

Call for Papers

The Arab East and the Bedouin Component: Features and Tensions from Late Antiquity to the Present

Organisers: Stefan Leder and Johann Büssow, Orient-Institut Beirut

Date: 29 November-1 December 2012

Venue: Orient-Institut Beirut

Deadline: 15 July 2012

The presence of Bedouin groups – nomadic and sedentary – has been a pervasive feature of Arab societies since Late Antiquity and some have played a central role in the history of the Arab lands. Nevertheless, Bedouin are often considered to be marginal groups with little influence on broader trends in society and of mainly folkloristic interest. They are thus ‘intimate strangers’, always present but largely ignored.

Historically, Bedouin nomads and their sedentary neighbours have generally formed part of one regional economic and political system, and mostly had more in common with their partners in this regional system than with other nomadic groups outside of it. This conference starts from the premise that the Arab East (*al-mashriq al-`arabi*), including Syria, Iraq, Sinai and parts of Egypt and of the Arabian Peninsula, has constituted one such distinct region of social interaction from Late Antiquity until the twentieth century. Although related to neighbouring regions (Anatolia, the Iranian plateau and North Africa) through nomadic migration, it is distinguished by its own characteristic features. This regional focus is justified by, for example, the close intersection of urban, rural and steppe zones, the Bedouin contribution to a common literary patrimony, and the persistent urban discourses on the Bedouin, which swing between contempt and admiration. Moreover, Bedouin have for centuries maintained their migration routes and their wide-ranging social networks, which crisscross the entire region. Likewise, the social and cultural patterns that structure the relationship between Bedouin and their neighbours, ranging from trade and warfare to customary law and genealogical thought, have survived the rise and fall of various political regimes.

The patterns related to the Bedouin in the Arab East that appear so remarkably stable in retrospect were continuously maintained and adapted in relation to numerous internal and external challenges, such as conflicts over resources, technological change and government policies. The conference aims to bring together historians and anthropologists in order to find formulas that will enable a better description of the specific fluidity that surrounds Bedouin agency in history and the Bedouin impact on the region’s culture.

The conference programme invites inquiry along three main axes:

(1) The Bedouin and the Arab East in History

- How are the Arab East and the Bedouin framed by successive socio-political and discursive orders?
- What are the regions constituted through specific forms interaction with Bedouin populations related to, for example, seasonal migration, trade, marriage, legal and political interaction? Does the resulting picture confirm the hypothesis of the Arab East as a distinct regional system?
- How do Bedouin organise themselves? What resources do they compete for and what strategies do they follow?
- How do Bedouin interact with neighbouring groups? To what extent do they rely on middlemen and social networks?
- What is the agency of Bedouin in the specific historical situation? In what ways are they 'central' or 'marginal' in a given context?
- What is the possible heuristic value of the categories 'Bedouin' and 'Arab East'?

(2) Identity Claims and Assignments

- How do Bedouin express their outlook and interests, both individually and collectively?
- Is there a distinctly 'Bedouin' aesthetics?
- What are the rules applied to the uses of genealogy (*nasab*) as 'idioms and discourses' in past and present?
- How are Bedouin portrayed in literature and the audio-visual media?
- How, why and to what ends do Bedouin themselves make use of literature and the media? How are Bedouin self-representations produced and what is their public? How do these self-presentations differ between regional and historical contexts?
- What are the characteristics of the Arab anthropology of the Bedouin, classical and modern?
- Has there been a Bedouin contribution to the literary legacy of the region?

(3) Conflict Management and Violence

- To what extent is raiding and extortion part of the economy of various Bedouin groups?
- How do the norms and mechanisms of conflict management in Bedouin law interact with other legal traditions? How regionally specific are they?

- How did the introduction of new technology change the rules of war and peace across historical periods? Did this have consequences for the internal organisation of Bedouin groups?

The deadline for the submission of abstracts (300 words maximum) is 15 July 2012. Your abstract, together with a short biographical note, should be sent to Johann Büssow (buessow@orient-institut.org).

The selection committee will inform applicants of their decision by 1 August 2012. Some travel grants for selected speakers will be available. If you plan to apply for a travel grant, please indicate this when submitting your abstract.

Please submit only unpublished papers that would be eligible for publication in an edited volume.

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