

Press release

“A leading Arabic poet, who was long virtually unknown”

Researchers associated with the Arabic scholar Thomas Bauer are starting a long-term project to produce a digital edition of the complete literary works of Ibn Nubātah – “Heyday of Arabic literature discovered”

Münster, 3 March 2020 (exc) A long-term digital project to produce an edition of the complete works of the leading Arabic poet of his time, Ibn Nubātah al-Miṣrī, who was virtually unknown to a broader public until recently, is being launched this week at the University of Münster. “Our most recent research has shown him to be the best-known poet in Syria and Egypt in the Mamluk period (1250-1518), a period long considered an epoch of decline, but which now turns out to have been a literary heyday”, explains Arabic scholar and Leibniz Prize winner Thomas Bauer from the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics” at the University of Münster. He is leading the long-term project, which is receiving 5.9 million euros over twelve years from the German Research Foundation (DFG). Linked to the project is Bauer’s own research in the Cluster of Excellence on the diversity of discourses in the Mamluk period, and on Shiite-Sunni religious conflicts in the 12th century.

The editorial project, which will be launched in Münster on Friday, follows on from a seven-year Leibniz Prize project on the long neglected Arabic literature and rhetoric from 1100-1800 (ALEA), an epoch that proved to be one of the great heydays of Arabic literature. The team of researchers discovered an unprecedented diversity of literary forms and ideas, which impacted on and involved all layers of society. According to Bauer, what has been discovered so far about Ibn Nubātah refutes the common image of Islamic cultures, where religion is thought to influence all areas of life, and especially politics. In examining the religious conflicts of the 12th century and thus the prehistory of the works of Ibn Nubātah, Bauer is centrally concerned in his current project at the Cluster of Excellence with the question of whether Ibn Nubātah’s somewhat secular approach to the political is an innovation of the Mamluk period, or already existed in previous, and more religiously unsettled, times.

“Using digital means to look over the poet’s shoulder”

Born in Cairo in 1287, where he also died in 1366, Ibn Nubātah spent most of his career in Damascus. He wrote not only 2,000 or more poems, but also 30 other works. While almost all have survived, only a fraction are available in editions. Thus, as Bauer explains: “Scholars wishing to discover the true Ibn Nubātah, and thus the paradigm for the generations of writers who followed him, have so far had to rely on manuscripts”. The long-term project will now make it possible to compile reliable editions of all Ibn Nubātah’s work that has survived, with the digital version in particular giving interested parties access to these editions. For Bauer, the challenge lies not only in the sheer size of Ibn Nubātah’s oeuvre, but also in the fact that he repeatedly rewrote his texts, making the task of documenting the many changes extremely complex. A digital edition is particularly suitable for illuminating the history of the changes, since it “offers the unique opportunity to look over the shoulder of a 14th-century poet at work”.

According to Bauer, Ibn Nubātah's work is for the most part purely secular, including his eulogy to rulers. "His prose advice to rulers is almost Machiavellian". In his Cluster project on the Shiite-Sunni religious conflicts of the 12th century, Bauer is looking at the most important discourses of power in the period of upheaval from 1150-1200 to examine how Ibn Nubātah's literary predecessors dealt with religion and politics. Bauer examines how far chancery and panegyric texts used criticism of religion against opponents, or how far they drew on religion to propagate their own claims. "How does religious conflict modify the image of power, and how does political conflict influence the mobilization of religion?", asks Bauer.

Opening lecture: "A golden age of Arabic studies"

The long-term DFG project is entitled "Edition of the complete works of Ibn Nubātah al-Miṣrī", and will be launched at the University of Münster's Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies on Friday, 6 March 2020 at 6 pm. The director of the academy project "Bibliotheca Arabica. Contemporary history of Arabic literature" in Leipzig, Verena Klemm, will give a lecture on "A golden age of Arabic studies".

As Bauer explains, the background to the research is "the dominant idea, which originated from Western colonialism and was quickly adopted by Arab elites, that there was an early 'golden age' in Islam, followed by a long period of stagnation and decline until the Islamic Sleeping Beauty was kissed awake by the Western colonial powers in the 19th century". This idea is not only inaccurate, but also has clear political consequences in Arab countries to this day. "For example, the fixation on a 'golden age' makes connecting up with history problematical, and encourages ideological distortions of various kinds". Above all, though, these prejudices obstruct the reception of entire literary epochs, "when some of the most fascinating Arabic literary texts were written. A better understanding of the literature and rhetoric of this period will revolutionize how we perceive Arabic literary history and Islamic cultural history", says Bauer, who was awarded the DFG's Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Prize in 2013 for his research on Arabic poetry and literature in the Mamluk and Ottoman periods. (vvm)

Caption: Arabic scholar Thomas Bauer (Photo: Cluster of Excellence "Religion and Politics"); gold dinar from 1261, probably minted in Cairo (Photo: Thomas Bauer): the Mamluk sultan Baibars (1260-1277) presents himself with his heraldic animal, the lion: the centre of Arab-Islamic culture shifts from Baghdad to Cairo – a powerful new beginning.