eBay as an Archive: Bidding for Bilad al-Sham Bargains

By Andrea Stanton

Are you in the market for a primary source – something that will add immediacy to your teaching as a piece of historical evidence that your students can see and touch? Or are you shopping for something that you can integrate into your research as material that is physically accessible even outside the archive? This is not the pitch of a huckster trying to sell Maktabat al-Assad – this is a plug for Bilad al-Sham scholars to make more effective use of that rich archival resource known as eBay.

As a scholar, what I like best about eBay is that it allows me to do two things: to purchase historical artifacts useful for my research and teaching, and to do so inexpensively. (In addition to the professional benefits, this makes a virtue of two character flaws: acquisitiveness and cheapness.) While eBay might appear most useful for Americanists, it offers many treasures to Levantine scholars, particularly modernists. In my experience, the twentieth century is the period richest in eBay options, in terms of both selection and pricing. There certainly are objects from earlier eras – mostly manuscript pages or engravings taken from books – but they are fewer, and priced more as art objects. My purchases tend to be in the $5-20 range; my rule-of-thumb limit is $10, but I make exceptions for unusual or particularly useful items.

Shopping eBay’s auctions for research purposes and shopping for teaching are not the same. Finding gems that fit one’s current research depends on serendipity and the willingness to spend time searching the site using different keyword combinations – and to do so on a regular basis. Even then, success may come in unexpected ways. For example, while completing my dissertation on the mandate-era Palestine Broadcasting Station, I searched endlessly for auctions related to keyword combinations like “radio Palestine”, “radio Jerusalem”, “broadcasting Palestine” or—for a comparative perspective—“broadcasting Lebanon”. I found a few items, like a 1930s Philips radio set catalogue printed in Hebrew, but nothing critical to my research (or cheap enough to merit a “maybe I’ll find a use for it” bid).

It was not until the dissertation had been defended, submitted, and set aside in favor of more pressing concerns (like teaching) that I ran across an item of immediate relevance. It was nothing big from a seller’s point of view: an envelope sent by Boutagy & Sons, one of mandate Palestine’s largest radio set sellers, from Israel to Britain in 1949. Yet for me it was an important piece of primary source evidence, corroborating other indications that the firm’s owners had tried to continue operations in Israel after the mandate ended – and it was evidence I found not in an archive but during a casual search for Israeli stamps.

Stamps are an excellent example of the inexpensive Levant-centered primary source material that does abound on eBay – and they can be very useful for courses. I have purchased mandate-era stamps twenty at a time, for as little as $1.50 + shipping. I use them to illustrate lectures, or give them to students and ask them to analyze the
iconography in light of the political, social, and economic concerns of the time. Postcards are also plentiful, and can be effective springboards for discussions on tourism and representation, as well as urban studies issues. (You can also use them to anchor exam questions or writing exercises.)

What is difficult to find on eBay is any significant body of government documents. Mandate-era Palestinian ones seem to be most common, sold by assorted Israeli antiquities dealers. But I have almost never seen Ottoman or Syrian government documents, and have only rarely seen Lebanese documents. Those that do appear seem more often to have been ancillary documents: receipts, attestations of good conduct, or other items generated by the government but put in private citizens’ hands - like the rejected visa applications for two Syrian Ottomans trying to emigrate to Brazil in the early 1900s that I found last year. The seller, who spoke no English, seemed delighted to have found a buyer, even for the $2 + postage I paid. I can only imagine what he thought I planned to do with them – and I doubt that “use as a primary source for students in a history course on Lebanese and Syrian migration to North and South America” would have been his first guess. But they are treasures: several pages of application forms and embassy letters that together lent a textural immediacy to the story of early 20th-century Levantine emigration.

Documents purchased on line. These are visa application materials for two Syrians who applied to emigrate from Beirut to Brazil in the early 20th century. Courtesy of Andrea Stanton.

The issue of government documents leads to a more scholarly concern: how to cite these items, and what – if any – permissions to seek. While I would have no qualms including
photos of the visa applications I mentioned above and citing them merely as “private collection of the author”, since they had been the property of the individual applicants rather than any state archive, reproducing published material that has not timed out of copyright restrictions involves all the standard permission issues. Maps, postcards, photographs, stamps – these to me appear little different than the many wonderful secondary source books available for sale on eBay: ownership of one copy does not imply permission to reproduce in one’s own published work.

Another tricky permissions area emerges from those items whose price is set too high for the eBay’ing academic, but whose historical value (and whose beauty shots on the site) make them difficult to ignore. My understanding is that I cannot in good conscience reproduce the image. However, if I can “grab” the image and save it with an accompanying document that indicates the sale URL, the item description, and whatever contact information is available for the seller, I can refer to it textually as a source. My reasoning here is that a reader tracking the item in question down would have no more trouble than if he/she were tracking down the subject of an interview or an item in a private collection – but other scholars may consider this approach too lax.

Navigating permission, copyright and fair use issues may be somewhat more complicated – because less standardized – for eBay purchases than for materials accessed in a traditional archive. This should not be a deterrent, but merely a reminder of the valuable role that these concerns play in scholarship. eBay has a valuable role to play as well: providing scholars with inexpensive primary source materials to use in teaching and research – materials that add life to a classroom discussion and immediacy to a monograph. There are plenty of Bilad al-Sham bargains to be found – all it takes is a user name (mine is “Mutabbal”), a little time to devote to keyword searches, and the willingness to place a bid.

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