



An Interview with Prof. Konrad Hirschler

Prof. Dr. Konrad Hirschler ile Mülakat

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Elif Sezer-Aydınlı: Dear Professor, thank you very much for accepting our invitation to this interview and for taking the time to share your thoughts with us.

Manuscript studies has undergone significant transformations over the past several decades, shaped by new approaches to the materiality of manuscripts, the history of collections, digitization, and the study of texts within their broader social and intellectual contexts.

Therefore, as one of the prominent academics in the field, your ideas that have shaped your work, your views on the current state and future directions of Islamic manuscript studies are valuable for us today.

Konrad Hirschler: Thanks for having me and including this interview in your journal.

ESA: Could you start by telling us briefly how you came to the field of manuscript studies? What were the cornerstones of your career in this field?

KH: I was only marginally exposed to manuscripts during my BA and MA in history in the 1990s. For my PhD on authorial agency in producing historical knowledge in the Ayyubid period, I also mainly worked with print editions. However, while working on my PhD, I increasingly wondered about the reception of the texts I was working on. This led, from 2004 onwards, to my post-doctoral *Written Word* project and book, which approached the question of reception with a focus on reading practices. Here, I was naturally drawn to manuscripts as key evidence for who read what, when, and how. So, my entry into manuscript studies was not through editing texts, but through an interest in the social function and meaning of manuscripts as carriers of the written word. The numerous additional research questions I encountered while working on this book led me to focus on manuscript studies in the subsequent years, particularly the history of libraries and collections. Since moving to Hamburg in 2021 and joining the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, I have increasingly positioned this research in comparative perspectives and explored the potential of material analysis of manuscripts using archaeometric methods.

ESA: For those who might not be familiar, how would you define archaeometry in the context of manuscript research? And leading from that, in what ways did the CSMC at the University of Hamburg contribute to bring these methods into the field.

KH: Archaeometry is the use of scientific methods and analytical tools for studying the material heritage of the past, for instance to assist in authenticating, dating and preserving manuscripts. Long used in archaeology, it has only in recent years begun to be systematically employed in manuscript studies, as more and more colleagues have become increasingly interested in the materiality of the objects carrying the texts traditionally studied. The CSMC is one actor in this field, but its deeply integrated community of researchers from the humanities, natural sciences, and computer science has been particularly fruitful in driving this development. A special feature of its laboratory system is its Mobile Lab, underlain by the credo that the equipment should go to the object to avoid the hazards of transporting cultural heritage. With its Container Lab, it can undertake large-scale analytical campaigns worldwide. Integrating sciences and humanities is a learning process, and

doing this meaningfully is not primarily about buying fancy machines, but about creating a deeply integrated community of researchers who are aware of each other's questions and methods. Scientific approaches rarely yield 'hard data', but it is an additional set of information that can be employed in historical scholarship. Very importantly, this development must be undertaken with care and continuous reflection on how invasive, or even destructive, the application of a given method can be. Our archaeometric researchers have developed the Guide to Written Artefact Profiling, which is a good starting point for initial insights into archaeometry and manuscripts.

ESA: Now, I wonder your comments on the development of the field on Islamic manuscripts. Could you provide a short assessment of the current state of Islamic manuscript research in broad strokes? And how it is different than before?

KH: Obviously, slotting the work of so many brilliant colleagues into a simplistic scheme is always tricky, but I guess that manuscript studies traditionally fell into three broad lines of work within Islamic Studies: editing texts, codicological work on codices and document studies (often under the slightly misleading heading of 'papyrology'). Over the last decades, different factors, chief among them the material turn and an increasing awareness of provenance, have driven exciting new directions. This has enabled manuscript studies to speak to and be exciting for a broader range of colleagues within academia (and also audiences beyond academia). As a result, many colleagues now work with handwritten materials without necessarily identifying as doing manuscript studies per se. At the same time, increasing investments in the Humanities, especially in the regions from which the manuscripts originate, and where they are still held in the vast majority, mean that the field is much larger and much more diverse than ever before. The growth of Turkish manuscript studies over the past decades is certainly a wonderful example, but similar developments are evident in other regions such as the Gulf states and Southeast Asia.

The quantitative growth is going hand in hand with a conceptual transformation: what used to be manuscript studies in the sense of working with codices is slowly developing into a larger endeavour in which colleagues working on codices, single-sheet documents, inscriptions, and others are

increasingly able to think within shared frameworks. At the same time, what used to be insular fields of manuscript studies defined by one language or one script are now increasingly willing and able to work across regions, periods and material objects.

ESA: Is it possible to speak of a common developmental history of Islamic manuscripts that transcends particular geographies and cultures? Or should they be evaluated in their own authenticities? If a common development can be identified, which culture (or period) should be placed at its center? If not, what kind of classifications can be made?

KH: For me, such broad classifications are of very limited heuristic value. For instance, I would be very hesitant to speak of a 'Christian manuscript culture' that offers a useful conceptual framework for studying Syriac manuscripts of Iraq alongside Latin-script manuscripts in Ireland. Beyond doubt, there are some phenomena where 'Islamic' offers a useful conceptual entry point to study phenomena such as the development of Koranic manuscripts. However, to understand the development of writing traditions between West Africa and Southeast Asia, we are better served by using manuscript cultures in the plural and considering more factors than religion.

ESA: Now I would like to ask a broad question on the current worldwide research on Islamic manuscripts. Where do you position the study of books and manuscripts within the current university information system or the classification of sciences (*ilms*)?

KH: As the organisation of disciplines varies largely across university systems in nation-states and world regions, this would be a good topic for a conference, but I will give it a try. In Europe and the US, manuscript studies were, for most of the twentieth century, seen to be part of medieval studies, reflecting the European trajectory towards typographic print in the early modern period. This positioning of manuscripts as medieval shaped the organisation of academia, including the questions asked and the funding granted. Disciplines working on the wider world (Islamic Studies, Turkish Studies, Indology, Sinology etc.) where handwriting remained the dominant technique of the written word well into the nineteenth century were only secondary partners of manuscript studies in this Eurocentric vision of media history. Being smaller

in size in terms of funding and personnel, working with manuscripts in these ‘area studies’ was predominantly part of philology and was rarely seen as a field of study in its own right. This began to change in the second half of the twentieth century, largely driven by colleagues working in the expanding university and library systems outside Europe. For instance, colleagues such as Youssef Eche in Syria, Ismail Erünsal in Türkiye, and Abd al-Latif Ibrahim in Egypt laid the foundations for constituting Arabic-script manuscript studies as a ‘proper’ field of historical inquiry. European and North American university systems followed this development, with additional push factors such as the material turn and greater awareness of provenance playing a role. As a result of research on other world regions entering the field, manuscript studies has become much more than the study of medieval codices in terms of the objects and periods it concerns, thus challenging established concepts, asking new questions and developing different arguments. At the same time, archaeometric methods have entered the field (‘archaeometric philology’), opening manuscript studies to the natural sciences; our datasets are growing so that artificial intelligence will be indispensable, opening manuscript studies to Computer Science; provenance debates are opening it to Law, and so on. This drive toward thinking across regions and integrating a broad array of disciplines means that manuscript studies is well positioned to help drive a wider reconfiguration of how we organise academic systems and train future generations.

ESA: How do you approach comparative manuscript studies? For example, monastic scriptoria were not common in the Middle East. Is it therefore accurate to claim that Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman manuscript production was less institutionalized and less systematic? What have you observed based on your own research experience?

KH: The main starting point in comparative studies is not to take the development of any region as the anchor point so that developments in other regions have to be discussed in relation to it. Latin-script manuscript cultures are a minor part of the global history of writing, and the historical developments we see there should not have a prime position in framing the questions we ask about other manuscript cultures. Such an approach often leads to what might be called ‘deficiency research’, i.e. explaining why

something did not occur. This also goes for the transition to typographic print, where research on other world regions often felt the need to explain why these writing cultures ‘failed’ to take the same path. We could also turn the question around and ask why Latin-script manuscript cultures failed to persist while manuscript cultures in most parts of the world succeeded in prevailing much longer. In the same vein, we could ask why Latin-script manuscript cultures failed to develop sustainable mechanisms outside scriptoria that ensured the large-scale production and circulation of manuscripts as we see it in West Asia and North Africa (and many other parts of the world), but I am not sure that this will lead us to exciting results.

Comparative research, for me, means stepping out of the concepts, terminology, and research questions specific to my own field so I can enter meaningful conversations with researchers working on other manuscript cultures. In this sense, it is less a matter of comparing specific phenomena and more about benefiting, on a conceptual level, from work done in other world regions to step out of my disciplinary box. This requires a lot of work, as disciplines have developed idiosyncratic research traditions where the same terms can have different meanings, and much of the published work rests on assumptions obvious to anyone socialised into a discipline but bewildering to outsiders. Once such a common playing field is established, it is possible to tackle questions, such as the social mechanisms driving manuscript production, by bringing different disciplines together, but with a clear awareness that the historical experience of one specific region cannot serve as the explicit or implicit anchor point of the discussion.

ESA: How do you classify the methods and theories used in manuscript research—particularly in collection studies—including your own work? Do you find the existing literature sufficient?

KH: I do not see that the development of manuscript studies as a whole is driven by theories or that it is possible to survey the field according to theoretical approaches taken. The field benefits from theories developed elsewhere, and the material turn has certainly had a major impact over the past decades. Yet, it does so in a very watered-down way, and theoretical discussions rarely frame our publications. This is rather happening in the methods applied, and here we see indeed differences between research that sees manuscripts primarily as

texts and research that sees manuscripts as material objects carrying content (text or otherwise). Originating in text-focused philological disciplines, manuscript studies was long synonymous with editing texts. Those colleagues who had an interest in the materiality of manuscripts were often marginalised in what was conceived as an ‘auxiliary science’, codicology. Over the past decades, codicological concerns have entered the mainstream, and most research in manuscript studies globally can be classified along this axis of development, from text-only to text-and-object.

Collection studies has started to play a more important role precisely in this context, as the trajectories of the objects from production to their present-day repository started to be meaningful. A methodological problem that has challenged the field has been how to conceptualise manuscript translocations. Collection studies inevitably raise the question of provenance, and in our field this is particularly pertinent to Europe’s imperial and colonial expansion into West Asia and North Africa in the 19th and 20th centuries. Here, we have had a wide gap between Europe- and US-based scholarship that has long ignored the problematic provenance of their collections, and WANA-based scholarship that has assumed illegal translocation as the main conceptual framework. Over the last years, this gap has narrowed with increasing acknowledgement of and interest in the often-problematic provenance of EU/US collections, and at the same time increasing research in the varied histories of these translocations. This includes, for instance, research into the role of actors such as the Cairene booktrader al-Khanji in the translocation and formation of EU/US collections. It is in this area, local agency and mechanisms of translocations, that I see most potential for scholarship over the next years.

ESA: Are there any methodological errors you observe in current codicological studies?

KH: I would not speak of errors, but one of the challenges of our field is terminology. Take the term ‘manuscript’, which originally only means ‘handwritten’, but which is often used as a synonym for ‘codex’. As a result, handwritten objects in other physical forms have an uneasy place in manuscript studies as traditionally conceived. For instance, handwritten single sheets with documentary content are often seen as part of a different field: diplomatics. In the same vein, stone inscriptions are also handwritten, but are not seen as

part of manuscript studies. Yet, in reality, these different material forms and techniques of handwriting belong to one sphere of human activity and should be studied within one framework.

Another example is the assumption that handwriting and print are opposed techniques. This largely goes back to a Eurocentric vision of development in which handwriting was followed by typographic print with movable type. Yet, most of humanity has used handwriting and printing techniques in combination, such as woodblock printing or lithographical printing where handwritten texts carved into the object are mechanically reproduced. These long-standing practices to reproduce the written word cannot be captured within a conceptual framework based on the dichotomy between ‘manuscript’ and ‘print’.

ESA: Thank you for sharing your valuable insights into the current state and future directions of Islamic and comparative manuscript studies. Like any conversation on the future of academia, we come to the advantages and disadvantages of digitalisation in the field of manuscripts. It is true that access to Islamic manuscripts worldwide is much easier today than it was twenty years ago. This has had, and will continue to have, a very positive impact on codicological studies. However, for researchers, manuscripts have largely transformed into digital material that cannot be examined physically. What are your views on this matter?

KH: Yes, digitisation of manuscripts is first and foremost a positive development, as the growth of manuscript studies would have been simply impossible without it. For instance, generations of students like my own were hardly exposed to manuscripts during their studies because they were difficult to integrate into lectures and seminars. One of my professors, Albrecht Noth, was engaged in manuscript projects in Yemen, but we hardly got a glimpse of that in our studies. At the same time, digitisation offers enormous potential in research ranging from handwritten text recognition to computer vision approaches for analysing, for instance, the layout of large corpora of manuscripts and using Large Language Models to analyse large quantities of textual data. It is beyond doubt that the field is undergoing an exciting transformation because of digitisation. Yet, as always, this is not a matter of simple progress towards a brighter future; the digitisation of the

objects we handle and of our scholarly practices requires reflection and poses fundamental challenges. First, working with digital surrogates entails the danger of marginalising the materiality of manuscripts, and seeing them primarily, or exclusively, as carriers of texts that can simply be transferred to another medium. We have fallen into this fallacy before with print editions from the nineteenth century onwards. The material turn, among other things, has fruitfully pushed us to refocus on the material object: the manuscript. The digital turn obviously works against this development and could reduce manuscript studies once again to textual studies. It is a banality, but it is worth repeating: As everyone who has worked with the physical objects has learnt, working with the actual material object tells you so much more than looking at the screen can. The core argument of my book, *Monument to Medieval Syrian Book Culture*, largely goes back to the moment I saw the actual codices after working on them for two years on screen. In this sense, institutions holding manuscripts should always make sure that access to the actual object remains open to researchers. Secondly, our scholarly practices have not kept pace with technical development in numerous ways. The most obvious problem is that digitisation has often been written out of our publications. This is not unique to manuscript studies: I guess many publications on pre-Ottoman history published in the 2000s used the digital text repository *Shamela* to work with chronicles and other texts. Yet *Shamela* hardly appears in the references of this period, as it was seen as a simple tool for accessing texts, even though it is a highly biased repository of what can and cannot be found. Future historians of knowledge will struggle to understand this essential change in how research was conducted. In the same vein, we have so far failed to develop a clear protocol for how to reference whether we worked with the material object or a digital surrogate (and which version of the multiple surrogates that are often available). Thirdly, a key challenge is that digitisation plays out very differently across nation-states and regions. The largest library of Arabic-script manuscripts in the Arab world, the Dar al-kutub in Cairo, is not systematically digitising its collections, and those digital surrogates that do exist are hardly accessible. As a result, we observe that this enormous collection is gradually disappearing from academic projects and references in publications – the simple availability and non-availability of digital surrogates is thus deeply framing the kind of histories we produce at the moment. There are numerous

reasons for the library's decision not to digitise. Among them is the fear of losing control over one's cultural heritage, and more must be done to address these often understandable concerns.

ESA: How do you evaluate the current state of Islamic manuscript librarianship services, and specifically the digital cataloging efforts of major institutions?

KH: A core challenge of our field is that many collections are only poorly catalogued, if at all. This is not a problem of librarianship, and colleagues in libraries around the world do an amazing job of making the best of often very scarce resources. The core challenge is that cataloguing projects per se are not very attractive for funding. One key task is to ensure that the existing information in print catalogues is transferred to digital catalogues to improve accessibility. The German *Qalamos* project, for instance, has done a great job in creating a German union catalogue in this way, and funders are generally quite sympathetic to such projects as they are cost-effective. The Syrian National Library has amazing print catalogues, especially on its core Zahiriya collection, but this information is increasingly underused because it has not been transferred into a digital catalogue. Another key task is to ensure that data produced in research projects is sustainably linked to the online library catalogues. For instance, we encounter substantial problems in linking the audition certificates in our Audition Certificates Platform to the catalogue entries of the respective manuscript.

ESA: Could you briefly tell us about one of your prominent projects: the Audition Certificates platform? I believe the database is continually being updated and expanded. What kind of material is included in these certificates, and what historical insights do you aim to uncover through them? Did this project grow out of your co-authored book *Manuscript Notes as Documentary Sources*—which itself marked a significant shift in how we approach paratextual notes and the circulation of manuscripts?

KH: Audition certificates are an amazing resource for studying a whole range of topics, from reading history to gender history, urban topography, the study of dependent ('enslaved') individuals, and more. Manuscript studies in other world regions would love such granular insight into who read what and where. The problem was that there was no way to study them systematically, and ACP

is the first major project aimed at unlocking the potential of this unique source corpus. The main driving force behind this platform is my colleague Said Aljoumani here in Hamburg. The project came to mind while working on the co-authored book you mention, but the main motivation was a chapter in my *Written Word* book. There, I tried to use the certificates to build a broader argument, but I was frustrated by the small sample I had to work with. When I met Said Aljoumani in the late 2010s, we saw that we were both interested in this topic and slowly started to develop the project. We launch a new version c. every 6 months, and all data is made available open access as JSON files. The last version, ACP 6.0, has over 6000 certificates with over 75.000 personal names – this is very rich material for analysis, and with the development of AI we are slowly getting entirely new tools to unleash this data's potential.

ESA: I would like to continue with your ideas on heritage issues. Regarding the reconstruction and examination of the provenance of certain manuscript collections in the West: decades or centuries after their formation, do you believe it is possible to rectify, at least to some extent, the historical injustices committed during the acquisition process of these manuscripts?

KH: This is long overdue, and the tide that has swept museums is now also coming to libraries. We are still far from moving towards heritage justice, but there are at least encouraging signs that the most blatant cases of recent illegal acquisitions are being rectified, such as the Museum of the Bible in Washington. It is also encouraging that more and more EU/US libraries are opening their archives so scholars can study the provenance of these collections. I am sure that we will see a rapid development in this field over the next few years, and this will also include, in some cases, discussion of repatriation. As scholars, one contribution that we can make is to consistently integrate our research with questions of provenance. As in other fields such as Assyriology, we need a stronger focus on whether we actually want to research specific objects and collections when the provenance is highly problematic. It is telling that clay tablets from the Schøyen Collection are now mostly excluded from Assyriological research, but that 'manuscripts' from the same collection are still being studied in our field – and still acquired by prestigious libraries in the US.

ESA: Could you briefly mention your recent efforts toward collecting and preserving neglected or dispersed collections.

KH: Apart from the sheer joy of ‘reconstructing’ collections, this work directly speaks to our present day. Manuscripts are a key part of local and regional cultural heritage, but because of their mobility, they are often gone and thus invisible. When we studied the former manuscript collection of the Jazzar library in Acre, one aim was to write the history of a splendid collection in Ottoman Palestine that was deeply integrated into a vivid literary and scholarly landscape. Today, hardly any of these manuscripts remain in Acre, and the rich history of the written word of this period has largely been forgotten. By studying the historical library catalogue (held in Ankara) and tracking down manuscripts now in libraries around the globe, we were also able to contribute to reviving the memory of this collection. The most beautiful outcome of the project has not necessarily been the book we published, but that the endowment board of the Jazzar mosque in Acre recently renovated the historical library room and restored it to its original use.

ESA: What is your opinion on periodical publications in the field of manuscript studies, specifically those focused on Islamic manuscripts? You also gave a presentation on this subject recently in Dublin I think.

KH: Indeed. Looking at journals focused on manuscript studies is fascinating for tracing the development of our field. For Arabic-script manuscripts, the launch of the *Journal of the Institute of Arab Manuscripts* in Cairo in 1955 was a key milestone. While it has focused to some extent on editing texts, it was an important forum for the crystallisation of manuscript studies as a broader field of inquiry. It took almost 60 years before an English-language equivalent was launched in 2010 with Brill’s *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts*. Since then, we have seen an enormous surge in specialised journals, reflecting the field’s growth. This played out in two principal ways: On the one hand, new journals were founded in the countries where most Arabic-script manuscripts are held and where manuscript studies have experienced significant growth. This includes your journal, *Yazmabilim*, founded in 2025, as well as the Iranian *Journal of Codicology and Manuscript Research*, established in 2022. Meanwhile, new manuscript journals have emerged that aim to publish research on different manuscript traditions, such as *manuscript cultures* by the CSMC in Hamburg,

launched in 2011, and *Manuscript Studies* by the Schoenberg Institute in the US since 2016. This development reflects the field's quantitative growth and now offers a broad array of high-quality journals. It is particularly pleasing that the new journals are all published open access, positioning manuscript studies prominently in the drive toward open science – certainly a fitting stance for a field devoted to the production, circulation and reception of information.

ESA: What are the different approaches in German or Turkish manuscript studies? Do you think that interactions between these two are enough or there is more potential for cooperation?

KH: I would not say that there are clearly discernible differences in the approaches to studying manuscripts in the two countries. In each country, researchers and projects use a broad array of approaches, without this leading to clearly defined national research profiles. In terms of the questions asked and the topics researched, we often see a strong alignment between the two research systems. This pertains, for instance, to the interest in paracontent to study the biographies of individual manuscripts, the history of collections and provenance studies. I see this overlap in my own work; for instance, the historical library catalogue at the heart of my *Ashrafiya* book was first discussed by Ramazan Şeşen. Another example is the Audition Certificates Platform, which Turkish researchers use most intensively.

The only major difference is that Turkish manuscript studies emerged largely from Ottoman studies, so it has developed outstandingly strong expertise in manuscripts produced during this period. In Germany, in contrast, Arabic-script manuscript studies emerged from different disciplines such as Islamic studies, Iranian studies, Turkish studies, and, to some extent, African studies and Southeast Asian studies. Consequently, German manuscript studies did not develop the same in-depth expertise in one specific field. At the same time, it has developed approaches with a slightly more transregional bend, working across regions. The profile of the CSMC, for instance, largely stems from this development.

ESA: Turning back to your own studies which had a huge impact on the development of manuscript studies such as *The Written Word*, or *Manuscript Studies as Documentary Sources*, I wonder through what processes did you

arrive at such ideas that have resonated in academia, like ‘popularization and textualization’ in this book or your recent project ‘manuscripts as archives?’

KH: I guess there are three processes that have facilitated the development of such arguments and concepts. Firstly, my aim has been to produce work which would also speak to academic audiences not specialised in manuscripts and/or West Asian and North African history. Hence, while researching my books and articles, I have consistently kept in mind how to present and frame the results in a way that addresses such non-specialised readers. Secondly, it is certainly important that my academic trajectory began in history departments, where I was not socialised into established working patterns on manuscripts or established categories such as the unfortunate division between the study of ‘documents’ and ‘manuscripts’ in the sense of codices. This facilitated taking a fresh look at the evidence and thinking about what it tells us in the wider scheme of social and cultural developments. Thirdly, for me, studying manuscripts is not only a matter of studying the past, but also an endeavour closely intertwined with our present day. For instance, the way information was recorded, stored, and transmitted through different media raises questions and issues that speak directly to the profound media change we are currently living through with the shift to digital.

ESA: Thank you for giving these glimpses into your academic journey and major ideas over the field. Now, looking ahead to the future: where do you see your work heading next? Do you already have specific plans, upcoming projects, or new directions in mind?

KH: While I will continue to work on manuscripts, I have never had a long-term master plan, as new projects typically develop out of encountering new people and new manuscripts. The material analysis of manuscripts, especially in terms of tracing life cycles, is a topic I find increasingly fascinating from a methodological standpoint. The ethics of working with manuscripts as an important part of ‘cultural heritage’ is taking a more central place. Conceptually, working across different forms of written artefacts, especially those traditionally described as documents or manuscripts, will be a driving force. In concrete terms, working with audition certificates as a key resource for writing history and thinking about their function and meaning will certainly continue to play a key role and I am particularly interested in working on AI-driven data analysis.

ESA: Thank you very much for this wonderful and insightful interview. I believe it will also be illuminating for those considering a career in manuscript studies. Since you were my supervisor, students sometimes ask me about your approach to supervision, and I always describe it as exceptionally well balanced. By this, I mean that your detailed feedback and intensive engagement greatly improved my dissertation, while your guidance never made the process more stressful. You constantly reminded me that a dissertation is only one step in an academic career and that there would always be opportunities to develop and improve the work in the future.

So, to conclude our interview, I would like to end with a perhaps cliché but nonetheless still-important question: what advice would you give to young scholars who are interested in pursuing a career in manuscript studies?

KH: Acquire a high degree of digital competence, get a good understanding of methods of material analysis, make sure that at some point during your project you work with the actual objects and, most importantly, research the topics you want to research and not those other people tell you to research.