

Call for Papers

Workshop: Demarcating Literary Genres in Premodern Arabic Literature. Semantics, Pragmatics, and the Question of Fictionality
OIB, Beirut — 3–5 June 2026

The *kalimat* project is organizing a workshop titled “*Demarcating Literary Genres in Premodern Arabic Literature: Semantics, Pragmatics, and the Question of Fictionality.*” The workshop is organized in partnership with the Orient-Institut Beirut on June 3–5, 2026, in Beirut. Through presentations delivered in Arabic, the workshop will explore how we can demarcate and interrelate premodern Arabic literary genres and systems of generic classification, what specific functions genres serve in changing social and cultural contexts, and to what extent the use of genre terms and concepts can be indicative of fictionality (see full concept note below).

We are pleased to invite researchers to submit their proposals for participation in the workshop. **Full travel and accommodation expenses will be covered.**

The practical objective of the workshop is to produce a collection of short analytical articles (approximately 3,000 words) that examine literary terms within the context of specific texts or corpora. This aims to uncover the complex semantic structure of *adab* as an overarching concept encompassing various manifestations of literary genres, and to highlight the multiplicity of meanings within Arabic literary heritage and the capacity of its terminology to change and acquire new meanings over time.

We particularly welcome contributions addressing terms such as: *hadīth*, *ḥikāya*, *naṣīḥa* (or *naṣīḥat al-mulūk*), *malḥama*, *qaṣīda*, *urjūza*, *qit‘a*, *qiṣṣa*, *nādira*, *khurāfa*, *khutba*, *muḥādara*, *risāla*, *tadhkira*, *tarjama*, *tabaqāt*, *tārīkh*, *riḥla*, *‘aja’ib*, *manāqib*, *futūḥ*

Deadlines and Timeline

- Please submit the final title and abstract (150–250 words) by **February 15, 2026**;
- Acceptance notifications will be sent by **February 28, 2026**;
- The deadline for submitting the draft research paper is **April 30, 2026**.

Proposals should be sent to: kalimat@geschkult.fu-berlin.de

Concept Note

Genre terms are an important, though underrepresented, means of classification in the history of Arabic literature. They challenge modern categories of textual classification—such as lyric and prose; literary and non-literary; secular and religious; and, above all, fictional and factual. This workshop invites scholars of Arabic literature to collaboratively examine central genre terms and concepts in the premodern Arabic literary tradition as they appear in historical systems of

classification and in their specific uses in poetry and prose. Genre terms are not merely formal descriptors; they have aesthetic, pragmatic, and ontological meanings that can shape a text's internal dynamics, its intended and actual uses, and its relationship to external reality. Terms of textual categorization—such as *qiṣṣa*, *ḥadīth* or *khābar*, *sīra*, *muḥāḍara* or *maqāma*, *qaṣīda*, *qit'ā* or *urjūza*—orient authors, readers, copyists, and commentators regarding expectations of style, length, authority, erudition, entertainment, emotive features, and historical accuracy. Moreover, the use of many such concepts is highly context-dependent; for instance, terms like *ḥadīth* or *sīra* can each stand for multiple types of narrative discourse and may encompass various genres—biographical, eschatological, or mythological. Additionally, the meanings and significance of such terms have changed over time: genres and genre terms acquire new semantic contexts and pragmatic functions across the long history of Arabic literature.

Our *kalimat* workshop addresses the historicity and changeability of genre concepts, centering the semantics and pragmatics of genre in the pre-modern Arabic literary tradition (up to the early nineteenth century). Beyond analyzing terms and concepts as well as their meanings and uses, we ask how fictionality is indicated and negotiated within and across genres, in order to better grasp the boundaries of literary discourse in premodern Arabic.

More specifically, we are interested in discussing the following questions:

The Semantics of Generic Distinctions

- What are the central means of classifying texts beyond rhymed speech vs. prose narrative in the Arabic literary tradition? How can we conceive of the central distinctions underlying generic terms, such as divine vs. human discourse; inspired vs. profane speech; poetic speech vs. didactic prose; historiographical vs. imaginary narrative material? Above all, what is the etiology of genres, and what is the etymology of genre categories? What ontological and epistemological claims are associated with genre concepts (e.g. historiographical accounts, biographies, anecdotes, fables), including those in verse and meter, such as *qaṣā'id*? How stable are these claims across premodern and early modern Arabic literary history?
- How are genres categorized in the premodern Arabic textual tradition, in contrast to modern (or other premodern) systems of classification? In particular, how do encyclopedic and analytical works that delineate generic boundaries— by Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 385/995), Abū Hilāl al-‘Askarī (d. 400/1010), Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406) or Ḥajjī Khalīfa (d. 1067/1657), among others—conceptualize and organize genres? When and why do new genre concepts emerge, and how do the classifications change over time?

Pragmatics of Genres

- What is the *Sitz im Leben* of central premodern literary genres? In what institutional contexts were specific genres produced, consumed, transmitted, and critiqued?
- How did the use of literary genres change with the transition from orality to literacy? How were genres like *khurāfa*, *mathal*, *maqāma*, *tārikh*, and *sīra sha‘biyya* performed at

different moments in history? What relations to orality, musicality, or performativity do different genres exhibit, and how can modern scholars discern these relations?

- How has epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic value been ascribed to particular genres? Which genres have been considered unethical and unaesthetic and why? How did discourses around certain genres emerge and evolve, and how has their perceived literary and broader aesthetic value changed over time?

Fictionality and Literary Aesthetics

- Which linguistic and stylistic features mark the boundary of particular literary genres, and to what extent do these features indicate literariness?
- How are core narrative features (e.g. voice, perspective, time, plot, characterization, setting) configured and reconfigured? To what extent is the distribution of emphasis among these elements genre-dependent?
- How can we identify fictionality (through the use of generic categories) or is “fictionality” an adequate term for analyzing premodern Arabic texts at all? If so, what are its markers in literary texts, e.g. paratextual signals, narrative framing, embedded character speech, or focalization?