

# Projects in manuscript studies

## Document Reuse in Medieval Arabic Manuscripts\*

*Konrad Hirschler, Freie Universität Berlin*

### *Research background*

Late medieval Arabic societies were highly literate. The central significance of the written word entailed a rich production of narrative and normative texts in which medieval authors made sense of past and present. Such texts, especially chronicles and biographical dictionaries, have come down to us in large numbers and they have held a central position in the writing of medieval Middle Eastern history.<sup>1</sup> The sheer mass of these texts has given the field outstandingly rich quantitative and qualitative data, which are now increasingly exploited by digital text-mining.<sup>2</sup> On account of their central position, these texts have themselves become the subject of historiographical inquiries and there is a sophisticated debate on their meanings, either focusing on individual authors<sup>3</sup> or through consideration of a larger number of texts as a historiographical field.<sup>4</sup>

For most of the last century, the study of medieval Middle Eastern history has primarily relied on such narrative and normative sources as the sheer mass of chronicles, treatises, biographical dictionaries and similar texts almost inevitably foregrounded them. By contrast, documentary material such as contracts, petitions, edicts and deeds—the products of pragmatic literacy—have played a relatively minor role in the historical practice of scholars of the medieval Middle East compared with fields such as Ottoman history or medieval Latin European history.<sup>5</sup> Within this non-documentary research paradigm, historians formed a rather pessimistic outlook of what was actually researchable; Roy Mottahedeh<sup>6</sup> famously claimed that ‘ulamology’, the

\* An earlier version of this paper was presented at the international conference *Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies: Looking Back—Looking Ahead*, Hamburg, 26 September 2016.

1 Hirschler 2012b and 2013.

2 Romanov 2014.

3 See, for instance, F. Bauden’s *Bibliotheca Magriziana* series and Hirschler 2012a.

4 For instance, J.v. Steenbergen’s ERC project ‘The Mamlukisation of the Mamluk Sultanate II’, funded for the years 2016 to 2021.

5 Hirschler 2012b and 2013.

6 Mottahedeh 1975.

study of the literate elites, is ‘all the social Islamic history we will ever have’. Though it was acknowledged that documents featuring other social groups had been produced in large numbers, too few were thought to have survived to constitute a meaningful part of historical practice. Michael Chamberlain thus argued with reference to medieval Damascus that document preservation was of low significance for actors in medieval Arabic societies, who primarily employed narrative texts as the main repositories of social authority and as the main textual devices in social conflict.<sup>7</sup> In the course of the twentieth century we do repeatedly see scholars (often linguists) developing an interest in such documentary material; for the late medieval period these include Samuel Stern, John Wansbrough, and Werner Diem.<sup>8</sup> However, their efforts had a limited impact on historical practices and the respective corpora they were working on rarely became central for historians. The major exception to this was the ‘discovery’ of Egyptian endowment deeds in the 1970s, which quickly became part of the field’s standard source corpus and significantly changed the interpretation of late medieval (Egyptian) society from the 1980s onwards.

However, over the last decade we have witnessed this narrative and normative paradigm’s gradual demise and the field took what can by now be called a documentary turn. The first step had been a distinctive move towards making existing documents accessible by drawing together what had hitherto been published in piecemeal fashion. The main player in this regard has been the *Arabic Papyrology Database* (APD) directed by Andreas Kaplony.<sup>9</sup> In parallel, Middle Eastern historians have started to explore new material by using collections that had not been fully exploited (e.g. the Papyrus Collection of the Austrian National Library), by bringing new collections to light (e.g. material from the Fayyūm<sup>10</sup>) and by focusing on documentary material that had not been identified as such (e.g. manuscript notes<sup>11</sup>). This research has become so intensive that we now have a dedicated annual survey of relevant publications of documentary editions.<sup>12</sup> In a second step, Middle Eastern historians have started to use the available documents more systematically. For early Islamic history, for instance, papyrological material is now exploited in depth; Petra Sijpesteijn’s recent book<sup>13</sup> and her current ERC project *Embed-*

7 Chamberlain 1994.

8 Stern 1964; Wansbrough 1965; Diem 1996.

9 See <<http://www.apd.gwi.uni-muenchen.de:8080/apd/project.jsp>>, last accessed 10 March 2017.

10 Cf. Gaubert and Mouton 2014.

11 Cf. Görke and Hirschler 2011.

12 Bsees et al. 2015.

13 Sijpesteijn 2013.

*ding Conquest: Naturalising Muslim Rule in the Early Islamic Empire (600-1000)* show to what extent documentary material can change our understanding of historical processes. Likewise for the Fatimid period, Marina Rustow is currently leading a project in Princeton on the rich Arabic documentary material contained in the Geniza collection<sup>14</sup> of the Ben Ezra synagogue. For the late medieval Mamluk period Frédéric Bauden has greatly contributed to rejecting the notion that few documents have survived.<sup>15</sup>

This documentary turn has also brought the question of the archive back into focus—rather it has brought it into serious focus for the first time in Middle Eastern history. While it is by now indisputable that Middle Eastern societies produced enormous quantities of documents and that many of these have survived, it is striking that so few of them (such as endowment deeds) have come down to us in archival collections. But the recent research on those documents that are available has re-orientated the debate on archives within the field; ‘archival traces’ on the documents themselves, from written marks to non-textual features such as folding lines, have yielded entirely new data. This new direction of research has reconceptualised the idea of the archive in this context; the archive was formerly seen as a fixed archival space such as a state archive, but is now seen in terms of ‘archival practices’ and documentary life-cycles.<sup>16</sup>

The documentary turn, however, suffers from chronological and regional blind spots, which need urgent redress. Research has so far prioritised earlier periods, especially between the years 600 to 1000 CE. At the same time we have a very distinct regional imbalance with Egypt being centre stage while other regions remain on the margins of the documentary turn. For late medieval history especially, we are thus facing a situation where the long-running regional research bias in favour of Egypt is being reproduced and thus distorts our ability to write ‘Middle Eastern’ history. In addition those documents that are known from late medieval Syria have been largely limited to those from Jerusalem, especially the legal documents of the Haram al-Sharīf collection<sup>17</sup> and those relating to Christian ecclesiastical institutions.<sup>18</sup> Within Syria itself, an imbalance has thus prioritised one relatively small town, Jerusalem, to the detriment of the two major cities in the region, Damascus and Aleppo, thus again skewing our ability to productively engage with the documentary turn in a wider perspective. Those documents that have emerged from Damascus so far have been very limited in number, predominantly originate from one

14 <<https://www.princeton.edu/~geniza/>>, last accessed 10 March 2017.

15 Bauden 2005.

16 El-Leithy 2011; Hirschler 2016.

17 Müller 2013.

18 Pahlitzsch 2008.

medieval text depository, Qubbat al-Khazna, and are held in one modern collection, the Turkish and Islamic Arts Museum in Istanbul.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Introducing the project***

The new project *Document Reuse in Medieval Arabic Manuscripts* seeks to address and remedy this situation by actively creating a new corpus of documents from Syria. For this end it explores and digitally reconstructs the material that medieval Arabic scribes reused to produce new manuscripts. Taking the case study of Syria between the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries CE, it will show that documents and other texts did survive in many more contexts than have been considered hitherto. This project is similar to that undertaken by the *Books within Books: Hebrew Fragments in European Libraries* network,<sup>20</sup> which focuses on similar practices of reuse. However, it is evident that reuse practices differed as book bindings, which feature so prominently in the European context play a less central role. Damascene scribes and binders routinely cut documents and other texts into pieces to obtain a whole range of material for producing new manuscripts. The most usual procedure was to cut a document with a blank verso into several pieces of equal size, lay them on top of each other as bifolia and sew them together to produce a new quire. At least 50% of this quire, the blank verso, could be used for the new manuscript in addition to, depending on line spacing, interlinear spaces on the recto. The second most frequent procedure was applied to a document which already had text on recto *and* verso. Here the scribes regularly used the marginal space on top of the text block to insert the new manuscript's title, i.e. the aim here was not to produce a new quire, but to gain a title page. These title pages could take different shapes and forms: At times scribes directly cut through documents while at others they carefully preserved the text. Sometimes they aligned the text of the original document with that of the new manuscript and at others they turned it by 90° or 180°. These two most common procedures (quire and title page recycling) were accompanied by a range of further techniques such as cutting a document/text into strips to be reused as sewing guards for stabilising the quire fold or as binding support. The project's focus on these reuse techniques is particularly in tune with documentary life-cycles in Syria, but this project aims to develop a methodology that can be applied far beyond one specific region.

When opening a manuscript with document reuse today, the traces of reuse practices appear at first glance often to be random strokes, scribbles and isolated words. Yet, once reconstructed, this material is extraordinarily rich in

19 Sourdel and Sourdel-Thomine 2006; Mouton, Sourdel, and Sourdel-Thomine 2013 and 2015.

20 See <<http://www.hebrewmanuscript.com/>>, last accessed 10 March 2017.

furnishing entirely new documents (such as contracts) and non-documentary texts (such as legal handbooks) for medieval Middle Eastern history. Preliminary work has so far identified some 400 reused fragments of documents and non-documentary texts, mostly from the National Library in Damascus. Reuse was wide-spread and a single manuscript can contain up to fifteen different documents. Reused documents include first and foremost an unprecedented corpus of late medieval legal documents from Damascus. Among the documents are especially those related to marriage (in particular marriage and divorce contracts) and real estate transactions (in particular rent and sale). In addition we repeatedly find private letters and petitions. The vast majority of these documents was written between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries CE and they will most likely constitute the largest corpus of medieval Syrian documents known so far. Apart from the documentary sources the project will also create a new corpus of non-documentary reused texts. Medieval scribes did not only reuse documents, but they also—though less frequently—reused other texts to which they had access. These include on the one hand Arabic texts, in particular legal and theological treatises, many of which had originally been produced in Northern Africa in the ninth and tenth centuries. On the other hand we have also a wide array of texts in further languages such as Greek, Syriac, Armenian, Latin and Hebrew. The reused Latin texts—many of them with musical notations—will arguably constitute the largest corpus of Western-language texts known to have circulated in the region and will be of outstanding importance for the study of the Latin East, i.e. the Frankish ('Crusader') states.

The documentary corpus in particular will put late medieval Syria (and specifically Damascus) on the documentary map and the field will thus have a corpus which will de-centre history writing away from Cairo when using documentary evidence. This is in particular true for the history of non-elite groups (as most of the persons named in the documents are not traceable in the narrative sources), urban history (the property-related documents include detailed descriptions of the urban topography), legal history (many documents contain the elaborate features of legal documents, especially witness attestations), gender history (description of external features in marriage-related documents, divorce rates, stipulations in marriage contracts), economic history (dowries and prices of real estate), to name just some of the topics for which these documents can be used. Manuscript Damascus, National Library, 3851, for instance contains fragments of a late thirteenth-century scroll related to ownership of a property that was disputed between a widow and her father-in-law (see Fig. 1). The scribe of the new manuscript carefully cut this document into eleven bifolia to produce a new quire and this allows us to

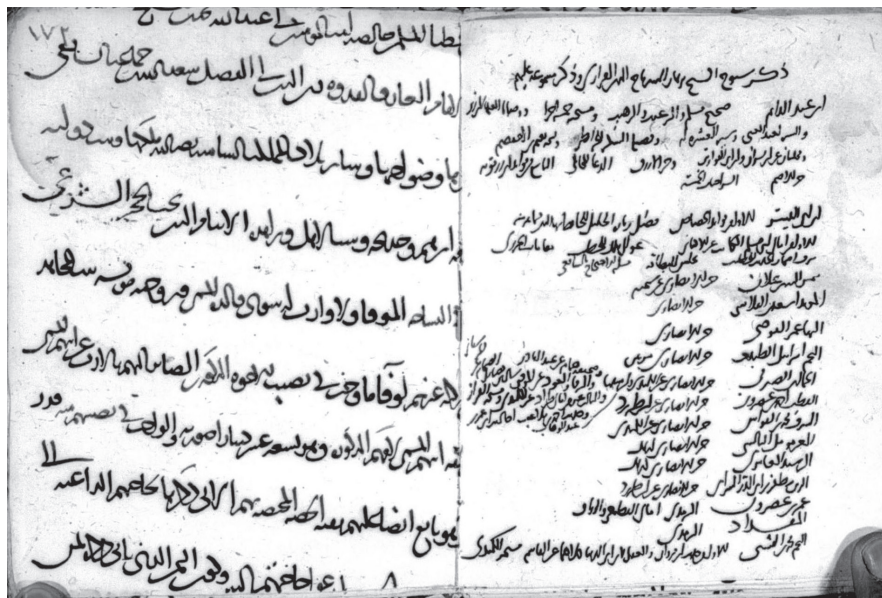


Fig. 1. Damascus, National Library, 3851, ff. 172b–173a with document on f. 173a.

reconstitute the document in entirety. The document is brimming with prosopographical and topographical data on early-Mamluk Damascus and gives fascinating insights into legal practice involving the earlier marriage document and provisions for the couple's children. Perhaps most interestingly it shows how the widow was able to skilfully use legal channels to ward off her father-in-law's dubious claims.

Apart from reconstructing new corpora of documents and texts, the project's second aim is to take reuse seriously that is often so much more than just 'recycling'. It will thus conceptualise the cultural practice of document reuse, which though widespread has not been consistently studied yet. Such practices have been identified by previous scholarship.<sup>21</sup> In addition, document reuse has been identified in settings well beyond manuscripts and we thus find documents recycled as Mamluk arrow flights,<sup>22</sup> textiles<sup>23</sup> and head-gear.<sup>24</sup>

21 Such as Bauden 2004 for Mamluk chancery documents reused for a notebook, Rustow 2010 for a Fatimid petition reused for writing Hebrew biblical verses with their translation into Aramaic and Sijpesteijn 2015 for an Abbasid official document reused for informal recording of some *ḥadīṭs*.

22 Nicolle 2011.

23 Reinfandt 2012.

24 El-Leithy on-going.



It needed colleagues with a distinctive interest in documentary and archival matters to make these pioneering steps and to show what can be achieved when such practices are taken seriously. However, all these cases have not yet triggered a systematic approach to understanding medieval reuse practices because they have been partly carried out in the name of retrieving new material, just as this project sets out to do in its first objective. However, ‘reuse’ was repeatedly a meaningful and highly sophisticated practice where the reused documents have to be read as communicative acts of social and cultural performance. Conceptualising reuse in its various dimensions will historicise this practice and show diachronic change and regional variety. Currently we know little about the specifics of reuse and such documents appear in many different forms and contexts. What we need is thus a taxonomy of medieval document reuse in order to meaningfully engage with this practice and to squarely place it on the research agendas of historians of the medieval Middle East.

Furthermore, reused texts appear in specific textual formats, especially notebooks (*taḍkira*), drafts (*musawwada*) and multiple-text manuscripts (*mağmūʿ*). What textual formats were deemed appropriate for reuse? This in turn raises the question of what documents and texts were deemed appropriate for reuse? What material could be reused? Finally what was the cultural significance of this practice? Common-sense would lead one to assume that practical considerations, such as sourcing cheap writing material, were a major factor. While such pragmatic factors cannot and should not be discarded, many cases tell a very different story: For instance, the multiple-text manuscript Damascus, National Library, 3748 contains a collection of *ḥadīṡ*s written by a Damascene scholar in 524 AH/1130 CE (see Fig. 2). This scholar wrote the collection, which was central for his scholarly ‘CV’, on the blank verso and the recto’s interlinear space of a marriage contract he had lovingly cut into eight new bifolia. Significantly this reused marriage contract was the contract of his own parents. This instance of document reuse was arguably aimed at symbolically merging his scholarly genealogy—as embodied in the collection’s prestigious chains of transmissions—with his family genealogy—as embodied in the splendid 68 × 92 cm original document.

Thinking about reuse takes up the recent emphasis on materiality in historical studies, be it under the heading of material philology or the material turn, where the manuscript is being revisited as a material object and is of interest well beyond the text it carries.<sup>25</sup> Influenced by scholars such as Latour,<sup>26</sup> historians emphasise the agency of the material world and see the written word as part of a manuscript culture and thus an object in a cultural world with

25 Johnston and Van Dussen 2015.

26 Latour 2005.

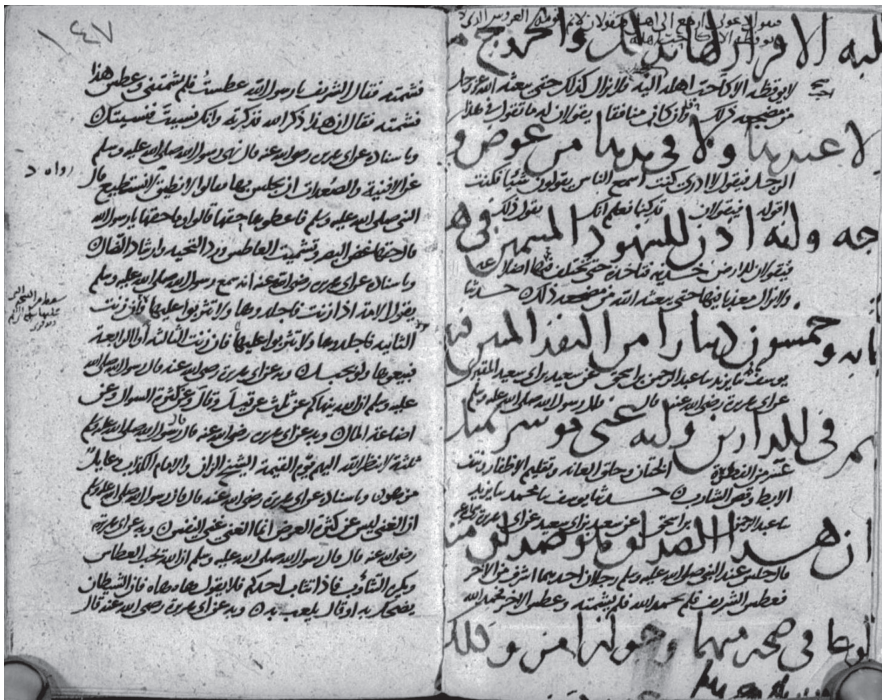


Fig. 2. Damascus, National Library, 3748, ff. 146b–147a with document on f. 146b (large letters).

which people interact in meaningful ways. In this sense reuse practices are not something marginal to the main text of a given manuscript, but are crucial elements of the manuscript's materiality, as shown by work on medieval reuse in other world regions.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to creating new corpora and conceptualising the practice of reuse, the project's third aim is to conduct an in-depth study of archival practices and textual life-cycles. This question is directly linked to the ongoing debate on archives, or rather archival practices, in the field of Middle Eastern history: Who preserved what documents, for how long and where—and why? Michael Chamberlain's suggestion that the non-survival of documents reflected a social logic has been strongly rebuked and new ways of thinking about the (absence of the) archive have been proposed.<sup>28</sup> Sijpesteijn has argued for an 'archival mind',<sup>29</sup> Loiseau focuses on the Mamluk state as an archival

27 Such as Kwakkel 2012.

28 Chamberlain 1994.

29 Sijpesteijn 2007.



actor,<sup>30</sup> El-Leithy adopted an anthropological approach<sup>31</sup> and Bauden speaks of an ‘almost virtual’ archive.<sup>32</sup> The project’s corpus allows building on this recent scholarship and to turn away from the idea of fixed archival spaces, or state archives, but rather focus on archival practices. These archival practices were carried out well beyond the ‘imperial’ centre and involved numerous archival actors well beyond the ‘state’.<sup>33</sup> Studying such archival practices is particularly in tune with the reuse corpus as these practices do not emerge from normative and narrative texts, but primarily from a consideration of archival traces on actual documents. Middle Eastern history’s discussion of archival practices is part of a growing interest in ‘archivalities’ in the wider historical field as for instance evident in the research network Global Archivalities<sup>34</sup> on the comparative history of archives before the modern era. Rather than primarily seeing the archive in a positivist approach as a depository for primary sources, this scholarship has turned to the archive as an object of study by and in itself. Archives have come to be considered as sites where specific meanings were created and where the production, collection and (non-)preservation of documents was closely aligned with the social and political agendas of the archival actors.<sup>35</sup> In medieval history, this new approach of moving the archive from an object to a subject of study and thus a crucial site of knowledge production, has also profoundly changed scholarship.<sup>36</sup>

The reuse corpus can decisively contribute to the wider archival debate from a Middle Eastern history perspective and it enables the field’s debate to be decentred from Egypt. Preliminary research shows that scribes who reused documents and other texts in order to produce new manuscripts clearly did not do so at random. Rather they must have had—direct or indirect—access to compact collections of documents. The reused material shows a clear profile in terms of content, including the very large number of marriage-related and property-related legal documents, as well as the considerable corpus of Crusader-period Latin texts. At the same time the reused material has a very distinct profile in terms of absences, for instance there are practically no trade-related documents or documents produced in proximity to the state (such as petitions and deeds). The corpora of new documents and texts will thus allow archival practices to be studied from a new angle using a ground-breaking body of material from a hitherto underrepresented region.

30 Loiseau 2009.

31 El-Leithy 2011.

32 Bauden 2013.

33 Hirschler 2016.

34 <<http://globalarchivalities.org>>, last accessed 10 March 2017.

35 See Stoler 2009; Blouin and Rosenberg 2011.

36 Geary 2006.

This project *Document Reuse in Medieval Arabic Manuscripts* is particularly crucial and urgent on account of the ongoing war in Syria. The conflict has led to wide-scale destruction and theft of cultural artefacts and it has made Syria almost completely inaccessible for researchers. We run the risk of seeing the region disappear from research agendas owing to the unfeasibility of conducting projects under such circumstances—the same fate that met Iraq in the 1990s and 2000s. The project responds to this situation by proposing an agenda that is specifically designed to keep Syria on the academic map.

## References

- Bauden, F. 2004. 'The Recovery of Mamluk Chancery Documents in an Unsuspected Place', in A. Levanoni and M. Winter, eds, *The Mamluks in Egyptian and Syrian Politics and Society*, The Medieval Mediterranean, 51 (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 59–76.
- 2005. 'Mamluk Era Documentary Studies: The State of the Art', *Mamlūk Studies Review*, 9 (2005), 15–60.
- 2013. 'Du destin des archives en Islam: Analyse des données et éléments de réponse', in D. Aigle and S. Péquignot, eds, *La correspondance entre souverains, princes et cités—États: Approches croisées entre l'Orient musulman, l'Occident latin et Byzance (XIIIe—début XVIe s.)*, Miroir de l'Orient Musulman, 2 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 27–49.
- Chamberlain, M. 1994. *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190–1350*, Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- Diem, W. 1996. *Arabische amtliche Briefe des 10. bis 16. Jahrhunderts aus der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek in Wien*, Documenta Arabica antiqua, 3 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1996).
- El-Leithy, T. 2011. 'Living Documents, Dying Archives: Towards a Historical Anthropology of Medieval Arabic Archives', *Al-Qanṭara: Revista de Estudios Árabes*, 32/2 (2011), 389–434.
- Görke, A and K. Hirschler, eds 2011. *Manuscript Notes as Documentary Sources*, Beirut Texts and Studies, 129 (Beirut and Würzburg: Orient-Institut Beirut, 2011).
- Hirschler, K. 2012a. *The Written Word in the Medieval Arabic Lands: A Social and Cultural History of Reading Practices* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).
- 2012b. 'Islam: The Arabic and Persian Traditions, Eleventh–Fifteenth Centuries', in S. Foot and C. Robinson, eds, *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, II:

- 400–1400, Oxford History of Historical Writing (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 267–286.
- 2013. ‘Studying Mamluk Historiography: From Source-Criticism to the Cultural Turn’, in S. Conermann, ed., *Ubi sumus? Quo vademus? Mamluk Studies—State of the Art*, Mamluk Studies, 3 (Bonn: Bonn University Press, 2013), 159–186.
  - 2016. ‘From Archive to Archival Practices. Rethinking the Preservation of Mamlūk Administrative Documents’, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 136/1 (2016), 1–28.
- Kwakkel, F. 2012. ‘Discarded Parchment as Writing Support in English Manuscript Culture’, in A.S.G. Edwards and O. Da Rold, eds, *English Manuscripts before 1400*, English Manuscript Studies 1100–1700, 17 (London: The British Library Publishing Division, 2012), 238–261.
- Latour, B. 2005. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Clarendon Lectures in Management Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- Loiseau, J. 2009. ‘Le silence des archives: Conservation documentaire et historiographie de l’État dans le sultanat mamelouk (XIII<sup>e</sup>–XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle)’, in *L’autorité de l’écrit au Moyen Âge (Orient–Occident): XXXIX<sup>e</sup> congrès de la SHMESP (Le Caire, 30 avril–5 mai 2008)*, Histoire ancienne et médiévale, 102 (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2009), 285–298.
- Mottahedeh, R. 1975. Review of R. Bulliet, *The patricians of Nishapur: a study in medieval Islamic social history*, Harvard Middle Eastern Studies, 16 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 95/3 (1975), 491–495.
- Mouton, J.-M., D. Sourdél, and J. Sourdél-Thomine 2013. *Mariage et séparation à Damas au Moyen Âge: un corpus de 62 documents juridiques inédits entre 337/948 et 698/1299*, Documents relatifs à l’histoire des croisades, 21 (Paris: Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, 2013).
- 2015. *Gouvernance et libéralités de Saladin*, Documents relatifs à l’histoire des croisades, 22 (Paris: Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres and De Boccard, 2015).
- Pahlitzsch, J. 2008. ‘Documents in Intercultural Communication in Mamluk Jerusalem. The Georgians under Sultan an-Nasir Hasan in 759 (1358)’, in A.D. Beihammer, M.G. Parani, and C.D. Schabel, eds, *Diplomatics in the Eastern Mediterranean 1000–1500*, The Medieval Mediterranean, 74 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 373–394.
- Rustow, M. 2010. ‘A Petition to a Woman at the Fatimid Court (413–414 A.H./1022–

- 23 C.E.)', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 73/1 (2010), 1–27.
- Sijpesteijn, P.M. 2007. 'The Archival Mind in Early Islamic Egypt: Two Arabic Papyri', in P. Sijpesteijn, L. Sundelin, S. Torallas Tovar, and A. Zomeño, eds, *From al-Andalus to Khurasan: Documents from the Medieval Muslim World*, Islamic History and Civilization, 66 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 163–186.
- 2013. *Shaping a Muslim State. The World of a Mid-Eighth-Century Egyptian Official*, Oxford Studies in Byzantium (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
- 2015. 'A *Ḥadīth* Fragment on Papyrus', *Der Islam*, 92/2 (2015), 321–331.
- Sourdel, D. and J. Sourdel-Thomine 2006. *Certificats de Pèlerinage d'époque Ayyoubide*, Documents relatifs à l'histoire des croisades, 19 (Paris: Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres, 2006).
- Stern, S.M. 1964. 'Petitions from the Ayyubid Period', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 27/1 (1964), 1–32.
- Wansbrough, J. 1965. 'Venice and Florence in the Mamluk Commercial Privileges', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 28/3 (1965), 483–523.