



# Entangled Religions

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## The Digital Humanities and Islamic & Middle East Studies

Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2016. VIII + 271 pages,  
€ [D] 99.95/US\$ 140.00/GBP 74.99,  
ISBN (hardback): 978-3-11-037454-4

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In a time of continuing international crises in the Middle East and the Islamic world, it could seem unlikely that a technological-methodical subject like Digital Humanities, which is set mostly in virtual environments, could be of any relevance in comparison to the challenges that people in those regions have to face in the real world. However, considering the massive loss of cultural treasures, it seems more important than ever to think of ways to protect cultural knowledge and heritage in the affected regions and to develop alternative approaches to physically based archives, documentation, and research. What is more, Digital Humanities could prove to be a great means to disseminate knowledge through the World Wide Web into different parts of the globe, in order to extend the global understanding of the Middle East and Islamic cultures. But currently, in the Digital Humanities community, these regions seem to be deplorably underrepresented.

In this time which is obviously longing for a change, it is Elias Muhanna, currently Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature at Brown University and director of the Digital Islamic Humanities Project, who has published a new volume titled *The Digital Humanities and Islamic & Middle East Studies*. The volume is mainly based on a conference of the same name

held in 2013 and is composed of various elaborate articles from all relevant perspectives—archives, editors, researchers, and teachers—thus giving an encompassing overview of the current position of the Islamic and Middle East Studies in respect to the Digital Humanities.

The first four articles focus on crucial questions of digital material and discuss the role of archives in the transmission of knowledge, various digitization issues, the perspective and potential of digital editions, and the function of social media as potential archives of contemporary history.

Travis Zadeh reflects soundly on the decisions and concessions required in the process of digitization, discussing examples from medieval Arabic and Persian manuscripts and comparing their print and digital form, and explaining how processes of loss and recovery influence knowledge transmission both in traditional and digital archives. Dagmar Riedel follows a similar discourse, tackling the question of sustainability and confronting the qualities of digital manuscripts to those of physical books. While digitization was a pragmatic approach to facilitate access to primary sources, Riedel argues, first problems arose due to un-coordinated digitization, lack of standards and no concerted tracking of projects. Furthermore, there was an urgent need for more and better tools to analyse the material made available. Riedel points out that the quality of a book as material evidence for the transmission of knowledge is often forgotten over the digital accessibility.

From the perspective of an editor, Chip Rossetti describes the challenges of developing a digital workflow for the Library of Arabic Literature. Rossetti emphasizes XML as a flexible technology for a digital workflow of a born-digital series of edition-translations, as it offers the greatest flexibility concerning the output format, e.g. on e-readers, and also for the future undertaking of a fully searchable series. In contrast to this, Nadia Yaqub illustrates how scholars can utilize a grassroots project as

an alternative to official archives. The only material on Tall a-Za'tar, a refugee camp founded 1950 in Lebanon but violently destroyed in 1976, is currently available through two Facebook groups. These groups allow reconstructing social networks from three decades before and insofar they serve as living archives for Palestinian history. The intuitive organization allows extraction and evaluation of the material. Although the groups are politically independent, Yaqub remarks that they are marked by dominant voices and aesthetics that may distort the researcher's understanding. Nonetheless, grassroots digital archives can be an ethical and useful way to create repositories and digital reconstructions of erased or irrevocably altered communities.

The next four articles focus on computational methods and digital applications in the areas of history, geography, and literature. The methods applied here range from imaging techniques to abstract history modelling, thus giving insights from microscopic and macroscopic perspectives as well. One recurring message in these papers is that digital and traditional methods are best combined, not only to confirm each other's results, but also in order to fully exploit the potential of the material.

Maxim Romanov presents a distant reading approach for investigating into the Islamic élites, based on *Ta'rikh al-islām*, a biographical collection of about 30,000 entries. His analysis demonstrates how patterns of social transformations in the Islamic world between 640 and 1300 CE can be identified by applying a history model to a large biographical text corpus. The model comprises various social, religious and cultural parameters and covers chronological and geographical dimensions. This computational approach, according to Romanov, confirms typical theses from earlier traditional research. Concentrating on a single object instead, Alex Brey compares different computational approaches to examining a manuscript of the Qur'ān dated 559/1164, based on a study project at Pennsylvania

State University. The first approach uses digital image enhancement techniques to reveal the physical composition of the manuscript, while the second one uses quantitative analytical methods to explore correlations between metric patterns and layout of page, lines and glosses; the last one is a principal component analysis on *sūra* headings to stylistically describe the compositional and ornamental elements. Brey claims that although the general results of the computational methods could also be reached by non-digital means, they still offer unique insights.

Till Grallert presents a digital workflow for a visual approach to explore correlations between historical phenomena, discourses and terminologies in Ottoman Damascus newspapers. The software, which can be used to identify geographic clusterings, is explained in detail, and is reusable in other scenarios. Grallert points out that the apparent correlations must be further scrutinized through more traditional methods and closer reading. From a different technological angle, José Haro Peralta and Peter Verkinderen explain their approach to develop a context-based search engine in order to use existing collections of digital texts more comprehensively. The software offers a number of functionalities like refined checklists, context search and toponym highlighting, which are extensively used by researchers. Focussing on the technical background, the authors describe the major role of regular expressions in the implementation. As the software is open for adaption, the developers point out the chance to develop a generic research tool out of it.

The last two articles are mainly written from the perspective of teaching. Joel Blecher presents the results of an undergraduate project on transmitters of early Islamic law in which the students performed historical inquiries with computational methods. Based on a biographical dictionary, the students built up a database and implemented visualizations to investigate various research questions. Blecher claims that Digital

Humanities projects hold great promise for instructors of Islamic studies in the undergraduate classroom, as students could learn to work with historical information both on the modelling and the interpretative level. Returning to the starting point of digital archives, Dwight F. Reynolds cyclically closes the volume with a presentation of the “Sirat Bani Hilal Digital Archive”, which preserves the oral tradition of a Bedouin epic and was started with field recordings in the 1980s. The long-term experiences that came along with the undertaking raise a number of uncertainties concerning recording techniques, media, formats, hosting and accessibility, which need to be faced regularly in the process. Reynolds emphasizes that scholars of Middle East and Islamic studies can and should make more concerted efforts to engage in work of the public humanities, in order to preserve and protect oral culture and traditional knowledge.

Altogether, looking at Elias Muhannas’ carefully balanced composition of articles, this volume presents a broad range of advanced digital competences in the field on the one hand and their great potential for research on the other. Furthermore, it raises the question how Islamic and Middle East studies and the international community of Digital Humanities could work together more closely in the future, as connecting methods and resources on both sides holds great potential.

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