

Designing the Digital Ottoman Project

Six hundred years, twenty-five languages, and eight alphabets

BY AMY SINGER

What makes a digital *Ottoman* project different from other digital projects and why isn't it a straightforward endeavor but rather one that will probably take several years to develop successfully? And why isn't there one already? Why would twenty-four people need one week together even to figure out where to begin? The Digital Ottoman Platform (DOP) workshop convened at the Institute June 8–12, 2015 to establish a transnational digital space in which to create, collect, and manage source materials, datasets, and scholarly work related to the Ottoman world. The goal is that these resources will be transparently and reliably authored, referenced, and reviewed to ensure that scholarly standards of research and publication are maintained for materials created and made available. The site, its materials, and its datasets will be sustainably managed to serve the global community of scholars, many of whom will also have contributed to the platform from their own research. At the same time, the space will be accessible to students, researchers, and readers worldwide.

Our vision is that the DOP will make it possible to locate and share resources and results in original, intermediate, and published formats and to create new collaborations for research and learning. It also aims to identify and document best practices among the dynamically developing digital technologies that now enrich the tools and methodologies of the humanities. Although these efforts focus specifically on Ottoman history, they may well create models for other fields of study or enterprises facing similar challenges.

A brief perspective on Ottoman studies and the ex-Ottoman lands makes clear the scope of the challenge and also emphasizes why the DOP could play a leading role in expanding the digital capacities not only of Ottoman studies but of Islamic and Near Eastern studies generally.

Ottoman history is narrowly defined by the six hundred years of Ottoman dynastic rule over a single entity (that grew and shrank), yet builds more broadly on legacies inherited in the lands conquered by the Ottomans; the Empire also left legacies with direct implications for the history of the ex-Ottoman lands even today. Addressing the largest Muslim state from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, Ottoman history is also integral to the study of Islamic thought and practice. The Ottoman Empire included a geography that today encompasses some twenty-five to thirty countries, including Anatolia, large portions of the Arab world, the Balkans and eastern Europe, the Crimea, the Caucasus, and western Iran. Scholars working on Ottoman history use original written sources in at least twenty-five languages that engage at least eight separate alphabets. Added to the written literary and documentary sources is a vast array of architectural, pictorial, numismatic, textile, metal, wood, and other evidence.

Obviously, no single person has the skills to work with this diversity of sources. Thus scholars of the Ottoman empire will benefit exponentially if systems and methods can be created for sharing not only the results of their separate research but also for collaborating on projects that demand a multiplicity of sources and methods, and for making available source materials in primary or intermediate formats for comparative projects. Sharing and collaboration of this kind necessarily (but not always easily) occurs across geographic distances, political divides, and language barriers. Some of these are more daunting or intractable than in many other fields of research. If successful, this digital platform will facilitate new kinds of research and communication, while making scholars of the Ottoman empire generally more efficient and effective in their work.

The workshop was sponsored by Sabine Schmidtke, Professor in the School of Historical Studies, and convened together with me, along with Chris Gratien (Yale), Michael Polczynski (Georgetown), and Nir Shafir (UCLA), who have each worked on a digital resource for Ottoman history and were together the authors of "Digital Frontiers of Ottoman Studies," *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* 1, no. 1–2 (2014): 37–51. A further nineteen participants from the United States, Canada, Britain, Germany, Greece, Bulgaria, and Turkey included scholars of pre-Ottoman and Ottoman history, librarians with digital expertise, geographers specializing in historical GIS projects, and an engineer with extensive management experience and digital skills.

Participants shared their knowledge of existing digital resources for Ottoman studies: programs, databases, published research, pedagogical materials, and research tools for scholars. These include, for example, databases on Ottoman historians and inscriptions from Ottoman buildings; books and original manuscripts from library collections worldwide; the Ottoman History Podcast (ottomanhistoricalpodcast.com) with some two hundred episodes; Hazine, a research guide; online catalogues to archives; costly and rare dictionaries online; and published scholarly work (out of copyright).

Individual presentations of hands-on experience with different digital methodologies and technologies fostered discussions of the advantages and challenges of digital endeavors in the humanities. Each contributed a valuable perspective on what is required to design, initiate, manage, fund, scale up, and sustain a project of the magnitude we envisage. The workshop emphasized to all of its participants that digital projects such as this can only thrive as partnerships of skills, enthusiasm, professional standards, and material support. At the same time, the discussions also considered carefully how and why digital projects falter or fail. Workshop participants shared their own experiences, frustrations, and critiques, examining carefully past projects and those currently under way.

Declining or absent human or financial resources, technologies that became obsolete, and uncertain goals are only a few of the persistent problems that have undermined promising initiatives. Successful projects must address specific needs and be critically evaluated and tested on a small scale before committing extensive resources to them. As a result, the DOP is proceeding deliberately and with caution.

The collective decision to emerge from the workshop was that a gazetteer of the Ottoman lands will constitute the greatest contribution to the largest number of scholars. It will be a

geo-referenced catalogue of places, each to be listed with its various names, in several languages, in their original alphabets and transliterated to Latin characters. Every entry and its variants will include dated references to its sources, and contributions will be reviewed before uploading, to make the gazetteer a reliable scholarly resource. From a practical perspective, the gazetteer can grow in a modular fashion, incorporating contributions as they are submitted. While it builds on the existing models from other fields, many Ottoman-specific challenges will need to be resolved. Of relevance far beyond the field of Ottoman studies is the larger challenge of how to ensure that the contributing authors of the gazetteer receive adequate academic credit for the critical scholarship needed to create sound data.

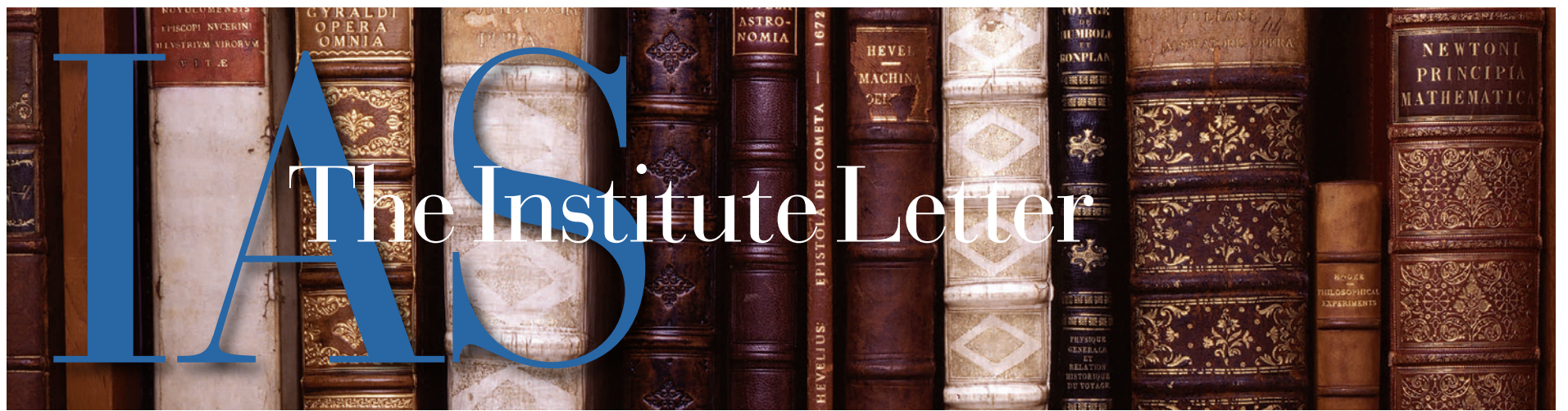
We envisage that the DOP will not only create datasets (gazetteer, biographies, monuments). It will also link to (and be interoperable with) robust digital projects (that pass a scientific review); provide a reference source for tested digital tools; incubate new projects; and serve as a digital publication site. The DOP will thus create basic resources for the entire field and exemplify how best to engage digital capabilities for humanistic research.

The DOP project fits as a natural complement to the ongoing projects in the IAS School of Historical Studies that engage digital capabilities in their research. In the specific context of the DOP, Schmidtke will focus on the creation of a Yemen Historical GIS as a complement to her ongoing studies of Yemeni manuscripts and scholarship. We believe that the IAS can play a unique role in this project, providing the ideal environment in which to define and nurture its successive phases. A local by-product of the seminar is the plan by the HS–SS Library to hold a series of workshops offering members in both schools the opportunity to explore and apply the digital tools that are expanding the parameters of scholarly inquiry. As the DOP workshop clarified, these tools work best when deployed by historian/social scientist–librarian–technologist teams, each bringing professional experience and a refined skill set to the endeavor. ■

Amy Singer, William D. Loughlin Member (2014–15) in the School of Historical Studies and Professor at Tel Aviv University, uses historical Geographical Information Systems and insights from spatial history to study the long-neglected Ottoman city of Edirne (Adrianople), the capital before the conquest of Istanbul and thereafter an enduring center of imperial and international activity.



With a vision to enrich and advance the field of Islamic and Near Eastern studies, Sabine Schmidtke and Amy Singer are among the DOP participants compiling the pages of Ottoman history.



A Global Politics of Knowledge

Doing social science across different worlds

BY DIDIER FASSIN

Let us imagine a conversation between a literary scholar from Palestine interested in the reception of Ibn Ruschd's commentary on Aristotle, an anthropologist from Iraq examining the experience of exiles fleeing the war, an economist from the Ivory Coast assessing the impact of microfinance projects, a sociologist from Benin investigating gas smuggling



The Summer Program brings together its participants for two-week sessions each summer for three years.

across the border, a political scientist from Brazil analyzing clientelism in local elections, and a legal scholar from Chile studying anti-discrimination laws. This conversation did take place at the Institute for Advanced Study as part of the Summer Program in Social Science that was launched in September 2015. Other scholars involved in the program were conducting research on environmental conflicts in Buenos Aires, crack use in Rio de Janeiro, income inequality in Egypt, water shortage in rural Iran, corruption practices in the Cameroonian health system, debates over the age of sexual consent under South African law, and negotiations at the World Trade Organization—among other themes.

The idea of this special program was born from the observation that certain regions of the world are poorly represented among the Members who are selected each year to participate in the regular program of the School of Social
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Ellsworth Kelly: Volume I

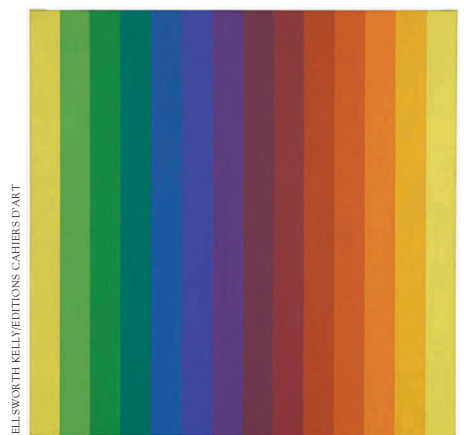
Cataloguing unexpected avenues of inquiry

BY YVE-ALAIN BOIS

Ellsworth Kelly likes to recall the incident in which a child, pointing at the five panels of *Painting for a White Wall*, enumerated their colors from left to right and back. It was at this moment that the artist realized that what he had wanted to do in this painting was to “name” colors.

The idea that a juxtaposition of color rectangles was the visual equivalent of a suite of color names had two components, both related to an essential property of language, namely its infinite permutational capability. When the child enumerated the colors of *Painting for a White Wall* in both directions, he produced a permutation on what linguists call the syntagmatic level (in an enumeration, to take the example of the child's utterance, the sequencing of the terms is of no grammatical consequence: “black, rose, orange, white, blue” is as correct grammatically as “blue, white, rose, orange, black”—or, for that matter, “blue, rose, black, orange, white,” or whatever word order). Investigating this aspect of the comparison between colors and linguistic units is what the artist set out to do in *Red Yellow Blue White and Black*, *Red Yellow Blue White and Black II*, and *Red Yellow Blue White and Black with White Border*.

The second aspect of the comparison concerns permutation on what linguists call the paradigmatic level: on this level, it is not a matter of changing the position of a given term within a set sequence but it involves the potential for replacing
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Spectrum I (1953)

The Odd Couple: Quasars and Black Holes

A cosmic detective story

BY SCOTT TREMAINE

Black holes are among the strangest predictions of Einstein's general theory of relativity: regions of spacetime in which gravity is so strong that nothing—not even light—can escape. More precisely, a black hole is a singularity in spacetime surrounded by an event horizon, a surface that acts as a perfect one-way membrane: matter and radiation can enter the event horizon, but, once inside, can never escape. Remarkably, an isolated, uncharged black hole is completely characterized by only two parameters: its mass, and its spin or angular momentum.

Laboratory study of a macroscopic black hole is impossible with current or foreseeable technology, so the only way to test these

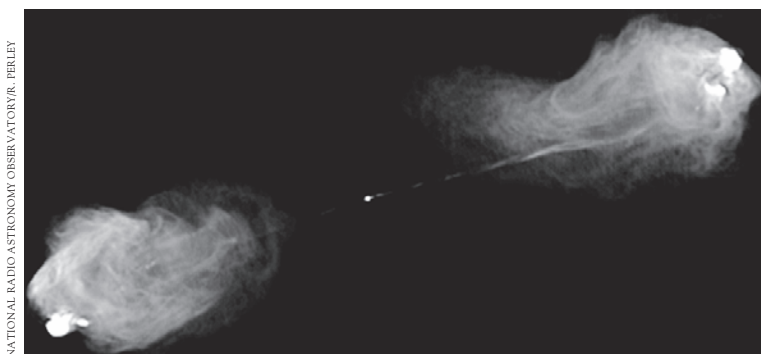


Figure 1: A radio image of jets from the quasar Cygnus A. The bright spot at the center of the image is the quasar, which is located in a galaxy 240 megaparsecs away. The long, thin jets emanating from the quasar terminate in bright “hotspots” when they impact the intergalactic gas that surrounds the galaxy. The hotspots are roughly 70 kiloparsecs (or 228,000 light years) from the quasar.

predictions of Einstein's theory is to find black holes in the heavens. Not surprisingly, isolated black holes are difficult to see. Not only are they black, they are also very small: a black hole with the mass of the Sun is only a few kilometers in diameter (this statement is deliberately vague: because black holes bend space, notions of “distance” close to a black hole are not unique). However, the prospects for detecting black holes in gas-rich environments are much better. The gas close to the black hole normally takes the form of a rotating disk, called an accretion disk: rather than falling directly into the black hole, the orbiting gas gradually spirals in toward the event horizon as its orbital energy is transformed into heat, which warms the gas until it glows. By the
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