Looking Beyond Jerusalem: The Dynamics of the Written Word and its Materiality

This book had as its starting point a micro-history, the story of a reciter owning books and preserving documents in medieval Jerusalem. While reconstructing and writing this story we have focused on Burhān al-Dīn’s social position and his cultural practices, but we hope that we have also succeeded in bringing to life the day-to-day travails of such an individual. There is no doubt that in more able hands his story could serve as inspiration for the Palestinian equivalent to Amitav Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land*. What we want to do in this conclusion is more mundane, namely to reflect on how this micro-history contributes to wider discussions and wider developments in studying the medieval history of West Asia and North Africa. This reflection will be focused on those three areas where we think that this book has something to say that might resonate beyond the small worlds of hardcore bibliophiles and document scholars: firstly, by offering a broader historical argument on literacy, secondly by engaging with the methodological turn towards materiality, and thirdly by placing a conceptual emphasis on processes.

As for the historical argument, this study of Burhān al-Dīn’s books completes a trilogy of analyses of documented book collections in medieval Bilād al-Shām that are known to date. It thus functions as a capstone for an (admittedly modest) arch encompassing the Ashrafiya library of seventh/thirteenth-century Damascus and the Ibn ‘Abd al-Hādī library of ninth/fifteenth-century Damascus. The conclusion of this trilogy is a good point at which to step back and reflect on the bigger picture. The first point coming out of these studies is how unhelpful categories such as ‘Islamic library’ are. More fitting is a heuristic typology of libraries, namely the endowed library
The main argument emanating from the present study and the trilogy as a whole, however, is that the written word played an increasingly central role in the socio-cultural practices of these societies. The massive growth of local endowed libraries across urban topographies, especially from the seventh/thirteenth century onwards, meant that the book was more and more tightly woven into the fabric of society. The Burhān al-Dīn library was arguably the result of the diffusion of the written word into ever-wider sections of society. After the spread of the endowment libraries we see here a further step, where considerable book collections started to be found well beyond the endowment, the court and the elite scholar’s household. The history of literacy, book ownership and authorship in Arabic-speaking societies has by now its fair share of revolutions and turning points and we do not want to add yet another one. We argue, however, that over the course of the eighth/fourteenth century we see a further rise in the number of people who actively engaged with the written word. True, the Ḥaram al-sharīf corpus is a rare snapshot and there is always the danger of advancing over-consistent arguments on the basis of very inconsistent source corpora. However, having studied various manifestations of the written word in medieval Bilād al-Shām (libraries such as the Ashrafīya and the Ibn ʿAbd al-Hādī collections as well as documentary corpora such as the Ḥaram al-sharīf and the Qubbat al-khazna corpora), we are in a position to at least suggest that in this period more and more people started to own books and to engage with documents. This was not a torrent of literacy flooding society, but a multifaceted and complicated development. The case of post-canonical ḥadīth booklets, which went into decline precisely in the
eighth/fourteenth century with fewer and fewer of them produced, is a case in point. Yet, overall there is ample evidence for the hypothesis that there were significantly more individuals in Bilād al-Shām who routinely dealt with books and documents in the year 800/1397 than there were in the year 700/1300.

This hypothesis and the trilogy underlying it were based on very specific case studies, and with each case the lingering doubt remains as to whether it is just an exception, nothing but an odd one out. Looking at them in combination and considering those features they share and do not share has made what is actually unique and what is, rather, a broader trend more evident. In consequence, when an earlier book argued that ‘it seems likely that at least for Syrian and Egyptian cities the proportion of those able to read simple texts was rather a two-digit than a one-digit number’,¹ we can now make such statements with much more confidence. One aspect that has remained completely beyond the scope of our studies is the rural areas, for which documentary corpora and evidence of book ownership are much sparser. In addition, the world of books (less so that of documents) as we represent it is still an overwhelmingly male history.

Our work has also shown that a simplistic dichotomy between literate and illiterate would not serve the field. Rather, it is evident that, as has been argued for medieval Europe, a ‘plurality of written cultures coexisted’² where individuals had the ability to engage with the written word to very varying degrees. The example of Burhān al-Dīn shows the staggering number of books that could be found in the house of an individual who – had his estate archive not survived – would have vanished from the historical record without a trace. How often Burhān al-Dīn read his books, whether he even read all of them, what he made of them and other similar questions have to remain unanswered. It is clear, however, that the written word in the form of the book was part and parcel of the world of this rather average individual in eighth/fourteenth-century Jerusalem. This spread of literacy is not the outcome of a technological revolution, and paper had been around for centuries in West Asia and North Africa. Rather, we see here a typical example showing that

¹ Hirschler, Written Word, 29.
² Bertrand, Documenting the Everyday, 7.
technological change does not automatically lead to far-reaching changes, but that its impact depends on individuals and societies adopting this change.

This book has extended the argument of its two predecessors in that it dealt with the question of how the written word was woven into the social-cultural fabric by looking not just at books, but also at pragmatic literacy. This world of documents was invisible in the case of the Ashrafiya Library, as neither its endowment deed nor a single sheet of its day-to-day paperwork (such as accounting books, payment slips and petitions) has survived (or rather, has been identified thus far). There were some glimpses of the documentary world in the case of Ibn ‘Abd al-Hādī, who bound several of his documents into the intricate books that he produced. The nature of the Ḥaram al-sharīf source corpus means that the intimate link between the world of books and the world of documents is only fully visible in the case of Burhān al-Dīn. His case clearly shows to what extent the large number of books he owned went hand in hand with the large number of documents that he preserved at home. Not only were there many documents, they also came in wildly different shapes and forms. This wide range in the documents’ materiality shows how many actors were involved in producing such paperwork – individuals who clearly had very different ideas of what a document was meant to look like. In the course of the eighth/fourteenth century, it thus seems that an increasing number of ordinary men and ordinary women produced documents in their day-to-day activities without having recourse to professional scribes who would have imposed a larger degree of uniformity.

The number of documents linked to Burhān al-Dīn and their material variety thus indicate, as do the size of book collections, the extent to which the written word had penetrated day-to-day activities in the late eighth/fourteenth century beyond the madrasa, beyond the court, beyond the world of legal administration and beyond the households of the political elite. This was a world in which lay people could use documents with utmost efficiency for the most banal transactions, such as concise receipts for rent payments for modest houses. It is also clear that medieval people were keen conservers of their documents, that they carefully safeguarded the documents they received and that those dealing with their estates skilfully reconfigured these personal collections into the new archival configurations they needed: estate archives. Individuals were thus not just using more documents: they also considered
them to be of increasing importance and relevance, and thus made them retrievable in various ways.

This increasing role of the written word in wider sections of the population was arguably part of a wider transformation of society and economy. Georg Christ has proposed that external shocks such as climate change and, especially, the Black Death in the eighth/fourteenth century with the subsequent series of epidemics triggered a shift towards what he characterises as a ‘fully mature knowledge economy’. This meant that the role of the agricultural and manufacturing sectors diminished during the period of the Cairo Sultanate while the tertiary sector (long-distance trade and higher education) thrived.3 In combination with the continuing spread of endowments and processes of bureaucratisation, the amount of paperwork that circulated within society and the numbers of those who handled it certainly increased. Our observation that wider sections of society had increased rates of pragmatic literacy and also bookish literacy in the eighth/fourteenth century was thus arguably linked to a profound transformation of social structures and thus also of cultural practices.

Whereas this literacy argument addresses a historical phenomenon, we see our book’s second contribution as being to the wider field of the methodology of how we study the past, specifically the topic of materiality. The study of the medieval history of West Asia and North Africa emerged within a strongly text-centred philological tradition, and the later emergence of the field of Mamluk Studies took place with this same approach to the past. The focus was on publishing an ‘authoritative’ and unified version of a given text at the expense of the multiple traditions that fed into the handwritten versions that went before it. In the process, the material texture vanished from sight. Issues such as the differing layouts of the same text, the bindings of the codices, the papers on which the text was written, the usage traces on the books, the composite manuscripts into which they might have been bound, and other features were more often than not invisible when accessing the printed edition. Today we often worry about how the ubiquity of the digital facsimile might undermine an appreciation of the material artefact. Whatever the negative impact of the digital might be, it will always have a far less disastrous impact

3 Christ, Economic Decline.
than print editions have had on our understanding of handwritten writerly culture.

Our field has come a long way since its text-centred beginnings, and the material turn in wider history has changed scholarly approaches in many ways. Scholarship on book studies has been particularly prone to integrating the material turn, and this methodological development might radiate to the wider field of studying the medieval history of West Asia and North Africa. For instance, analysing the library of Ibn ʿAbd al-Hādī without paying heed to his binding strategies, without ‘reading’ his composite manuscripts as intricate material constructions, would have meant missing out on essential elements of this splendid monument to medieval Syrian book culture. As regards Burhān al-Dīn’s library, consideration of its material objects made its main contribution in terms of enabling us to understand the documentary corpus. The nesting of the booklet’s sheets and the folding of the documents, the layout of the page and the format of the sheet, archival holes and archival strings have all been central elements for building up this book’s arguments. The material plurality of documents, for instance, is so important for literacy because it shows that people from very different walks of life claimed the right to produce documents and did not hesitate to do so in very idiosyncratic (or ‘unprofessional’) ways. This wild world of documentary formats can hardly be described with the functional categories that we as modern historians might try to create. Paying attention to these ever-new material forms of documents is crucial for understanding the increasingly writerly world in which these individuals lived.

Apart from the historical and the methodological, this book’s third contribution lies in the conceptual, namely in its emphasis on processes and actors, rather than structure. The book has thus not been on a quest to find the archive, but has been interested in archival practices sustained by various social actors; it has not been on a quest to identify the state, but was interested in socio-cultural practices driven by households within the military and political elite; and it has not primarily been on a quest to find stable libraries, but rather to discover the processes of how and by whom libraries were made and unmade. As we have seen, especially, in Chapter 3, the first and the second element, ‘archive’ and ‘state’, are closely interconnected: most document preservation in the political elite was carried out in a polycentric network of households and far from any ‘state’ archive. In the civilian elite we observe a similar
complex network of processes. Even if papers were legally relevant, such as in the case of estate archives, the archival actor in Jerusalem was not the judge or an organisation called ‘court’, but a rather obscure trustee – an ‘official’ whom we only know from the paperwork that he himself left behind. It will thus be our task to retrace the faint traces of such elusive archival practices on those documents that have reached us, rather than trying to slot them into visions of state structures. In this book we suggested, for instance, that the ‘estate archive’ is an important stage in the trajectories of many papers. Listening to the archival stories of documents will certainly bring up many other social sites where documents were (even if only for short periods) brought together, preserved and reconfigured. There is, however, little doubt that in late medieval society home is the prime site where practices of document preservation should be looked for – the homes of judges and notary witnesses, of administrators and officers, and of traders and reciters.

Distributed document preservation, especially in homes, is particularly crucial for furthering our understanding of social processes. It brings into focus a growing number of actors who confidently claimed a considerable role within society via asserting the right to keep (and to discard) documents. The agency of these individuals has often been overlooked in scholarship that has privileged ‘Mamluk’ state structures and endowed organisations in understanding how society functioned or failed to function. The social strategy of Burhān al-Dīn has only become evident as a result of a detailed study of how declarations of intent (not ‘decrees’ or ‘diplomas’) were produced, used and preserved. His socio-cultural practice of acquiring personal stipends from low-ranking officers is exactly one point where we see the agency of otherwise invisible individuals – individuals whose social position cannot be grasped with the catch-all term ‘scholar’. The specific case detected here, patronage between peripheral scholars and low-ranking officers, is in this particular shape probably a development specific to the late Qalāwūnid and early Barqūqid periods in the late eighth/fourteenth century. There is no doubt that a further interest in social and cultural practices will bring out other manifestations of such practices and will allow us to get a better understanding of their historical dynamics.

The conceptual emphasis on processes has, finally, been crucial for the way we approach libraries. Before serious library history emerged as a
sub-field, the discipline of studying medieval West Asia and North Africa was dominated by its fixation on the ‘holy trinity’ of the grand royal libraries of ʿAbbasid Baghdad, Fatimid Cairo and Umayyad Cordoba. It was arguably the typical lure of the stable organisation that contributed to a focus on these libraries, even though the extant documentation for them is – to put it mildly – not overwhelming. At the same time, the massive evidence that we have for ephemeral book collections was simply sidelined. The history of libraries cannot be written with any precision if the focus is on neat, long-lasting and easily definable organisations – the search for ‘the’ library will end in an impasse just as much as will the search for ‘the’ archive. The demise of the grand royal libraries of ʿAbbasid Baghdad, Fatimid Cairo and Umayyad Cordoba (however ‘grand’ they really were) was not a sign of decline or decay. Rather, their end was part of the long-term process of books being reconfigured in new collections. In the same vein, endowed libraries in the period of the Cairo Sultanate had rather short life cycles. This was not because endowment administrators or the political elite were inherently corrupt, but because libraries have to be, in most cases, thought of as processes, not as stable entities. To write such a processual history of libraries and book collections dispenses with the need to engage in hackneyed debates on decline, corruption, malpractices, plunder and theft. Rather, it enables us to see how specific individuals and specific organisations acquired, materially changed and divested books. The history of libraries is thus one of constant reconfiguration, of books that rapidly move and on collections that disappear as quickly as they come into being. The analytically richest moments in the history of a library are generally not when it was extant, but are to be found in the process of its books coming together and in the process of its books parting company while moving on to their next life stage.