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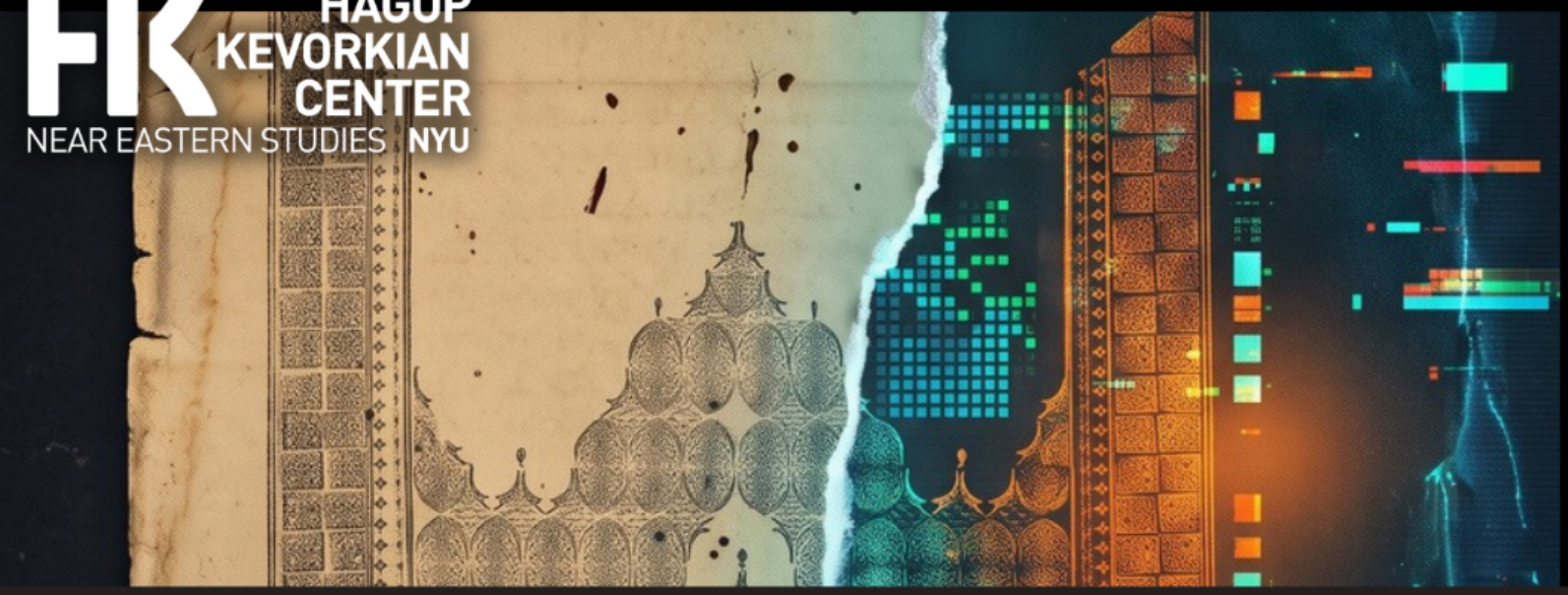

Archiving the Middle East: Histories, Technologies, Methods

JARED MCCORMICK AND ROXANA-MARIA ARĂŞ

Wednesday, 5 to 8 PM

Ettinghausen Library, Kevorkian Center, 255 Sullivan St.

Topics in Anthropology, NEST 3002-001

What counts as an archive? Who holds the power of interpretation? What does it mean to activate archives for different audiences? How has the Middle East been represented and imagined through archives? This course sits at the intersection of Middle Eastern studies, museum practice, and critical archival theory. We will approach archives not as neutral repositories of the past but as active infrastructures that shape which histories are preserved, how knowledge about the region is circulated, and how new technologies including AI models are reshaping access to archives.

Students will move between the imperial and the intimate: between Ottoman bureaucratic records and Arab American family photographs, between the Met's exhibition galleries and a personal box of unsorted documents. Through hands-on activities such as archival description, label writing, and oral history, students will engage archives directly as sites of both power and resistance. New York City serves as the course's urban laboratory. Through engagement with the city's archival and cultural institutions, students will investigate how histories of the Middle East are collected and how these processes shape public understandings of the region.

The course builds around two interconnected tensions. The first is historical: archives in and about the Middle East have been profoundly shaped by colonialism, nationalism, war, and displacement, yet they are also sites of resistance and community-building. The second is technological: AI tools are now being used to transcribe Ottoman manuscripts, tag photographic collections, and translate Arabic finding aids. These tools offer real possibilities for access but also raise urgent questions about who controls the digital futures of these materials. Through these tensions, we will interrogate how archival materials acquire new meaning as they move between institutions, technologies, and audiences, and how these processes shape what can be known.

Our cases come from the Middle East and its diasporas, but the problems they raise (records held far from the people they describe, collections scattered across borders, AI tools trained on older catalogs) belong to no single region, and we encourage students working on ANY world region to enroll. More information: www.archivingthemiddleeast.com