging participants to question prevailing narratives and explore new avenues of research in the context of manuscript cultures. Participants furthermore found that the close reading of manuscripts including ownership statements and marginal notes contributes significantly to a deeper understanding of the continuity, changes, and intersections of knowledge in Mongol and post-Mongol Baghdad and consequently to a better understanding of the history of literatures.