The freedom and independence to pursue the most interesting and relevant questions about nature and humanity have been the essence of the Institute for Advanced Study for more than eighty years. The Institute exists to provide an optimal environment where scholars from all over the world can think and share, imagine and risk, and begin again without conditions and limitations.

The Institute’s School of Historical Studies, established in 1949 with the merging of the School of Economics and Politics and the School of Humanistic Studies, expanded its scope to include Islamic and Near Eastern studies with the appointment of the late Professor Oleg Grabar (1929–2011) in Islamic Art and Culture in 1990. This was followed by the appointment, in 1997, of Professor Patricia Crone in the field of Islamic History. Both appointments focused on the premodern period, recognizing the overall historiographical importance of the cultural, religious, and intellectual history of Islam and the Near East.

Over two decades, Grabar drew both emerging and established scholars to the Institute, where, both before and after he became Professor Emeritus in 1998, Grabar continued to cultivate and advance fundamental research in a field in which he posited questions that challenged Western perspectives. Crone has focused her research on the political, religious, and cultural environment in which Islam began and how it transformed, and was itself transformed by, the regions that the Arabs conquered. With Oleg Grabar and Patricia Crone, the Institute has become, over a period of almost a quarter century, a recognized center for the pursuit of the study of Islamic culture and history.

In finding a successor for Crone, who retired in July 2014, the School considered the most innovative and creative areas within the vast field of Near Eastern Studies, covering over two millennia and every aspect of humanistic knowledge from art to literature, and to political, cultural, social, and economic history.

The intellectual history of classical and postclassical Islam is an area that, because of renewed philological and textual activity made possible by an increased accessibility of manuscript libraries and collections, represents a primary challenge and a critical frontier in the future development of Islamic studies. This particular field holds the greatest promise of long-term investment in fundamental research that will contribute to the transformation of future knowledge on the evolution of intellectual traditions not just in relation to Islam, but also Judaism and Eastern Christianity to the extent that mutual influences can be revealed.

Given these considerations, Sabine Schmidtke, previously Professor of Islamic Studies and founding Director of the Research Unit Intellectual History of the Islamicate World at Freie Universität Berlin, was appointed as Crone’s successor in July 2014. Schmidtke has played a central role in the exploration of heretofore unedited, and indeed unknown corpora of theological and philosophical writings. Thanks to her excellent knowledge of Arabic, Judaeo-Arabic, Hebrew, and Persian, Schmidtke is regarded internationally as one of the most accomplished and rigorous philologists. She has devoted herself for the past fifteen years to the indefatigable study and publication of hitherto mostly unexplored manuscript collections. Her collaborations and research on manuscript materials span Iran, Russia, Turkey, Yemen, and beyond, and she regularly publishes both in the West and in the Islamic world.

The broad reach of Schmidtke’s interests allows her to work across different traditions and to make important connections that would otherwise go unnoticed. For instance, her study of Arabic and Judaeo-Arabic manuscripts preserved in various Genizah collections has enabled her to recover works, by Muslim as well as Jewish authors, considered lost. Her research, thus, has an inherent innovative quality, in that it not only allows new perspectives to be opened but also enables other scholars to pursue their studies with greater awareness of available sources, and especially with transformed perspectives about the interrelations and connections among different strands of intellectual inquiry, across time, place, religions, and philosophical schools.

Schmidtke’s inexhaustible energy in uncovering, editing, and studying new texts combines with a rare ability to cover the full span of the intellectual development of Islamic thought from the early classical period to the late Ottoman, and the ability to initiate and direct research groups. Pushing the boundaries of her field in several directions and in multiple ways—as author, editor, and coordinator of major collaborative projects—Schmidtke
represents both a change of direction with respect to the work of Grabar and Crone, and a new engagement with the field of Islamic thought.

Currently working on the history of Islamic thought in the postclassical period (i.e., ca. thirteenth through nineteenth centuries C.E.)—a period that is often described as either largely unknown or irrelevant—Schmidtke is painstakingly reconstructing the textual heritage and intellectual import of the Islamic world at large. Her project is breathtakingly ambitious, and surely one that will transform the field at its foundations.

SABINE SCHMIDTKE’S RESEARCH FIELD is the history of ideas in the medieval, post-medieval, and early modern world of Islam as reflected in the literary productions of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian writers in Arabic. More specifically, her work focuses on the following main areas:

- post-Avicennan philosophy;
- Muslim doctrinal thought and its reception both among Jews and (within Islam) Shi‘ites;
- interreligious exchanges and apologetics;
- Muslim perceptions and receptions of the Bible;
- aspects of intellectual and social history in the transmission of knowledge.

Schmidtke’s research is focused on the vast manuscript holdings that have so far escaped the attention of scholarship. In many areas within the field of intellectual history of the medieval world of Islam, the main challenge is a lack of a critical mass of primary literature.

As a German trained in Islamic Studies partly at Hebrew University in Israel (B.A.) and partly in England (M.A. from the University of Oxford), Schmidtke very early on developed an intense awareness of borders in every sense. Throughout her academic life, she has attempted to cross these wherever possible. Though a frequent visitor to Israel, she has been traveling regularly to the Islamic world and particularly Iran, Turkey, Yemen, and Oman, and has established working contacts with the leading scholars in her field in these countries. She regularly publishes and lectures in the Middle East, stressing particularly the intimate connectedness of Muslim and Jewish thought in the lands of Islam. She moreover founded several book series in Iran.

On the basis of rediscovered manuscripts, Schmidtke is working to reconstruct how Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars have engaged and influenced each other’s thinking. With this objective in mind, she assembled over the past decade a collaborative research team whose members include Muslims, Christians, and Jews, scholars of Islam and Judaism, and specialists in Eastern Christianity. Moreover, she is the founding editor-in-chief of the journal Intellectual History of the Islamicate World (Leiden: Brill), which provides a forum for research that systematically crosses the boundaries between the three disciplines of Islamic, Jewish, and Eastern Christian Studies.

In the field of POST-AVICENNAN PHILOSOPHY, Schmidtke has worked intensively on the earliest generation of commentators on the works of the founder of Illuminationist philosophy, Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi (d. 1191), viz. Ibn Kammuna, Shams al-Din al-Shahrazuri, and Qutb al-Din al-Shirazi. The pioneer of modern scholarly research of Illuminationist philosophy, Henry Corbin, had considered Shahrazuri as the central figure among these three; his writings apparently influenced both Ibn Kammuna and Qutb al-Din al-Shirazi. On this assumption, Corbin (as many scholars after him) paid little attention to Ibn Kammuna, the only non-Muslim among them (he was born into a Jewish family of thirteenth-century Baghdad and received a thorough education in
When Sabine Schmidtke and Hassan Ansari, an Iranian national, met more than a decade ago in Tehran, Ansari was a student of the traditional religious system in Qum and Tehran (the “Hawza”). Ansari had read Schmidtke’s doctoral thesis The Theology of al-‘Allama al-Hilli (d. 726/1325), which was translated into Persian and published in Iran in 1999. Schmidtke’s scholarship changed Ansari’s approach to Islamic sources and was one of the reasons why he became interested in historical studies on Islamic theology. “The historical approach is not only useful, it is necessary,” says Ansari. “I talk now as a Muslim scholar. We need to have this kind of historical studies to change our approach to our own intellectual and legal tradition and its holy texts.”

What makes Ansari a particularly exceptional scholar is his combination of Western and traditionalist Islamic training. In the “Hawza” in Qum and Tehran, he successfully completed the very highest level of study for the rank of Ayyatollah, in the Shi’i clerical system. He also has studied Islamic and Western philosophy and Islamic intellectual history at universities in Tehran, Beirut, and Paris. “Hassan’s command of the sources is extremely wide-ranging,” says Schmidtke, “and he combines this with the very best historical-critical approach to the subjects and texts he is dealing with. He is an intimate connoisseur of manuscripts, Arabic and Persian, and the spectrum he covers is immense.”

In 2009, shortly after completing his Ph.D. at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (Sorbonne) in Paris, Ansari began working as a Senior Research Associate in Schmidtke’s research team at Freie Universität Berlin. Ansari, now a Member in the Institute’s School of Historical Studies, has worked extensively with Schmidtke, coauthoring books, editions, and articles and co-organizing international conferences—including a conference on the city of Rayy as an intellectual center that Ansari, Schmidtke, and Patricia Crone organized at the Institute in April 2014. After more than a decade of individual research and collaborative work with a number of international colleagues, Ansari says he has witnessed how his work and that of others has influenced the attitude of many scholars in Iran towards a more historical approach to Islamic theology.

A specialist of Zaydi studies, Ansari has traveled to many libraries—in Berlin, Rome (Vatican), Leiden, London, Milan, Munich, Paris, Vienna, and Yemen—to verify in depth the Zaydi and Mu’tazilite manuscripts in their collections. The available cataloguing of the manuscripts is often incomplete, riddled with mistakes, or the manuscripts have not been catalogued at all. Through the recovery and publication of these manuscripts, Schmidtke and Ansari have been working over the past six years to reconstruct lines of transmission and circles of scholars that were active at the time.

For his dissertation on the concept of religious authority in Shi’i Islam, which will be published by Brill in 2015, Ansari has used texts beginning from the eighth and ninth centuries. Through identifying quotations from earlier works, he has been reconstructing earlier layers of primary materials that are entirely lost and only preserved in these secondary sources. This has enabled him to analyze the earliest stages of the evolution of the concept of religious authority. “Many Muslim scholars take the concept of religious authority in Shi’i Islam as static concept, which does not have any development,” says Ansari. “For me, it is a historical concept, and I have studied its development through an in-depth analysis of the available sources. [My dissertation] is in many ways therefore a critique not only of the sources and the manuscripts, but also of the widely held approach of contemporary Muslim scholarship.”

Today, Schmidtke, Ansari, and other Members at the Institute are working to counterbalance a trend in Western universities to focus on the exclusive study of modern Islam. “If you want to understand what happens today or since the nineteenth century, if you want to read Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905) with a critical approach, you have to understand first much of the Ash’ari tradition, which requires a thorough knowledge of Islamic theology and its primary sources,” says Ansari. “You have to study the sources from the eighth and ninth centuries onwards, not only those from the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. If you want to grasp what is happening today, you have to start with studying Ibn Taymiyya. But if you want to understand Ibn Taymiyya, you have to start with studying Ahmad ibn Hanbal and the early Hanbalite tradition.”

Adds Schmidtke, “All of the thinkers and groups in modern Islam in one way or another have their roots in different strands in the Middle Ages or even before. Many scholars and pundits today take a claim at face value, when very often the claim is wrong. Look for example at ISIS. If you really know the history and the sources, you can analyze what they are doing and where they are completely wrong.”

An extremely prolific writer, in Persian, Arabic, French, and increasingly in English, Ansari also regularly publishes a blog (http://ansari.kateban.com), which is extremely popular among scholars in Iran and far beyond. Since Muslim readers are one of their primary audiences, Ansari and Schmidtke both publish their works in Persian and Arabic. “This is one scholarly community,” says Schmidtke. “It is one game, and we are all sitting in the same boat. In the West, because we have more possibilities than people in the Islamic world, it is our responsibility to make sure that we publish in a way that is accessible to scholars in other parts of the world, particularly the Middle East. As someone from the West working in this field, I have a responsibility to contribute something for the people whose tradition it is. There is also a very important mission for a Western audience, namely to show the intellectual richness of the Islamic world and make it available and not only to create awareness for this intellectual richness but also respect.”
both Jewish and Islamic letters). During her research on the three commentators of Suhrawardi, and Ibn Kammuna in particular, Schmidtke was able to revise the picture entirely. Having studied all extant manuscripts of the writings of Ibn Kammuna in detail, she demonstrated that both Shahrazuri and Qutb al-Din al-Shirazi had studied Ibn Kammuna’s works in detail and had incorporated extensive excerpts of them in their own writings. Her main publication in this area is the monograph A Jewish Philosopher of Baghdad (Leiden: Brill, 2006; with Reza Pourjavady).

Currently, Schmidtke is engaged in investigating the increased interest in ancient Greek and pre-Avicennan philosophical writings among Iranian philosophers of the Safavid and the Qajar periods (sixteenth through eighteenth centuries). The intellectual endeavor to shed light on the legacy of Greek philosophy can be traced back to the end of the fifteenth century to Shiraz, which was at the time the main cultural center of philosophy in the Eastern lands of Islam. Gradually, a large corpus of Graeco-Arabica (including pseudepigrapha) was assembled by scholars, one of the most significant texts being the so-called Theologia Aristotelis, an adapted paraphrase of sections of Enneads IV to VI of Plotinus, which had made an immense impact in Christian, Muslim, and Jewish circles during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Together with international research cooperation partners, Schmidtke is investigating this shift and its consequences in the philosophical writings of Muslim (and mostly Iranian) authors of the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries.

RATIONALISM has been a salient feature of Muslim theological thought from the earliest times. Despite the fact that rationalism had its opponents throughout Islamic history, it continued to be one of the mainstays of Muslim theological (and legal) thought, and it is only in the wake of modern Islamic fundamentalism that rationalism has become marginalized and threatened as never before.

The Mu’tazila was the earliest “school” of rationalist Islamic theology and one of the most important and influential currents of Islamic thought. Mu’tazilites stressed the primacy of reason and free will and developed an epistemology, ontology, and psychology that provided a basis for explaining the nature of the world, God, man, and the phenomena of religion. In their ethics, Mu’tazilites maintained that good and evil can be known solely through human reason. The Mu’tazila had its beginnings in the eighth century and its classical period of development was from the latter part of the ninth until the middle of the eleventh century. During this period, Mu’tazilite ideas also had a major impact on Jewish doctrinal thought in Baghdad, Jerusalem, and Cairo.

The movement gradually fell out of favor in Sunni Islam and had largely disappeared by the fourteenth century. Its impact, however, continued to be felt in Shi’i Islam where its influence subsisted through the centuries.

In 2003, Sabine Schmidtke founded, together with David Sklare (Jerusalem), the “Mu’tazilite Manuscripts Project Group” with the purpose of collecting all hitherto unpublished Mu’tazilite manuscripts (Muslim and Jewish), of identifying these materials, and of preparing critical editions, in order to set the scientific research of the Mu’tazilite movement on a broader basis. The theological movement and its literary production was also the focus of Schmidtke’s European Research Council project (2008–2013), “Rediscovering Theological Rationalism in the Medieval World of Islam.” As a result of the numerous critical editions, studies, and catalogues that she has published as single or coauthor in this field since 2003, and as a result of her numerous presentations of the...
ongoing project and the numerous international workshops Schmidtké has convened on the topic over the past decade, Mu'tazilism is today in the focus of scholars, and the significance of its impact on Jewish medieval thought for modern research (which had long been ignored) has by now become an established fact.

Despite the constantly growing research regarding the literary history of the Muslim World, our knowledge about what was available/popular/read in different periods and regions is still dismally patchy. There is hardly a period or a region during the long and diverse history of the Muslim world for which we can present a clear and detailed picture of which books were available and popular in any given discipline among the various circles, communities, and societies (Muslim and non-Muslim alike). Nor do we know much, regarding most periods of Islamic history, about the diffusion of books, the processes of survival, selection, and transmission of books, or the mechanisms and ways to include books in a teaching curriculum (the term “curriculum” itself carrying a rather vague meaning), exclude them from it, or remove them from the library shelves. We do not know why at certain stages works by authors of earlier generations became obsolete, while at other periods a clear preference for the more antique literature prevailed. We are equally ill informed regarding the different ways to manage scholarly information at any given time, nor do we possess comprehensive studies discussing theoretical and practical approaches of Muslim writers towards scholarship or their changing predilection for specific literary genres. Related social practices of writing, copying, commenting, excerpting, citing, or reading are similarly understudied. These lacunae appear even more glaring when compared to the far more advanced and refined state of scholarship on similar issues in Western contexts, ranging from the ancient Greek and Latin world to the European Middle and Late Middle Ages as well as Early Modernity.

What we have so far are mostly snapshots, each one focusing on a limited perspective. They show that the process of transmission was a dynamic and highly variegated one and that on many relevant issues there is a wealth of data and sources that need to be analyzed carefully. On the other hand, Islamicate societies (Muslim and non-Muslim) share meta-contextual characteristics of book culture and mechanisms of transmission of knowledge that render comparisons between the findings for different regions, periods, and circles a rewarding enterprise. This is the rationale of the conference and volume “Histories of Books in the Islamicate World,” co-convened by Schmidtké in March 2015 in Madrid (in collaboration with colleagues of the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas and The Hebrew University of Jerusalem). In her own research, Schmidtké focuses on the transfer of knowledge from Northern Iran to Yemen from the twelfth century onwards, a development that was prompted by the political unification of the two Zaydi states in these two regions.

**Recovering Manuscripts from Yemen to St. Petersburg**

A large quantity of manuscripts have surfaced in the past few years, many from private collections. Of particular interest to Sabine Schmidtké are two major collections of manuscripts. These are the various private and public libraries of Yemen that mostly contain Zaydi materials, and the Abraham Firkovitch collection in St. Petersburg, the least explored among the various Genizah collections, which contains Jewish and Muslim texts alike.

Zaydi Shi’ism initially developed and flourished in two regions, namely the Northern Highlands of Yemen and Northern Iran. The Zaydi states that were established there constituted for centuries separate political and cultural entities, but by the beginning of the twelfth century, they were politically unified. As a result, a massive transfer of knowledge occurred from Northern Iran to Yemen that comprised nearly the entire literary and religious legacy of Iranian Zaydism. Most of this unique heritage is preserved until today in the libraries of Yemen as well as in the various European collections of manuscripts of Yemeni provenance. Schmidtké’s aim is to investigate this highly interesting though hardly studied process of knowledge transfer as well as the ensuing development of intellectual thought among the Zaydis of Yemen.

Several manuscript collections from the Karaite leader and historian Abraham Firkovitch were acquired by the Czarist Imperial Library in St. Petersburg. The first collection of 830 manuscripts was purchased in 1862, the Samaritan collection in 1870, and the second collection, by far the largest, was purchased in 1876. The large majority of the manuscripts of the second collection were taken from the Genizah of the Karaite Synagogue, Dar ibn Sumayh, in Cairo. Many of these manuscripts are quite large, containing hundreds of folios. A significant percentage of the manuscripts date from the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Some of the manuscripts were originally part of the library of the Karaite community in Jerusalem and were brought to Cairo as a result of the Crusader conquest of Jerusalem in 1099.

The Arabic manuscripts, the large majority of which are in Judaeo-Arabic, are extremely important. Most of the works contained in these manuscripts are unknown (or nearly unknown) to scholarship. A considerable number are unica. The collection also contains Muslim works in the areas of rational theology, philosophy, medicine, astronomy and other sciences, and belles lettres.

Together with a number of international colleagues, Schmidtké aims to prepare a full catalogue of the Firkovitch collections, a vital tool for making the riches of the Firkovitch manuscripts known and available to scholarship. Most of the manuscripts present two major challenges to the cataloguer. The first is the poor and fragmentary physical state of the manuscripts. The second challenge is identification of the manuscripts’ content. Title pages and colophons, the usual means of identifying unknown or poorly known works, are almost always missing.
Biblia Arabica’s Interreligious Terrain

The research project “Biblia Arabica: The Bible in Arabic among Jews, Christians, and Muslims,” a collaborative effort initiated by Sabine Schmidtke and Professors Camilla Adang and Meira Polliack of Tel Aviv University, is studying the rich and varied traditions of translating the Hebrew Bible and New Testament into Arabic, starting from the eighth century onwards, as well as the Muslim reception of biblical materials.

Shortly after the expansion of Muslim rule in the seventh and eighth centuries, Christians and Jews living in the Muslim world began to translate their sacred texts: the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament into the new dominant language of the time: Arabic. Many of these translations, from languages such as Hebrew, Greek, Syriac, Latin, and Coptic, have survived and have come down to us in a vast corpus of manuscripts and fragments that hail from monasteries, synagogues, and libraries, especially in the Middle East. The majority of extant materials still awaits scholarly exploration and is preserved until this day in manuscript only—manuscripts that are scattered in libraries around the world. Some are imminently threatened, such as those preserved in the numerous monastery libraries in Iraq and Syria, and others are accessible only with great difficulty, as is the case with some of the important collections in Russia containing material of Jewish provenance.

Compared to other translation traditions of the Bible throughout its history, the Arabic versions are the most abundant in terms of the number of surviving manuscripts and later on prints. Moreover, they reveal an unusually large variety in stylistic and didactic approaches, vocabulary, scripts and, ideologies.

From the study of manuscripts, the project will move on to investigate translation as an act and a process, and the manner in which translators from different faiths influenced each other in an interreligious and intercultural context. Some of the results of the project will be published in the recently established book series Biblia Arabica: Texts and Studies, published by Brill in Leiden and edited by an international team of six scholars, including Adang, Polliack, and Schmidtke. In addition, Volume One of the peer-reviewed journal Intellectual History of the Islamicate World (Leiden: Brill, 2013) is exclusively devoted to the Bible in Arabic.

Additional Reading

Professor Schmidtke’s Biblia Arabica project is available at http://biblia-arabica.com/.

A lecture on “Muslim Perceptions and Receptions of the Bible” was given by Sabine Schmidtke at the Institute in October 2014: https://video.ias.edu/schmidtke-lecture/.

From Masterpieces of Islamic Art to Yemeni Manuscripts

MASTERPIECES OF ISLAMIC ART by Oleg Grabar (Prestel, 2009)

In Masterpieces of Islamic Art, Professor Oleg Grabar introduces a wide range of illuminated manuscript masterpieces from the eighth to the seventeenth century, including those of the Koran, epic poetry, and scientific works from the Egyptian, Syrian, Persian, Mogul, and Ottoman Empires.

THE NATIVIST PROPHETS OF EARLY ISLAMIC IRAN by Patricia Crone (Cambridge University Press, 2012)

In 2013–14, Professor Patricia Crone received four prizes for The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran, a book that examines the Iranian response to the Muslim penetration of the Iranian countryside, the revolts subsequently triggered there, and the religious communities that these revolts revealed. The book also describes a complex of religious ideas that, however varied in space and unstable over time, has demonstrated a remarkable persistence in Iran across a period of two millennia. The central thesis is that this complex of ideas has been endemic to the mountain population of Iran and occasionally become epidemic with major consequences for the country, most strikingly in the revolts examined here, and in the rise of the Safavids who imposed Shi’ism on Iran prior to C.E. 1000.

THE YEMENI MANUSCRIPT TRADITION edited by David Hollenberg, Christoph Rauch, and Sabine Schmidtke (Brill Academic Publishers, 2015)

The Yemeni Manuscript Tradition contributes to the study of the manuscript codex and its role in scholastic culture in Yemen. The articles in this volume, which range in period from Islam’s first century to the modern times, result from the authors’ close scrutiny of manuscripts of Yemen. Collectively, these studies demonstrate the variety and richness of scholarly methods closely tied to the material text and the importance of cross-pollination in the fields of codicology, textual criticism, and social and intellectual history.
The Institute: Advancing the Edge of Current Knowledge

The Institute for Advanced Study situates itself at the very edge of current knowledge—of the universe and of humanity. Work at the Institute takes place across historical studies, mathematics, natural sciences, and social science. A permanent faculty of some thirty eminent academics each year award fellowships to some two hundred visiting members. Dr. Robbert Dijkgraaf is the Institute’s current director.

The Institute’s more than six thousand former members hold positions of intellectual and scientific leadership throughout the academic world. Thirty-three Nobel Laureates and forty out of fifty-six Fields Medalists, as well as many winners of the Wolf and MacArthur prizes, have been affiliated with the Institute. Past faculty have included Albert Einstein, Kurt Gödel, J. Robert Oppenheimer, Erwin Panofsky, Hetty Goldman, Homer A. Thompson, John von Neumann, George Kemen, Hermann Weyl, and Clifford Geertz.

While the list of great scholars associated with the Institute is remarkable, the Institute’s history does not weigh heavily on current faculty and members. Instead, the atmosphere focuses on the present and the future, where every twist and hairpin bend changes our view. What do we know? What do we yet need to understand? How should we try to comprehend it? At the Institute, everything is designed to encourage scholars to take their research to the next level.
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