Stories of Survival is a five-year research project (2015-20) directed by Dr John-Paul Ghobrial, and based at the University of Oxford. The project investigates the history of Eastern Christianity from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. From Lebanese immigrants in Argentina to Iraqi refugees in
Sweden, Eastern Christians can be found today scattered across the entire world. Too often, however, this global migration has been seen purely as a modern development, one arising from contemporary political and confessional events in the Middle East, while in fact this phenomenon had its roots in the early modern period. From the sixteenth century onwards, Christians from the Ottoman Empire set out for distant worlds and foreign lands, travelling as far as Europe, India, Russia, and even the Americas and leaving traces of themselves in countless European and Middle Eastern archives, chanceries, and libraries. This transnational project gathers all of these disparate sources into a single analytical frame to uncover, for the first time, the global and connected histories of Eastern Christianity in the early modern world.

The questions driving the research range include issues related to communal identity, memory and belonging in Eastern Christianity, modes of exchange and communication between Eastern Christian communities and their counterparts in the West, and central questions about the place of Eastern Christianity in the early modern world. Underlying the project is also a set of deeper questions related to the practice and future of early modern global history, itself a subject of current and controversial debate. The project responds directly to one of the most pressing conceptual challenges facing global history today: that is, how is it possible to link the study of the micro-scale level of everyday life to the macro-narratives of global change. At the heart of this project, therefore, is an attempt to contribute to a more rigorous form of global history, and one which preserves philology and source criticism at the heart of its methodology.

Work performed from the beginning of the project to the end of the period covered by the report and main results achieved so far

In year one, the PI laid the groundwork for the research while ensuring dissemination of the project and its objectives to the widest possible audience. In 2015-16 he was a Visiting Fellow at the University of Konstanz where he collaborated with scholars working on Eastern Christianity, identified the range of relevant sources and began to plan the preliminary categories for the bibliographical database. In February 2016 a first workshop was held on the methodologies of early modern global history (The Space Between: Microhistory and Global History).

The research team was recruited and carried out an exhaustive survey of all extant sources relevant to the project. IT specialists were consulted to refine the workings of the database to ensure its usability and suitability for the research questions. The PI worked closely with the researchers to identify goals, timelines and specific publications and a website was set up (http://storiesofsurvival.history.ox.ac.uk).

With the construction of the database completed, the team began research into specific manuscript collections and started to gather together what were once disparate microhistories into a three-dimensional and global history of Eastern Christianity in the early modern world. In 2018 Dr Parker organised a workshop on ‘Syriac and its Users in the Early Modern World’ and published an article on the Church of the East in the 16th century in English Historical Review. Dr Krimsti’s article on an 18th century library in Aleppo was published in the Journal of Islamic Manuscripts. Dr Graf’s contributions enabled the database to incorporate a set of early modern publications and bibliographical records; he also prepared two of his own publications linked to the project.

In early 2019 Dr Sergey Minov (working on Syriac manuscripts), and Ms Alice Croq (Arabic, Syriac, and Karshuni manuscripts) joined the team. One of the project’s flagship volumes - a book edited by
the PI on Global History and Microhistory was published in November 2019 as a Supplement to the journal Past and Present.

In 2019 the project successfully hosted a wide-ranging programme of events: workshops on Christian Arab scholars in the nineteenth century, on signatures and colophons as sources for early modern history, and on global microhistorical approaches to information, manuscripts, and record-keeping. Dr Krimsti and the PI are now preparing for publication a collection of articles arising from the June 2019 workshop, which will appear in Philological Encounters in 2021. In late 2019, Dr Vevian Zaki, Ms Rosemary Maxton, and Dr Celeste Gianni were recruited to assist with the work of the database.

**Progress beyond the state of the art and expected potential impact (including the socio-economic impact and the wider societal implications of the project so far)**

The project has attracted the interest of scholars working in centres of excellence across the US, UK, and Europe, which is reflected in invitations to present at a range of scientific gatherings in Islamic, European, and global history. Moreover, the project has already published several important works that have made the research available in a set of high-profile, open access publications while also inciting immense scholarly interest in the ongoing work of the manuscripts database. The combined energy of the project and the audiences that have developed around the publications means that the project has had the effect of creating a wide-reaching and international community of scholars whose legacy will continue beyond the project’s completion.

The flagship volume Global History and Microhistory brings microhistorians and global historians together to consider the recent methodological and theoretical interest of scholars working on different scales of analysis, and it has already resulted in several invitations to the PI to speak about this methodology, even in Doha which will enable the project to spread its methodology to the Middle East. At a seminar in November 2019, the President of the Royal Historical Society made special mention of the importance of the volume as a truly European endeavour that brings together scholars working in several different national traditions, some of whom rarely publish in English. In this way, the volume seeks also to offer a model for continued UK-European collaboration after Brexit.

One of the other important achievements has been the construction of the manuscript database. Apart from piecemeal efforts to make handlists of Eastern Christian manuscripts there has been no effort since the 18th century to chart literary production across Christian, Arabic and Syriac for the early modern period in such an ambitious way. The result is the discovery not only of works that were previously unknown, but even unknown authors and unknown geographical sites—churches and monasteries where manuscripts were once produced—that have now disappeared off contemporary maps. Work on a front-end to make this data available is now progressing to ensure the widest circle of scholars understand the real analytical fruits of this type of research.

The staff turnover in 2019 is a testament to the excellence and hard work of the project’s researchers, three of whom have been awarded prestigious posts. The project has established itself in Oxford and internationally as the hub for any research into the early modern history of Eastern Christianity and is a beacon for a community of scholars working on a wide set of related issues.
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This website showcases the ongoing research of our team of researchers based at Oxford. We encourage you to discover more about our work using the links above.