

**Court Cultures in the Muslim World:
Politics and Patronage (7th – 19th
Centuries)**

Veranstalter: Research Centre Gotha for Cultural and Social Studies (FGE); Institute of Islamic Studies of Erfurt University

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Courts and the complex phenomenon of the Courtly societies have received intensified interest in academic research over the last three decades, especially due to the pioneering work of Norbert Elias from 1969. For various reasons however, so far the field of Muslim Court Culture has been almost neglected, if we compare it to the huge amount of detailed studies on European Court Culture. Whereas in the European case scholars of different academic disciplines can rely on a vast variety of different studies to move towards comparative and, thus, more structural questions, research in Muslim Court Cultures did not yet surpass the level of studies of individual courts.

The Gotha conference therefore attempted to provide a first structural overview of the state-of-the-art of research on different aspects of courts and courtly life in the Muslim World from the earliest times to the 19th century. Therefore, the *Research Centre Gotha for Cultural and Social Studies* (FGE) and the *Institute of Islamic Studies of Erfurt University* have invited international scholars to an International Conference on Court Culture in the Muslim World.

Hardly any other place in Germany is more qualified to host such a conference than the Baroque Schloss Friedenstein at Gotha. The Library of Schloss Friedenstein is in possession of the third largest collection of Oriental manuscripts in Germany. The impressive collection of Islamic manuscripts in Gotha is in itself an indicator of European Court Culture, as the manuscripts were collected by the German scholar Ulrich Jasper Seetzen (d. 1811) at the turn of the 19th century by order of Duke Ernest II (1772-1804) of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg. Seetzen undertook a research ex-

pedition to the Middle East from where he dispatched, among others, more than 2.500 Oriental manuscripts from Istanbul, Aleppo, Damascus, Jerusalem, and Cairo to Gotha, before finally disappearing under unclear circumstances in Yemen in 1811.

Over fifty international participants were present at the conference at Schloss Friedenstein. In order to approach the conference theme from the broadest possible perspective the participants disposed either over a large variety of specialist expertise on different regions and different time periods within Islamic societies or were scholars working on rather „timeless“ aspects like the role of natural sciences or art in different Muslim empires and time periods. Especially the latter contributions were meant to underline the transdisciplinary approach of the conference.

The inaugural speech of STEFAN LEDER (Halle) on „courtly dishes“ in the Muslim world highlighted the role of food in literary texts and courtly contexts in medieval Muslim societies and did touch already numerous methodological questions which would be followed up during the conference. At the beginning of the second day the organizers presented their initial thematic and structural thoughts. Sessions I (The Prophet and the Caliphate), II (Local Forms of the Representation of Rulers) and IV (Muslim Court Culture between the 16th and 19th centuries) then explored regional and historical case studies throughout Islamic societies. This part of the programme was opened by the paper of Michael Cook (Princeton) who asked if the Prophet did keep court in Medina. He argued that the ruling practice of the prophet did not resemble a court culture at all, especially in terms of the easy accessibility of the prophet. Following case studies then showed that Muslim rulers later on very often limited and canalised their accessibility by special court ceremonies. Afterwards, the courts of the great Islamic dynasties of the Umayyads and the Abbasids were discussed. After the conquest of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258 the Islamic Empire fell finally apart and new forms of local rule emerged which brought with them specific forms of royal representation at local courts. Central aspects of these more historical presentations were questions of reli-

gious legitimacy of Muslim rulers, terminologies for court culture in Oriental languages, concepts of space for royal representation, accessibility of rulers and the growing influence of European courts as role models from the 18th century onwards. The participants found the broad variety of themes, stretching from South Asia to Spain, from the judiciary practice of rulers to aspects of royal clothing very enriching.

The second major part of the conference was devoted to comparatistic approaches. The aims of the Sessions III (Patronage, Science and Literature) and V (Patronage, Arts and Architecture) lied therein to show trans-cultural phenomena which were present at many different Muslim courts in different time periods, especially looking at the role of religious scholars, natural science, literature, art and architecture at Muslim courts. Quite often the role of the court as a financially strong catalyst for science and art was highlighted in these contributions. The scientific aim of the conference was to gather manifold aspects of Muslim court culture in order to systemize them in an analytical process. Of course no ideal Muslim court can be reconstructed after the holding of the first conference of its kind. However, the questions raised during the conference certainly present an important step towards that direction. Many underlying structures will hopefully come to light in the process of analyzing the findings of the conference by publishing the proceedings.

Hopefully one will then learn more about questions of religious legitimacy and try to explain what makes a Muslim court Islamic? Who represents the ideal of Muslim rulers in their court culture? Is it constituted by the Prophet or the Caliphs of Damascus and Baghdad? We know that from the 14th century onwards the Macedonian ruler Alexander/Iskander gains of great importance as the prototype of a Muslim ruler through the increasing popularity of the Alexander romance. Other central points of the conference were the dichotomy of tent and palace, the role of military slavery at Muslim courts, the function of the harem and the quest for appropriate terminologies for Muslim court culture. All these aspects were dealt with at Gotha

and we hope to present the final findings of the conference to a wider scientific audience through the publication of a proceedings volume in the near future.

The conference was kindly funded by the German Science Foundation (DFG). For the complete conference programme, short abstracts and additional information see: www.uni-erfurt.de/islamwissenschaft/courtculture2007 or contact Jan-Peter Hartung (Jh74@soas.ac) and Albrecht Fuess (albrecht.fuess@uni-erfurt.de)

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