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**Surveying knowledge in the tenth-century Middle East: al-Maqdisi's Book of the  
Beginning and History**

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## Aktuelle in der Schweiz angesiedelte Forschungsprojekte

### Surveying knowledge in the tenth-century Middle East: al-Maḡdisī's *Book of the Beginning and History*

The *Book of the Beginning and History* (*Kitāb al-bad' wa-t-ta'rīḥ*) was composed according to the earliest manuscript by a certain Muṭahhar b. Ṭāhir al-Maḡdisī in 966 CE and dedicated to an individual of high political office, presumably a Samanid governor. It presents concise treatments of key problems in philosophy, theology, cosmology and the physical sciences, human and physical geography, religious law, Islamic historiography, prophatology and eschatology. This multi-disciplinary survey is set within a universal history that presents Islamic knowledge at the centre of a horizontal axis of world cultures and intellectual traditions, especially Hellenic and Iranian, and understands Islam as the highest point on a vertical axis of history stretching back to the time of the Creation. Drawing on a wide range of textual sources, it gathers together an astonishing variety of material from the Greek philosophical tradition (above all the *Placita Philosophorum* of pseudo-Plutarch) and Islamic theology.

This project aims to provide a thorough study of the work in its own right and an account of its place in the wider intellectual culture of its day, approaching it from two main aspects: (i.) the four extant manuscripts, along with several lengthy citations in later works, are scrutinised from a philological perspective in order to establish the basic content and transmission history of the text itself; (ii.) the *Book of the Beginning* is subjected to a thorough intellectual-historical study in order to contextualise it within its tenth-century *milieu* and to understand its significance in terms of its later reception-history. Of particular interest are the work's conceptualisation of knowledge and its divisions, the function of large-scale compilations of material from different disciplines in this period and their subsequent appropriation by later authors, as well as the connection between the composition of such compendia and the courtly environment in which they were produced.

Although the *Book of the Beginning* was edited already in the first decade of the twentieth century by Clément Huart, the edition is poor and is based on only one of four extant manuscripts, which does not contain the whole text. Huart's edition was subsequently reprinted in Baghdad in 1962 and 1965, but has since become difficult to obtain beyond specialist libraries. Either as a cause or result of this, the work has largely been overlooked by modern scholarship. This project overcomes the problems with the existing edition by engaging directly with all four manuscripts, as well as several long citations of the text in later works. Due to time constraints, the intention is not to produce a new, critical edition of the text, the scope of the extant content of the *Book of the Beginning* and some idea of its transmission history have now been established.

Moving to a literary-historical level, the *Book of the Beginning* is compared in terms of form and content to a range of other texts of the period with the aim of better establishing its generic affiliations, as well as its reliance on and reconfiguration of earlier literary models: Islamic world-histories, with which the *Book of the Beginning* shares its fundamental structure; Syriac *hexameron*-commentaries, which like the *Book of the Beginning* embed large amounts of Late Antique *problemata physica* material into an account of the six days of Creation; works of traditionalist Islamic cosmography, that is to say collections of cosmographical material based on the sayings of the Prophet Muḥammad, such as the *Kitāb al-'azama* of Abū š-Šayḥ al-Isfahānī, upon which Maḡdisī seems to rely; theological *summae* and in particular the thematic and structural overlaps between the first five chapters of the *Book of the Beginning* and the Mu'tazilī *Kitāb ar-tawḥīd* tradition; and contemporaneous Arabic administrative manuals and geographical works, which exhibit numerous similar formal features.

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