Sijills in Perspective

By James Reilly

“The Sijill in Perspective: Mapping Similarities and Differences across the Empire” was the titled of a workshop held in Berlin between Oct. 17 and 19, 2008 under the sponsorship of the Freie Universität Berlin (Center for Social and Cultural History of the Middle East) and the Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO). The organizers were Nora Lafi (ZMO) and Christian Sassmannshausen (Freie Universität Berlin). An international body of scholars presented a dozen studies covering all the major regions of the empire.

The idea behind the workshop to bring together people working on Ottoman shari’a court sijills from various regions, in order to get a dialogue going among Balkan-, Turkish-, and Arab-oriented sijill scholars. Questions that workshop participants were invited to consider included:

- Were sijills representative of a particular society? Which socio-economic milieus were over- and under-represented?
- To what extent can we use sijills to reconstruct a social order? How can the information provided in court records (titles, names, attributes) help us to locate individuals? What can sijills tell us about the representation of social hierarchy and marginality?
- Which modes of mediation (i.e. for women or educationally marginalized groups) changed over time or took different forms in different regions? To what extent were these individuals able to represent themselves, to what extent their voices recorded?
- Was “legal consultation” given at court or was there an oral transmission of legal knowledge within society? How did the transmission of legal strategies for application and presentation of cases occur?
- Can we observe social “biases” when comparing socio-economic background and the outcome of a case? How far do verdicts reproduce local power structures? For the 19th century and to a certain extent before: to what extent did legal and administrative reforms affect record keeping? To what extent did reforms impact the form of these documents and representation of groups and individuals in a local setting?
- What lay hidden within or behind the formulaic prose of the sijill?

For me, it was useful to learn that many of the questions and problems that I have with the Syrian sijills as texts or sources are not confined to Bilad al-Sham but are Ottoman-wide. The doyen of Syrian sijill scholarship, Abdul-Karim Rafeq, was the senior scholar present. A few other veterans (including yours truly) also were on the program, but the largest group were junior or early mid-career scholars. So, it was a good opportunity to learn what the next generation(s) are doing. A publication, the scope of which is yet to be determined, will in time come out of the workshop. More information about the workshop can be found at: http://www.zmo.de/veranstaltungen/2008/Program_Flyer_Workshop%20The%20Sijill%20in%20Perspective,%20October%2017-19,%202008.pdf

James Reilly is Professor of Middle East History in the Department of Near & Middle Eastern Civilizations at the University of Toronto.