Universität Basel

Research Project

The Ambivalence of Language: Expression of Power and Administrative Function in Arabic Documents from Early Islamic Egypt

Third-party funded project

Project title The Ambivalence of Language: Expression of Power and Administrative Function in Arabic Documents from Early Islamic Egypt

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The project (definitive title: *Projecting a New Empire: Formats, Social Meaning, and Mediality of Imperial Arabic in the Umayyad and Early Abbasid Periods*), focused on the modes of representation of authority underlined by the structural, formulaic and terminological features of Arabic documentary sources dated to the earliest (7th–8th) centuriesă after the Islamic conquest of the Near and Middle East.

The theoretical basis of my work is offered by the application of the socio-cultural model of "empire"— understood as a hierarchical configuration of power—to the context of the emergence and development of documentary Arabic. My main interest lies in the social behaviour of the imperial Arab-Muslim elite vis-à-vis the culturally and ethnically diverse populations of the Early Islamic imperial polity through the lens of virtually the whole spectrum of published Arabic papyrological, epigraphic as well as numismatic sources. These include ca. 760 documents on papyrus and parchment, ca. 870 inscriptions and graffiti and ca. 550 coin types and sub-types in addition to several hundreds of seals, vessel stamps, and in-scribed objects spreading from Andalusia to Afghanistan. In view of the typologically and geographically uneven repartition of the evidence, documentary features that are more heavily influenced by pondered social factors—particularly mise en page, formulae, and technical terminology—provide the common analytical framework for sources produced in widely different geo-cultural realities.

Thematically, I approach the question of the social and cultural trends that shaped Early Islamic Arabic writing from the perspective of a cluster of intertwined linguistic and social dynamics underscored by: 1) The functional interplay of Arabic and other languages used in the Early Islamic chanceries including Greek, Coptic, Sogdian, Middle Persian, Latin and Middle Aramaic, 2) the development of Arabic from a minority language into a lingua franca for medium and long term exchange across the Mediterranean basin and beyond, 3) the "mediality" of practices of public Arabic writing—meaning those features that operated beyond and independently of a semantic comprehension 4) the formulaic and graphic distinc-tiveness of Early Islamic Arabic documentary standards compared to previous and neighboring scribal traditions, and 5) the regional influences that shaped local styles of imperial representation.

Keywords Early Islamic Empire, Arabic Papyrology, Formal Varieties of Arabic Documents, Multilingual-ism and Multiglossia in the Early Islamic Empire, Early Islamic Society

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