



At the Origins of Global History

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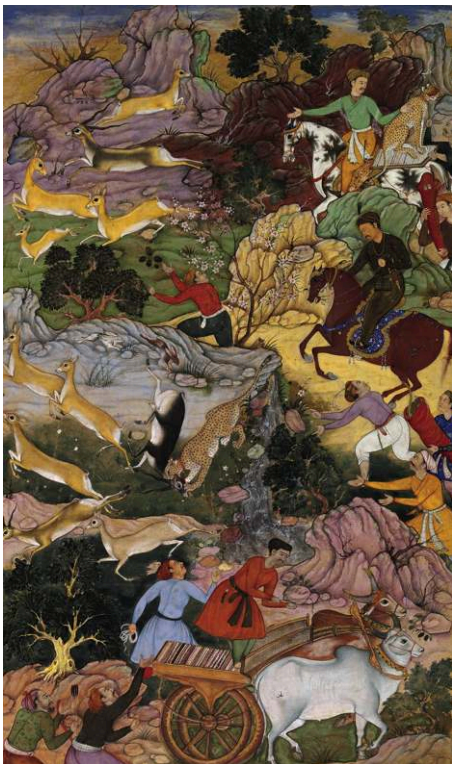
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EDITOR'S NOTE

Excerpts from the Inaugural Lecture 28 November 2013

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Akbar Hunting Black Buck from the Akbarnama © James Stevenson

- 1 **The circulation of texts and material during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries produced a conjuncture that opened a range of possibilities for historical production.**
- 2 In a recent book, entitled *Clio and the Crown*, the American historian Richard Kagan provides an overview of medieval and early modern Spain, ranging from simple chorographs to Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas's all-encompassing imperial chronicle. As regards Elizabethan England, there is a sharp contrast between Raphael Holinshed's eminently national history, and the global view of Richard Hakluyt or even Sir Walter Raleigh's *History of the World*, a text that was still incomplete when the author was put to death in 1618. For a final example, let us return to a context that is very familiar to me, that of the late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Mughal Empire. There are a number of historiographic possibilities available to us. First, there is the *Akbar Nama*, a great text written by Shaikh Abu'l Fazl, which starts with the creation of the world and is then largely limited to the classical dynastic history of the Timurid sultans in India. Second, we find the chronicle of Muhammad Qasim Firishta, which was produced outside the Mughal Empire but drew on both Mughal and earlier texts to produce a regional history of the Indian sub-continent under Muslim domination. The third is a highly personal and secret text by Maulana 'Abdul Qadir Badayuni, in which a sceptical view of the mystical and political claims of the Mughal sovereigns is evident. Finally, there is the *Trkh-i Alf*, a millennial chronicle of Islam written by several authors. We can easily add to these four texts ten others, which were sometimes written from the point of view of the Afghans vanquished by the Mughals, and which sometimes expressed the grievances of the Central Asian elite who were disappointed by the unstable behaviour of their Mughal masters.
- 3 As you know, global history is at the centre of a number of controversies, in this country and abroad. It is sometimes thought of as nothing more than a desire by American academics to destroy the good old tradition of national history and to replace it with an imperial and imperialist perspective. English-speaking authors have often imagined that the subject was invented in the first half of the twentieth century by authors such as Arnold Toynbee and Oswald Spengler, and then generalized by the following generation. Other historians of ideas have more ambitiously dated the current back to the late eighteenth century, drawing on cases such as that of August Ludwig Schlözer, known for his contributions to *Weltgeschichte*. This type of history was considered in this sense as a product of the German and Scandinavian *Aufklärers* and of their exceptional openness to the world. It is therefore no coincidence that the rise in the past three decades of postcolonial movements – which are often fiercely hostile to the Enlightenment and its intellectual heritage, and which confuse Schlözer's and Hegel's ideas – has created tension around the status of global history.
- 4 What I have sought to show here is a part of the long and slow evolution of global history as a minority trend, or *Oppositionswissenschaft*, or more modestly as a kind of Bièvre River in contrast with the more visible Seine of national and imperial history. Research and teaching on the global history of early modernity are actually not unprecedented, neither in France nor even at the Collège de France, even though the subject has not always been formally identified as such. As I have endeavoured to explain, the field has a fairly complex and varied genealogy, but to my mind it is important, from the outset, to rule out the idea of a field where synthesis, rather than first-hand research on archives and texts, prevails. This means that it is impossible to

write a global history from nowhere or – as some have proposed – by adopting an “extraterrestrial” perspective. Like any historian, I remain attached to particular places and spaces, and my knowledge is the direct product of training in the reading of texts, archives, and images. It turns out that in today’s world there is growing interest and curiosity in this type of history, although I am firmly convinced that it is destined not so much to replace the history produced on a regional, national or continental scale, as to complement it. I am also convinced that new synergies can be found by combining these historical varieties under the same roof.

• A video of the Lecture can be found at www.college-de-france.fr, on the professor’s page.

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Early Modern Global History (2013-2014)