Questions and Challenges of a Transottoman Perspective for Early Modern Studies

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This interdisciplinary workshop brought together scholars of the „Transottomanica“ Priority Programme, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), working on different aspects of Early Modern Studies, with researchers from various other projects. It was the aim to further the exchange of ideas on the role of mobility and networks as well as to explore the heuristic potential of a „Transottoman“ lens in studying different aspects of Mediterranean, Ottoman, Eastern European and Persian history. The workshop emphasized four issues in particular: languages and translations (vernacularization processes, multilingualism), migration and the diasporas (networks and communication processes), ideas of goods and commodities as well as individual and group perception of religion (identity, confessional affiliation).

STEFAN ROHDEWALD (Gießen) provided an overview of the ongoing Transottomanica Priority Programme, which focuses on Transottoman ties and communication practices between the Muscovite Tsardom/Russian Empire, Poland-Lithuania, the Ottoman Empire and Persia between the Early Modern period and the early 20th century. Focusing on different contexts and fields of social interaction with different spatial and social ranges unified by the lens of mobility, Rohdewald emphasized reciprocal processes of migration, knowledge circulation (travelling concepts), travel, trade and mobility of entire societies between these dominions. Providing details on the main concepts and approaches of the working groups of the Transottomanica programme, he briefly introduced individual projects and touched on issues, to which researchers from various projects could turn their attention to bridge discussions and achieve a higher degree of cooperation.

STEFAN TROEBST, deputy director of the Leibniz Centre for the History and Culture of East-Central Europe (GWZO), gave an overview of different research directions at GWZO, as well as ongoing projects.

SUSANNE HÄRTEL (Potsdam/Berlin) presented the activities of the research team „Jewish-Jewish Encounters in the Ottoman Empire/Mediterranean (15th–19th Centuries)“. She emphasized the issues of expulsions and exile of the Sephardic Jews that resulted in a broad Sephardic diaspora as well as in exchanges with other (Romanioi, Ashkenazic) Jewish communities. This led to the breakup of former territorial units of Jewish life and the dispersal of entire communities. Stressing that the project compared the Jews under Ottoman rule with those under Christian rule in Early Modern period, Härtel shifted the attention to the question how religious affiliations were negotiated internally among various Jewish communities on matters such as Jewish cooking and food restrictions. Another issue was the role of competition with other religious traditions such as Islam and Christianity in the Mediterranean region and under Ottoman rule in particular.

OVIDIU OLAR (Vienna) presented the ongoing group research project HEMSEE (Handbook on Historiography of South Eastern Europe), which aims at producing a source-based handbook showing the challenges and opportunities of working with historiographic texts from Early Modern South-East Europe. In thematic clusters, the project focuses on both familiar and uncharted territories and analyzes excerpts from both mainstream and „minor“ sources. Olar demonstrated the importance of little known sources like the chronicle by the Jewish scholar Moses

1 http://www.transottomanica.de
4 https://www.oeaw.ac.at/de/inz/forschungsbereiche/balkanforschung/forschung/wissen-und-institutionen/hemsee/

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Almosnino (16th c.) on Sultan Suleiman’s death for reconstructing funeral rites in the Ottoman Empire. Also the focus on manuscripts like those of Dimitrie Cantemir (d. 1723) are very promising, as the author’s handwritten notes can change the narrative of historiographical texts.

JAKUB WYŚMUIEK (Warsaw) introduced the CHEML research project he is leading, which concentrates on multiethnic and multi-confessional relations in Early Modern Lviv. As a widespread phenomenon in premodern Europe, multi-ethnicity of Roman Catholics, mostly Poles and Germans, Orthodox Ruthenians (Ukrainians), Armenians and Jews was particularly visible in the cultural frontier zones and in regional trade centers located on the crossroads of important trade routes such as Lviv. Moreover, on the methods of socio-topography and social network analyses, he raised the questions to what extent the minorities shared a common place, what power divisions and professional divisions were made in the city, and what social structure the multi-ethnic city had.

JÜRGEN HEYDE (Leipzig) talked about Jewish trade in the 16th century. His starting point was that in the early decades of the century, Jewish trade in the kingdom of Poland appeared to be going through a very difficult phase, facing opposition not only from burghers but from the szlachta as well. Briefly outlining the polemical front in the discussion on Jewish trade that culminated in the 1530s, Heyde presented some high-profile examples of contacts between Jews and non-Jews and focused on Jewish trade in and with three different regions with their specific agents, merchandize and problems.

ALEXANDR OSIPIAN (Leipzig) provided an overview of social practices of trade in the Transottoman region, focusing on the spread of merchant networks between Eastern Europe and the Middle East from the 16th to the 17th centuries. First, he outlined the organization of the Armenian caravan trade, the elections of a caravanbashi, his jurisdiction and functions and his dealing with local authorities and bandits. Then he shifted the attention to the confidential relations of Armenian merchants with power-holders in the region and the diplomatic services provided by Armenian merchants to the rulers. Osiopian stressed that trust remained the most important factor for functioning trade by Armenian merchants, even in comparison to their religious/ethnic belonging.

NIKOLAS PISSIS (Berlin) examined Muscovite intelligence in the Ottoman Empire in the middle of the 17th century. He traced how Greek ecclesiastics, itinerant alms-seeking monks and merchants who were continuously crossing the Ottoman borders, formed protection and communication networks that provided espionage services to the Muscovite tsars. Based on case studies, Pissis proved that despite the complex practice of questioning the agents in Muscovy in order to prove their reliability, Greek agents’ information did not really shape the policy towards the Ottoman state.

ANDREAS HELMEDACH (Bochum) gave an overview of the main research topics and a collective volume of the Transottomanica working group „Mobile actors”. After mentioning political factors, border regimes, and (in)voluntary migration, he shifted attention to the decision of families, communities or individuals of transregional (im)mobility, and provided a detailed look at the specific aspect of trust, which was a key for a stable relationship in networks and multiple loyalties in Transottoman societies. As the main subject of the forthcoming collective volume Helmedach introduced the issue of Transottoman biographies of actors with migration experience.

BARBARA HENNING (Bamberg), TAISIYA LEBER (Mainz), and ANI SARGSYAN (Hamburg), from the working group „Knowledge circulation” presented their upcoming volume Knowledge on the Move, focusing on some ideas about knowledge and its trajectories in the Transottoman context. Briefly presenting her contribution on Ottoman political advice literature and its readers, collectors and translators, Henning emphasized the approach „follow the knowledge” inspired by the field of social anthropology, in particular by G. E. Marcus. Leber talked about religious knowledge in the

5 https://cheml.wordpress.com/
6 https://www.transottomanica.de/research/ag1
7 https://www.transottomanica.de/research/ag2
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Early Modern period, how it manifested itself in the social and textual form of interreligious disputes. Examples of Jewish-Christian and Christian-Jewish polemics in the early Ottoman Empire were examined as bodies of knowledge (Wissensbestände) that had often an external origin, but were particularly valuable beyond the imperial frontiers e.g. in Eastern Europe. Introducing the category of „knowledge reservoir“ (Wissenspeicher) helps to understand the functions of texts that are made to preserve and conserve knowledge for the future. Sargsyan tackled the question of the personalized character of knowledge and the role of the direct agents. She stressed the personal and political interests of mobile actors and their social roles, the power balances, networks and the interdependencies on the grounds of reality that affected their lives. Briefly presenting her contribution on Persian-Turkish dictionaries, Sargsyan outlined the privileged access of the lexicographers that allowed them to modify and rework knowledge in order to reach new audiences and continue to claim expertise in newly emerging contexts.

The workshop’s final presentation dealt with the working group „Object mobility“8. Introducing the collective volume and the main topics of the contributions, ROBERT BORN (Leipzig) discussed the concept of translocality mainly focusing on power of things in changing societies through the circulation of objects. Born highlighted the complex role of the principalities of Transylvania, Moldavia and Wallachia as zones of cultural, artistic and technological transfer between the Ottoman Empire, Persia and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

The concluding round table discussion was dedicated to the issue of a transnational perspective as a part of a global historical discourse and its challenges. The focus on mobility – on flows of people, goods and ideas – between the Ottoman Empire, Persia and Eastern Europe in the Early Modern period created a new specific Transottoman perspective in the studies of global cultural interchanges. Among the challenges remains the question of how to introduce this concept to the broader audience.

In their concluding remarks, Taisiya Leber and Robert Born confirmed the productivity of providing a space for closer exchange between scholars working on Early Modern issues. Such presentations and discussion rounds should do justice to the major geographical and thematic focal points such as Early Modern trade routes, network analysis, multilingualism, confession-alization, slave trade, urban spaces, markets and cults. One suggestion was to form a network of scholars working on transnational flows in the Early Modern period in order to organize and provide information on workshops and conferences within and outside the Priority Programme Transottomanica in close cooperation with the research group „Ottoman Europe“9. This would provide the opportunity to exchange information on sources, archive research, practical and methodological challenges, research groups and initiatives.

Conference overview:

Opening Remarks

Taisiya Leber (Mainz), Robert Born (GWZO Leipzig)

First Session

Stefan Rohdewald (Justus-Liebig-University Gießen): Transottomanica

Susanne Härtel (Potsdam/Berlin): Jewish-Jewish Encounters in the Ottoman Empire

Ovidiu Olar (Vienna): HEMSEE – Historiographies of Early Modern Southeast Europe

Jakub Wysmulek (Warsaw): CHEML Project – Companion to the History of Early Modern Lviv

Jürgen Heyde (GWZO Leipzig): Jewish Long-Distance Trade in the 16th Century – Geographies, Networks, Ramifications


Second Session

8 https://www.transottomanica.de/research/ag3
9 http://www.osmanisches-europa.de/

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Nikolas Pissis (Berlin): Muscovite Intelligence in the Ottoman Empire

Andreas Helmedach (Bochum): Mobile Actors

Barbara Henning (Bamberg), Taisiya Leber (Mainz), Ani Sargsyan (Hamburg): Knowledge on the Move

Robert Born (GWZO Leipzig): Mobility of Objects

Round Table