

# What's in a Name: Islamic Books as Sources of Prosopography



Mike Peters' Mother Goose and Grimm, 16 August 2007

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**direct** sources of prosopography in Muslim societies in Eurasia and Africa

- archival documents on papyrus, paper, and other writing surfaces, in particular legal documents and letters
- epigraphy
- coinages
- authors of literary works
- paratexts in manuscripts and printed books

**indirect** sources of prosopography in Muslim societies in Eurasia and Africa

- biographical dictionaries
- hadith compilations which document transmitter chains
- administrative handbooks which preserve copies of archival documents
- historiography
- book seller inventories and library catalogs
- poetry, in particular panegyric and funerary odes
- prose works dedicated to patrons
- newspapers

challenges posed by the direct and indirect sources of prosopography in Muslim societies in Eurasia and Africa

- preservation and accessibility of direct sources for the history of Muslim societies since the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE; in other words, there are very few complete prosopographical datasets (e.g., voting registries in the US in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, census data)
- the constantly changing relationship between direct and indirect sources during the process of transmission (cf. micro history v. macro history)
- the application of the heuristic distinction between direct and indirect sources to scholarship
- what are “good” questions that prosopographical research can answer; in other words, why does it matter?
- do the dead have a right to privacy? Cf. the training of archeologists with regard to the ethical handling of human remains and the data mining by government agencies in the Age of the War of Terrorism

working assumption:

paratexts are historical sources of evidence for production, circulation, and uses of manuscripts and printed books in Arabic script

prosopographic data preserved in books in Arabic script, printed as well as written on parchment or paper, as a way of obtaining

- a better understanding of the uses of literacy in **all** aspects of life in Muslim societies (cf. history from below, social history)
- official administration (e.g., justice system) and record keeping in government archives
- education and research
- religious practice
- book production, book trade, book collecting

sample data :

names related to literary works and the paratexts in specific copies of these works

difficulties with these sample data

- the FaceBook model is a social utility assuming a network of connections among people
- all names are related to a specific copy of a specific text in Arabic script, but not every text is a literary work with a fixed text, a standardized title, and a known author (e.g., glosses on known commentaries preserved as informal manuscript copies; popular literature; informal manuscripts written for personal use that have entered the commercial book trade; pamphlets and “grey literature”)
- both manuscripts and printed books are widely circulating commodity so that a wide range of languages, scripts, and categories need be accommodated
- the object that generates information about people is not STATIC, so who gets the unique identifier?!
- metadata standards used for texts (TEI) and the cataloging of artefacts (DUBLIN CORE), archival records, and books, that is both, manuscripts and printed books (MARC) in order to allow for reuse of metadata records

crucial is that each name is related to a specific copy of a text (material artifact), be it in printing or in manuscript (technical consequence: creation of relational database?!)

types of names

- author of a text
- author of a commentary on a text
- editor of a text
- author of an abridgement, epitome etc. of a text
- owner of a specific copy
- scribe
- illuminator
- binder
- publisher
- reader

types of paratexts

- *waqf*
- *ijāzah*
- *ḥāshiya*
- reading and study notes
- ownership notes

## my questions about PROSOP

- what is new about PROSOP and why is PROSOP needed?
- Prosop as one example of the recent “linked data” initiatives, such as LAWDI and SNAC
- interoperability with other databases that contain direct and indirect prosopographical data, e.g., indices of digital biographical databases such as the *American National Biography* (subscriber only), and authority files of library catalogs, such as VIAF (OA)
- an international database must accommodate prosopographical data from cultures (cf. Digital Scriptorium) with differing prosopographical traditions (i.e., formatting of names) and standards (cf. information in obituaries and on tombstones) and wide range of languages
- eligibility of contributing research, modes of data entry, and quality control
- cooperation between Computer Science and Humanities (= Digital Humanities?! ) with regard to design, maintenance, and future development
- short-term, mid-term, and long-term funding