Workshop: "Quotation practices in pre-modern Arabic: what is an *isnād*?"

Friday 22nd - Saturday 23rd March 2019
Conveners: Julia Bray (University of Oxford) and Isabel Toral-Niehoff (FU Berlin)

Description:
Stijn Aerts's entry "*Isnād*" in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam THREE* reflects the accepted view of the *isnād* when it says that it is found in "Islamic historiography and the Islamic sciences, including *ḥadīth*, Prophetic biography, exegesis, and jurisprudence" and that it gives "varying levels of authority to reports by demonstrating their provenance from earlier authorities or eyewitnesses." In both medieval and modern scholarship, the *isnād*, a string of names that links a quotation or text (*matn*) to its original source via a sequence of receptors and transmitters, has been predominantly associated, as a scholarly device, with oral teaching or the fiction of orality. In modern scholarship it is usually associated with the types of religious discipline enumerated by Aerts. Over the centuries, *isnād*s leading back to a *ḥadīth* (an eyewitness report of what the Prophet Muḥammad said, did, endorsed or disapproved of) gave rise to a vast body of scholarship organised prosopographically around transmitters. This scholarship, however, was often wary if not openly critical of easy assumptions about the reality of personal contact, textual reliability and historical authenticity.

It is the credibility of *isnād*s connected with *ḥadīth* that has engrossed the attention of modern western scholarship, obscuring the fact that there are many other kinds of *isnād* which are found across a wide range of Arabic writings, in varied contexts, and that all *isnād*s are instances of quotation practice—something that is not peculiar either to Arabic or to the "Islamic sciences." Conferring or denying authority or authenticity by showing provenance may not be their only function, and the familiar string or "chain" format may not be the only type.

The purpose of the workshop is:
- to look at different contexts in which *isnād*s occur in pre-modern Arabic writings;
- to examine the forms and investigate the functions of *isnād*s as quotation practices;
- to ask whether new forms and functions developed in the course of time.

The workshop , sponsored by St John's College Research Committee, brings together Arabic scholars from different fields (literature, history, law, etc.) and is intended to establish a conversation between disciplines on the subject of the quotation practices represented in *isnād*s and the questions they raise.

The main aim of the workshop is to raise interdisciplinary consciousness rather than to publish, but it may nevertheless result in a jointly-authored publication (e.g. a survey article), an edited publication (e.g. a journal special issue) or individual publications.