

Recovering the Role of Christians in the History of the Middle East

A Workshop at Princeton University, May 6-7, 2016

East Pyne 245

Sponsored by

Near East and the World Seminar, Department of Near Eastern Studies, Princeton University
with The Aradin Charitable Trust, Cambridge, England

Organized by

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Overview

Although we often think of the Middle East as being the center of a “Muslim World,” Christians constituted the majority of the population throughout much of the pre-modern period. In fact, scholars speculate that it was only during the Crusades – a full six hundred years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad – that the region may have finally crossed the threshold of a Muslim demographic majority. Even after this, Christians existed in large numbers throughout Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Iraq, playing important roles in the economic, political, and cultural life of the region.

Despite this, scholars often treat Christians as marginal actors in the history of the Middle East. The impression often derives from the assumption that they were merely *dhimmis* – protected and subordinate members of Muslim-ruled societies – as if this legal category had a direct bearing on social history. But seeing Middle Eastern Christians in this way not only strips them of historical agency; it also leads scholars to sometimes equate the history of the region with the history of the Muslim community that governed it, rather than of the diverse society that flourished alongside it.

This workshop convenes a distinguished group of historians – with expertise ranging from the early Islamic to the late Ottoman periods – to reconsider Middle Eastern history through the lens of Christian sources, experiences, institutions, and individuals. In what manner can recovering the neglected or ignored Christian layers of the region’s past either enrich or alter established narratives in the field?

Workshop Schedule

Friday, May 6

9:00-9:15: Welcome

9:15-10:30: Session 1

Petra Sijpesteijn, University of Leiden

Christians and Muslims, Egyptians and Arabs: Who is Who in the Administration of Early Islamic Egypt?

Lev Weitz, Catholic University of America
Islamic Thought, Islamic Culture, Islamic Society: Scholarly Categories and Medieval Middle Eastern Historiography

10:30-10:45: Coffee

10:45-12:00: Session 2

Robert Hoyland, New York University – Institute for the Study of the Ancient World
Christian and Muslim History Writing in the Early Islamic Period

Luke Yarbrough, Saint Louis University
Ishaq ibn Nusayr and the Importance of Being Christian

12:00-1:00: Lunch

1:00-2:15: Session 3

George Kiraz, Princeton University/ Beth Mardutho – The Syriac Institute
"The Crown of Our Head": Petitioning the Syriac Patriarch in the Late Ottoman Empire; and How Syriac Studies Can Help Rewrite the History of the Middle East

Febe Armanios, Middlebury College
From Marginalia: Writing Coptic History for the Ottoman Period

2:30-3:30: Visit to Rare Books and Special Collections (space limited)

Don Skemer, Curator of Manuscripts, Princeton University

3:45-5:00: Reflections on the study of Middle Eastern Christians

Sidney Griffith, Catholic University of America

Samir Khalil Samir, Pontificio Istituto Orientale, Rome/ Université Saint-Joseph, Beirut

Saturday, May 6

9:30-10:45: Session 4

Thomas Carlson, Oklahoma State University
More than Conversion: Multi-Faceted Islamization and the Unity of Medieval Middle Eastern History

Stephen Davis, Yale University
Toward a History of Christian Arabic Scribal Practice: Cataloguing the Collection at Dayr al-Suryan

10:45-11:00: Coffee

11:00-12:15: Session 5

John-Paul Ghobrial, University of Oxford
Recovering the Connected Histories of Eastern Christianity in the Early Modern World

Bernard Heyberger, L'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales
Christians in the Ottoman Empire as Local and Global Subjects

12:15-1:15: Lunch

1:15-3:15: Session 6

Bruce Masters, Wesleyan University

Christian Sources for the Political and Social History of Aleppo in the 18th and 19th Centuries

Bedross Der Matossian, University of Nebraska – Lincoln

Neglected Armenian Sources and Institutions in Late Ottoman Historiography

Tom Papademetriou – Stockton University

Memory and History: Oral History Accounts of Asia Minor Refugees as a Source for the History of Greek Orthodox Christians in Late Ottoman Society

3:15-3:30: Coffee

3:30-5:00: Where to go from here? Group discussion led by Jack Tannous and John-Paul Ghobrial

Princeton University Campus Map

<https://m.princeton.edu/map/campus>