

# Global Microhistories and the Object Archive

FINBARR BARRY FLOOD

*New York University*



Fig.1.

Sitting at my laptop, I have a clear view of a small globular blue and white vessel perched on a nearby shelf (Fig. 1). Perhaps the base of a kalian, or more likely a vase, it was acquired in a junk shop in Krakow about fifteen years ago. Its presence serves as a perpetual reminder

of the capacity of certain objects to materialize the global networks that connected Eurasia long before the era of globalization. Ornamented in blue and white with a repeating pattern of kneeling lohans or monk-like figures and an abstracted landscape of hills and stylized vegetation, the vase exemplifies a kind of ceramic manufactured in Safavid Iran in the seventeenth century in imitation of so-called Kraak ware. Conventionally denoted by a Dutch term derived from carrack, the name of the Portuguese ships that carried them westwards, such wares were produced in the kilns of southern China for export during the Ming and early Qing dynasties. What distinguishes this vessel from the many other examples of such Iranian chinoiserie is an addition to the neck: a flaring nielloed silver mouth engraved with restrained petals forming an arcade on both sides, possibly added when the neck broke and was repaired. The style of the work suggests itself as late Mughal, an addition probably of the eighteenth century, raising the likelihood that at some point subsequent to its manufacture, this vase made its way to India. But if the details of the vessel bear witness to aesthetic and economic networks imbricating China, Iran, and India, it is also paradigmatic in attesting to what are frequently the limits of our knowledge regarding the agents and conditions of mobility. How and in what circumstances the vase was broken, repaired or may have traveled to India remain obscure, as undocumented as its subsequent trajectory from the subcontinent to the Polish city in which I found it orphaned.

I find objects like this good to think with. Neither as substitutes nor supplements to the textual archive, but as archival documents in their own right, and sometimes the only archival materials available to us. But this is perhaps not the most appropriate way to begin a thought piece on the Global Middle Ages (GMA). Not only because (at least until relatively recently) philological and textual approaches have tended to dominate at the expense of attention to material culture, but also because the vase belongs clearly to the era of early modernity which has, of late, come to dominate the discourse on histories of the global.

The emergence of the global as an exclusively early modern cultural-historical phenomena has compounded a double marginalization of the premodern and the Global South while simultaneously consolidating, if re-inscribing, the traditional role of Europe, and the European Renaissance in particular, at the center of things—bigger, better, and more connected.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the emergence of early modernity as the Ur-horizon of the global before globalization has often been accompanied by assertions that one can speak of the global in any meaningful sense only after there is a consciousness of all five continents.<sup>2</sup> Such an approach assumes that global history begins only around 1500 CE, effectively situating Europe at the heart of things in perpetuity.

By contrast, invoking the global in relation to earlier histories of transregional connectivities challenges the narcissism of presentism that sees the time of the global as coincident with that of recent forms of Euro modernity. Alternative perspectives were

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1. For an endeavor to move beyond these paradigms, rethinking the Renaissance in a global frame, see Stephen J. Campbell and Stephanie Porras, "Introduction: Teaching the Global Renaissance," in *The Routledge Companion to Global Renaissance Art*, ed. Stephen J. Campbell and Stephanie Porras, 1–13 (New York: Routledge, 2024).

2. For some divergent perspectives, see Finbarr Barry Flood, David Joselit, Alexander Nagel, et al., "Roundtable: The Global before Globalization," *October* 133 (Summer 2010), 3–19.

suggested several decades before the idea of a Global Middle Ages (GMA) emerged by works such as Janet Abu-Lughod's *Before European Hegemony* (1989).<sup>3</sup> The book is especially notable for its provincialization of Europe, as but one circuit within a series of intersecting segments of a global economic system fostered by the Mongol conquests of the fourteenth century, which Abu-Lughod sees as foundational to the early modern world system.

At a distance of three and a half decades since its publication, there are, of course, things to criticize. Recent attempts by archaeologists, historians, and art historians to rethink early globalisms have, for example, highlighted circuits not well represented in Abu-Lughod's famous reconstruction map, such as East and West Africa or northernmost Europe. Yet, although largely focused on economic history, in its ambitious scope, its endeavor to counter more Eurocentric notions of a world system, and its demonstration of what might be possible with a synthetic interdisciplinary overview of materials that lie outside one's own areas of specialization, the book has been foundational to the idea of a Global Middle Ages. The various approaches that might be accommodated under the GMA rubric acknowledge differences in the scale and speed of modern and premodern global connectivity but avoid either insisting on the absolute alterity of pre-modernity or asserting a teleology of connectivity that validates contemporary phenomena of globalization espoused by neo-liberal capitalism.<sup>4</sup> However, the very idea of a Middle Ages highlights once more the tensions between modes of periodization firmly rooted in a Eurocentric episteme and endeavors to transcend the limits of this model, with its colonialist, Orientalist, and racist legacies.<sup>5</sup> Such tensions throw into high relief the relationship between spatiality and temporality that any account of the global must consider.

Rather than insisting on a moment (or moments) of origin, or thinking of globalism as a single continuous phenomenon, I tend to follow a distinction between globalization and globalism outlined by the political scientist Joseph Nye (admittedly not the most obvious choice!), who suggests that "Globalism, at its core, seeks to describe and explain nothing more than a world which is characterized by networks of connections that span multi-continental distances ... In contrast, globalization refers to the increase or decline in the degree of globalism. It focuses on the forces, the dynamism or speed of these changes."

In contrast to more Eurocentric notions, which insist that the global requires a historically situated consciousness of the entire globe, Nye acknowledges that "Globalism is a phenomenon with ancient roots. Thus, the issue is not how old globalism is, but rather how 'thin' or 'thick' it is in a particular region (or transregion) at any given time."<sup>6</sup> The

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3. Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

4. For useful introductions, see Alicia Walker, "Globalism," *Studies in Iconography* 33 (2012): 183–96; Geraldine Heng, "Early Globalities, and Its Questions, Objectives, and Methods: An Inquiry into the State of Theory and Critique," *Exemplaria: Medieval, Early Modern, Theory* 26, nos. 2–3 (2014): 234–53; Catherine Holmes and Naomi Standen, "Introduction: Towards a Global Middle Ages," *Past and Present* 238, suppl. 13 (2018): 1–44; Geraldine Heng, *The Global Middle Ages: An Introduction*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

5. For a cogent critique, see Rebecca De Souza, "Are There Limits to Globalising the Medieval?," *postmedieval* 15, no. 1 (2024): 257–83.

6. Joseph Nye, "Globalism Versus Globalization," *The Globalist* 15 (2002).

challenge for the historian is to try to reconstruct something of the shifting configurations that fostered historical connectivities. As the historian Alan Strathern reminds us, “[t]he celebration of connectedness in global history writing risks analytical banality unless we are also able to make visible temporal and geographic variations in its extent.”<sup>7</sup>

For Abu-Lughod, a key factor was the Mongol conquests of the Middle East in the mid-thirteenth century. This integrated regions from Anatolia to China within a unified imperial formation fostering the emergence of intersecting or segmented networks of circulation and exchange that facilitated long-distance exchange between merchants and producers.<sup>8</sup> My own research has increasingly focused on the century before the sack of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258, the long twelfth century preceding the period covered by *Before European Hegemony*. In addition to the revival of the political fortunes of the Abbasid center in Baghdad, the period witnessed the emergence of significant transcultural and transregional visual economies. Major technical and technological developments in material culture (including ceramics, illustrated book production, and metalwork) were all associated with the mobility of artisans, artifacts, and technical knowledge. The period was also one of maximum receptivity to Islamicate forms and practices by non-Muslim elites living outside the frontiers of the Islamic world across a wide swath of territory from the Mediterranean to the Caucasus, Ethiopia, and even western Tibet.<sup>9</sup> In short the period is marked by a remarkable degree of Eurasian and Afro-Asian connectivity.

The long twelfth century has often attracted the attention of historians. Among them, Marshall Hodgson saw it as marking the emergence of what he called “the new Sunni Internationalism,” fundamental to the establishment of “an international civilization.” The idea was revisited more recently by Said Amir Arjomand, who noted that Hodgson’s take on the long twelfth century was marked by an “implicit argument that the Islamicate civilization was on the verge of a breakthrough to modernity” cut short by the Mongol invasions.<sup>10</sup> Implicit though it may have been, the suggestion raises interesting questions about how early histories of modernities (however defined) or proto-modernities might intersect with phenomena of premodern or medieval globalisms.

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7. Alan Strathern, “Global Early Modernity and the Problem of What Came Before,” *Past and Present* 238, suppl. 13 (2018): 317–44, at 334.

8. For an incisive review, suggesting the need for an even more longue durée perspective on a dynamic and continuous world system, see Andre Gunder Frank, “The Thirteenth-Century World System: A Review Essay,” *Journal of World History* 1, no. 2 (1990): 249–56.

9. See, for example, Finbarr Barry Flood, “A Turk in the Duhang? Comparative Perspectives on Elite Dress in Medieval Ladakh and the Caucasus,” in *Interaction in the Himalayas and Central Asia: Processes of Transfer, Translation and Transformation in Art, Archaeology, Religion and Polity, Proceedings of the Third International Conference of the Société Européenne pour l’Étude des Civilisations de l’Himalaya et de l’Asie Centrale, Vienna, 2013*, ed. Eva Allinger, Frantz Grenet, Christian Jahoda, Maria-Katharina Lang, and Anne Vergat, 227–53 (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences, 2017); Finbarr Barry Flood and Beate Fricke, *Tales Things Tell: Material Histories of Early Globalisms* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), 147–90.

10. Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 2:255–92; Said Amir Arjomand, “Transformation of the Islamicate Civilization: A Turning Point in the Thirteenth Century?,” *Medieval Encounters* 10, no. 1 (2004), 213–45, at 215. See also John Olbert Voll, “Islam as a Special World-System,” *Journal of World History* 5, no. 2 (1994): 213–26.



However, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot reminds us, “[t]he experience of globality is always that of historically situated individuals with specific resources and limits.”<sup>11</sup> After two decades of reading and writing celebratory narratives of circulation and mobility, the time seems right for a recalibration, acknowledging the often-complex relationships between premodern artifacts, images, materials, and peoples that were highly mobile with those that were rooted, marked by limited mobility, yet central to the reception and (re) conceptualization of things and persons in motion. Whereas once I felt the need to assert the primacy of routes over roots (to borrow from James Clifford),<sup>12</sup> I now feel the need for a corrective emphasis on *both* routes and roots, considering not only histories of circulation but also of reception. The challenge is to account for both the horizontal flows associated with transregional mobility *and* the ways in which mobile agents, ideas, images, materials, and objects intersected with the vertical axes of the local, the situated, and the particular.

In my current research, this is a corrective that operates on two fronts simultaneously: highlighting neglected histories of transregional and transcultural connectivity before the age of European hegemony that can be documented materially and/or textually; focusing on histories of inter-Asian or Afro-Asian connectivity from which Europe is largely or completely absent.<sup>13</sup> In attempting to negotiate these imperatives, far from thinking in terms of world systems, let alone a world system, I’m increasingly drawn to the emerging field of global microhistory. Combining the idea of fine-grained archival work conducted on a limited scale with writing and research at a macro level, the term global microhistory might seem like a paradox, an oxymoron even. But oscillations between micro and macro scales of analysis can be immensely productive for those facing the challenge of writing histories of concepts, images, objects, and practices that refuse to be bounded by the taxonomies of time and place that have traditionally structured the disciplinary or field divisions within which we work.

Global microhistorians have generally taken two kinds of approaches to their materials, which are not necessarily antithetical. The first focuses on a single individual, image, object, or place which then serves as a lens through which to explore broader questions with transcultural, transregional, or transtemporal implications. The second is closer to connected history, and “prioritizes the analysis of sources produced by human action as it occurred across multiple, connected contexts. Where the first looks for the world in a grain of sand, the second sifts through many beaches around the same ocean with a finetoothed comb.”<sup>14</sup>

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11. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “The Perspective of the World: Globalization Then and Now,” in *Beyond Dichotomies. Histories, Identities, Cultures, and the Challenge of Globalization*, ed. Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi, 3–20 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 15.

12. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 344; James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

13. See note 9 above.

14. John-Paul Ghobrial, “Introduction: Seeing the World like a Microhistorian,” *Past & Present* 242, suppl. 14 (2019): 1–22, at 15–16. For an introduction to global microhistory, see Romain Bertrand and Guillaume Calafat, “Global Microhistory: A Case to Follow,” *Annales Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 73, no. 1 (2018): 3–17; Jan de Vries,

Just as pioneer scholars of the GMA have tended to come from literary study backgrounds, the origins of microhistory lie in the analysis of textual archives—autobiographies, court records, letters, and so forth. However, recent approaches to global microhistory have broadened the nature of their archival materials to include material culture.<sup>15</sup> Given the inevitable disparities and lacunae in the archives available for writing global history, such approaches have the advantage of expanding the range of materials available to historians of globality, while potentially resisting the ahistorical and totalizing tendencies of some narratives of globalism and globalization.

In my own work, I have been following the history of a single image, a schematic outline of the Prophet Muhammad's sandal first traced from a relic enshrined in thirteenth-century Damascus. Through the copying of such tracings within scholarly networks, the image-relic was disseminated from the Maghrib to Southeast Asia, enjoying a truly global distribution. The tracing and replication of the image expanded its purview exponentially and continued into the era of print, sometimes accompanied by an isnād or chain of transmission indicating that the print was generated by copying from the medieval tracings of the sandal compiled in early modern manuscripts.<sup>16</sup> In addition to highlighting the global reach of many devotional materials, the peregrinations of the sandal image cut across the boundaries of periodization implied by notions of pre-, early, and full-blown modernity, a further reminder of the ways in which questions of globality and temporality are closely imbricated.

Writing histories that are less than universal but more than local,<sup>17</sup> and that therefore cross all sorts of ecological, historical, and linguistic frontiers requires collaboration, something that is not only methodologically appropriate, but increasingly attractive to the funding bodies on which we all depend to support our research, curating, and teaching. And yet, collaboration is often less straightforward a proposition than might appear. On the one hand, the Christocentric and Eurocentric defaults of medieval studies (including in my own discipline of art history) establish hierarchies and power differentials, which often operate even across the modalities of collaboration. I'm surely not unique in having had the rather uncomfortable experience of feeling like a (non-native) native informant for western medievalists keen to give solidly Eurocentric scholarship a global gloss.

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"Playing with Scales: The Global and the Micro, the Macro and the Nano," *Past & Present* 242, suppl. 14 (2019): 23–36; Maxine Berg, "Introduction: Global Microhistory of the Local and the Global," *Journal of Early Modern History* 27 (2023): 1–5.

15. For examples of such approaches, see 'Amr Osman, "Al-Ta'rīkh al-ʿalamī: mawḍūʿ wa-manāhiḡ min khilāl ta'rīkh al-ashyāʾ," *Ostour* 1 (2015): 1–23; Giorgio Riello, "The 'Material Turn' in World and Global History," *Journal of World History* 33, no. 2 (2022): 193–232; Flood and Fricke, *Tales Things Tell*.

16. Finbarr Barry Flood, *Technologies de dévotion dans les arts de l'Islam: pèlerins, reliques et copies* (Paris: Hazan/Musée du Louvre, 2019), 173–206; idem. "Relics and Resistance: Towards a Global Microhistory of a Devotional Print," in *Islamic Art and the Global Turn*, ed. Hala Auji and Radha Dalal (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, forthcoming).

17. Frederick Cooper, "What Is the Concept of Globalization Good for? An African Historian's Perspective," *African Affairs* 100, no. 399 (2001): 189–213, at 208–10.

On the other hand, there can be no doubt that collaboration can be immensely enriching and productive in researching complex transcultural and transregional phenomena that cross modern boundaries. Such work often demands a range of expertise rarely at the fingertips of a single individual. As part of a long-term project on Islamic materials preserved in Christian church treasuries located outside the traditional boundaries of the *dār al-Islām*, for the past few years I have had the pleasure of collaborating closely with fellow medievalists in the Republic of Georgia.<sup>18</sup> We have been studying the twelfth- and thirteenth-century reuse of Islamic silks as wrappings for crosses and icons in the churches of Svaneti, that region of the Caucasus that forms the northern border of the modern state and is spectacularly rich in medieval architecture and objects. The challenges of accounting for both the origin of the textiles (many seem to have come from Seljuq Baghdad) and the extraordinary manner of their local reception (many were tailored as garments for crosses) requires a wide range of skills which none of us alone could muster: a knowledge of histories and historiographies in Arabic and Persian, Georgian (of which I have none), and Russian (I have a basic reading capacity); knowledge of the churches and treasuries of the region; local knowledge regarding specific iconographies; familiarity with the history of Islamic textiles and technical (indeed, forensic) aspects of textile production; and, at the most basic but essential level, knowledge of the likely sites where such textiles are preserved today.

The kinds of materials that are the focus of the Svaneti project challenge the often markedly sectarian disciplinary boundaries of modern scholarship (most obviously between “Christian” and “Islamic” materials) while highlighting once again the relationship between chronology and geography, spatiality, and temporality. Some of the textiles were already a century or more old at the time they were reused in the churches of the Caucasus; just as the precise mechanisms by which the blue and white vase on my shelf moved across early modern Eurasia remain elusive, so the routes followed by these spectacular silks to their final mountain resting places remain to be investigated, but will probably never be determined with certainty.

The challenges that such collaborations pose to one’s own formation, methods, and internalized assumptions are immensely enriching, exposing one to unfamiliar historiographies and approaches to the past other than those canonized in the Euro-American academy. Moreover, they are fundamentally rooted in the human relationships that anchor the possibilities for (re)imaginings of the past in the present. In their negotiations between deeply rooted epistemologies and the construction of broader transcultural, translanguistic, or transregional contexts in which to situate the local, such collaborative approaches (re)enact something of the negotiations, translations, and receptions that are their subjects. At their best, they can be fundamentally transformative, both intellectually and personally.

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18. The project is a collaboration with Professor Irina Koshoridze, Associate Professor at the Institute of Fine Arts, Department of Humanities, Tbilisi State University, and chief curator of Oriental collections in the Georgian National Museum. Professor Corinne Muehleman, a textile expert from the University of Bern, has been undertaking the technical analysis of the textiles.