Announcements: Syrian Studies Association-Sponsored Panels at MESA 2016

The Syrian Studies Association is sponsoring two panels at the 2016 Middle East Studies Association Annual Meeting. We are pleased to support these fine panels and encourage SSA members to attend.

P4298 Text and Technology: Exploring the Materiality of Early Arabic Periodicals: Friday, November 18, 8:00am

This session examines how the materiality of Arabic periodicals impacted political ideas, identity, and language in the late Ottoman world. The papers focus on periodicals produced in the cities of Cairo and Beirut (between 1851 and 1885) and examine them as objects, artifacts, and carriers of knowledge whose physical and material dimensions lend additional layers to the understanding of their broader socio-political and cultural significance. The session offers a multi-disciplinary “reading” of these dimensions and examines crucial questions of politics and identity. How can we describe the relationship between sensual experience and epistemology in Arabic? How did periodicals function as aesthetic objects or disseminators of knowledge? How did these publications’ visual aspects impact textual content and vice-versa? How did affordable news impact the public use of Arabic language or the very way language was instrumentalized?

Addressing these questions by offering new interpretations about the transnational world of (Ottoman) Arab modernity, the papers selected for this session present new research that examines the ways in which materiality can be historicized in order to provide alternative readings of knowledge production and historical transformation. The first paper explores the production and language of Majmu’ Fawayid (Beirut, 1851-1856), an early Arabic-language missionary periodical printed at the press of the Protestant mission in Syria. The second examines the dissemination of military knowledge and visual aspects in the largely overlooked first Arabic military periodical, Jaridat Arkan Harb al-Jaysh al-Misri (Cairo, 1873-1877) as an extension and promotion of the ideologies of Euro-Egyptian imperialist expansionism. Another paper considers the interplay between illustrations and textual content of the medical journal al-Tabib (Beirut, 1874-1885) as important markers of the multifaceted perceptions of medical practice and their intersection with the views on society, identity, and technology. The final paper explores the relationship of Arabic print technology to the mediation of knowledge via standardized Arabic as a protocol of control. This session thus considers crucial problems of modern Middle Eastern history through a deep engagement with print materiality and its impact on ideas and identity.

Chair: Dana Sajdi, Boston College
Discussant: Nadia al-Bagdadi, Central European University
Presenters: Adam Mestyan, Harvard University; Hala Auji, American University of Beirut; Antoine Edwards, Washington and Lee University; Rana Issa, University of Oslo

P4522 Imperial State Practices and Local Perspectives in Early Ottoman Syria: Saturday, November 19, 8:00am

Despite great strides by scholars over the last half-century, the history of the Arab lands under the first centuries of Ottoman rule (1500s-1700s) remains greatly understudied. This panel addresses key questions in the research agenda for geographical Syria (Bilad al-Sham), ranging across political, social and cultural history and adopting a variety of sources and methods.

The first two papers investigate major challenges that Istanbul authorities faced in the extension of their power over Syrian society following the conquest in 1516 of the Mamluk Sultanate. Making use of Ottoman official correspondence in the 1530s, the first paper identifies and evaluates major problems in
the early management of Syrian military cadres, many of whom were former soldiers in the Mamluk regime. The paper also investigates the changed relationship between Syria and Egypt; now separated from its former capital, Cairo, Syria enjoyed a shift in its imperial status relative to Egypt. Turning from the macro- to the micro-historical, the second paper follows the career of a Syrian Kurdish notable in Ottoman state service and in so doing evaluates the capacity of the Ottoman system to recruit and retain local elites. It illustrates a discretionary Ottoman practice whereby chiefly lineages, with their regional knowledge and influence, were brought into Ottoman state service with regional appointments but not wholly integrated into a system of regular, rotating appointments empire-wide.

Affecting interactions between the Ottoman capital and Syrian provinces were subjective perceptions of the other, articulated in writing by individuals possessing social and cultural authority and reaching a broad audience. The third paper examines the travelogue of Syrian Arab Badr al-Din al-Ghazzi (1499-1577) describing his journey through Anatolia to the Ottoman capital in 1530, less than two decades after the Ottoman conquest. Penned by a member of a prominent scholarly family with historic connections to the former Mamluk state, the text sheds light on the receptivity of those newly conquered populations to a new political master and the limits of their appreciation of cultural difference. The fourth and final paper also examines Damascene attitudes about the Ottoman dynasty but refines its inquiry to consider only views of Suleyman the Magnificent (r. 1520-66) that emerge from histories, poems, and other texts over a longer temporal span, the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. What emerges is an embrace of Suleyman not so much as warrior-hero but as founder of imperial institutions that they regarded as just and protective of their welfare.

Chair: Abdul-Karim Rafeq, College of William and Mary
Discussant: Stefan Winter, Universite du Quebec a Montreal
Presenters: Linda Darling, University of Arizona; Charles Wilkins, Wake Forest University; Abdulrahim Abu-Husayn, American University of Beirut; Malissa Taylor, University of Massachusetts-Amherst

Andrea L Stanton is Editor of the Syrian Studies Association Bulletin.