

Production of knowledge in West Asia in the Medieval Period: from linguistic to paradigmatic shift

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SOCIAL AND INTELLECTUAL HISTORIANS have long acknowledged and elaborated an early divide or divergence between the so-called “Eastern” and “Western” Islamic societies (the latter referring to the Maghrib and al-Andalus). While united linguistically, through the dominance of classical Arabic as the medium of production of knowledge, other aspects of intellectual life diverged, over time, from the central and eastern Islamic lands. A variety of political and economic factors led to discrepancies and divergences in scholarship, some of which are reflected in the common interpretations of the nature and scope of the contact between the Islamic societies, and the Latin West.

The more crucial rift, however, and by far the less studied one, is the emergence of the distinct Persophone zone in the East, i.e., in Iran and its “Islamic Hinterlands”, namely, India, Central Asia, and its various contacts with East Asia, and the ramification of the linguistic shift for the production and circulation of scholarly texts in the East. While traditionally the focus of the studies on this linguistic divide has been topical studies of intellectual life in the dominant Pre-modern “gunpowder” Islamic Empires (the Ottomans, the Safavids, and the Mughals), recent study suggests the roots of the linguistic divide, and the ultimate paradigmatic shift in the East goes far deeper than the fateful moment of this three-fold division. More substantially, I will argue that the emergence of the intellectual Persophone zone, and the divergence with the Arabic heartlands should be traced earlier, with the emerging patterns of migration in Western and Central Asia.