

History 205
The Making of the Islamic World: The Middle East 500-1500
Mr. Chamberlain
Fall, 2007
TTh, 4:00—5:15
2650 Humanities

Office Hours: T and Th, 5:30-6:30
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Important Dates

October 2: Map Quiz

November 1: Midterm

November 29: Papers Due

December 17, 4:00 sharp: last minute to turn in the take-home final exam. You may turn it in earlier. You should not take this course if there is the slightest possibility that you will not finish on time.

History 205 is a survey of the human ecology, politics, social life, culture, economy, and religions of the Middle East from late antiquity to the early modern era. We begin by looking at how Middle Eastern peoples have adapted to their physical environments as agriculturalists, nomads, city-dwellers, and early empire-builders. We will then try to understand both the unique characteristics of the Arab conquests and the early Islamic empires and their continuities with the pre-Islamic past. The remainder of the course will be devoted to an examination of Islamic civilization as it developed from the life of the Prophet Muhammad to the early modern period. Please note that this is not a course that puts religion at the center, though of course we will be studying the central ideas and practices of Islam throughout. Think of it instead as an attempt to understand how environment, economy, politics, culture, social life, and religion interacted over time to produce and sustain a civilization.

Having given you the usual due-diligence boilerplate let me suggest that many of you will find this subject amazing. I certainly do. The story we will be following is about the first world civilization, the sole pre-modern example of a global culture. The stories that people in the Middle East and elsewhere tell of this period are both an anchor of their identities and a prism through which they observe the present and contemplate the future.

Grading is based on a map quiz (5%), attendance and section participation, including the occasional quiz (20%), mid-term (25%), paper (25%) and final (25%). If you want an A be prepared to put a consistently high level of effort into the course. Note that the final is a take-home.

Warnings, threats, and menaces:

This course is listed as a 3-4 credit course. All undergraduates must register for four credits. All students must write a paper and attend all lectures and discussions. The lectures and the readings each cover material not covered in the other. You are responsible for both, and you will find that discussion sections are the place to pull the material together.

If you are prevented from attending either a lecture or a discussion, send your TA and me an email. I dislike yoking you to a strict attendance policy, but it will save you misery and confusion, and me the heartbreak of flunking you should you end up deserving it.

The field of medieval Islamic history is not so well established as to permit the last-minute scanning of a bluffer's guide before an exam. Not only does such a book not exist, the field has yet to benefit from a comprehensive textbook. The only way to acquire a decent knowledge of the field is pull together disparate materials from textbooks, translated primary sources, and stuff that your instructor has stumbled upon and that he might remember in lecture. The only way to organize and synthesize this material is to come to lecture and to prepare for sections. The usual scams, dodges, last-second stratagems, and trusty expedients do not seem to work. So keep up.

You will have noticed that the course schedule is unbalanced, the heaviest reading at the beginning and the midterm, paper, and final all falling in November and December. There is a reason for this: the subject is unfamiliar to most of you, and I want to give you the chance to synthesize before you begin to put your thoughts on paper. This places a special responsibility on you. Do not flag, procrastinate, postpone, or go easy on yourself the first six weeks of the course.

Finally, take care with resources on the web. The course home page will have a list of relatively reliable links, but you must check them out and cite them diligently. Not-too-bad sources for other fields, Wikipedia for example, are often flat wrong when it comes to Islamic history. You would do the world a service were you to correct it as you go along.

Oh, and by the way, I've heard though can hardly believe that some faculty have advanced their personal political views in their classes. Standing offer: I'll give an A to anyone who succeeds in figuring out my views on any current hot issue. If you are wrong, sorry, this is a pay-for-play proposal, I'll have to shave a half-point off your final grade. Don't want to turn this into twenty questions.

Textbooks (available at the University Bookstore).

Michael Cook, Muhammad.

Michael Cook, The Qur'an: a Very Short Introduction.

Robert Irwin, Night and Horses and the Desert: an Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature.

Albert Hourani, A History of the Arab Peoples.

We will also read translated primary sources posted on the course home-page located at learn@uw. Make sure you take a look soon.

Lectures and Readings

Weeks 1 and 2: Sep. 4, 6, 11, 13:

Course description, Human geography: peasants, city-people, nomads; early states and empires; trade.

Reading: Hourani, Prologue; Irwin, 1-29; "Ibn Khaldun on Pastoral Nomads" (learn@uw).

Week 3: Sep. 18, 20

Arabia and the Arabs in Late Antiquity; life of the Prophet Muhammad; The Qur'ân.

Reading: Hourani, 7-22; Cook, Muhammad; Cook, The Qur'an; Irwin 30-41; Ibn Ishaq, Biography of the Prophet, selections" (learn@uw, and note: read this over the next two weeks as required readings slacken)

Week 4: Sep. 25, 27

The Arab conquests and the formation of an Islamic empire.

Reading: Hourani, 22-38; Irwin, 42-67.

Week 5: Oct. 2, 4
(Map Quiz)

Cult, ritual, basic doctrines of Islam.

Reading: Hourani, 38-75 (for overview only, we will cover this material in detail later) and 147-158.

Week 6: Oct. 9, 11

The `Abbâsid Empire and the formation of an Islamic cultural style; literature, architecture; translation from Greek to Arabic.

Reading: Irwin, 68-147 (read Irwin over the next two weeks) “Baghdad and Provinces, Lewis translation (learn@uw); “Poets, scholars, physicians, Lewis translation” (learn@uw).

Week 7: Oct. 16, 18 Religion and communal life: Sunnis and Shi`a; Christians and Jews; conversion.

Reading: Hourani; “Status of non-Muslims, Lewis translation” (learn@uw)

Week 8: Oct 23, 25 Economy and trade; the collapse of the `Abbasid Empire.

Week 9: Oct 30, Nov 1 Review and midterm

Week 10: Nov. 6, 8 Scholars, soldiers, and sultans: Islamic cultural, social, and political institutions of the Middle Period

Reading: Hourani, 83-141; “Law, `ulama’, Lewis translation” (learn@uw)

Week 11: Nov. 13, 15 The era of invasions: Turks, Crusaders, and Mongols.

Reading: McNeill and Waldman, 185-206; 249-272 (learn@uw); Irwin, 314- 448.

Weeks 12, 13: Nov. 20, 27, 29, Islamic Law and Sufism, education.

Reading: Hourani, 158-208;

Week 14: Dec. 4, 6 The Middle East and Europe to 1500.

Reading: “Cook, Brief History of the Human Race, 2” (learn@uw)

Week 15: Dec. 11, 13 Summary and Review

Papers

All papers must be turned in on time to ensure fairness. You may turn in a paper late, but you will lose a half-grade per class-period, i.e., two periods late will bring your grade from a B to a C.

Papers should be 7-10 pages, with foot or end-notes, title page, and bibliography. Paper-grading is partly a subjective art, so a good-looking paper, without typos, counts for something. Please avoid all silly binders. A staple works best.

You may appeal a grade by bringing the paper to me in my office hours with a written argument why it should be changed. Be aware that your grade can be revised down as well as up.

Using the sources in Irwin, McNeill and Waldman, the course home-page, and on reserve, address one of the following questions:

1. How did Islam challenge the world view, notions of the meaning of existence, and sense of personal morality of the pre-Islamic Arabs? What would have seemed strikingly new to settled or pastoralist Arabs in the Qur'an? Note: include Ibn Khaldun's Muqaddima on the role of religion in pastoralist political movements.
2. How did the al-Tabari depict the origins and early development of Shi'ism? How sympathetic was he to Shi'ite claims? This is a hard one, best consult with us early and often.
3. How did the arts – literature and architecture in particular – both reflect and attempt to shape the transformation of Arab and Muslim society from the conquests through the establishment of the `Abbasid empire? If you chose to do this question, take a look at Oleg Grabar's The Formation of Islamic Art (New Haven, 1973).
4. How did Ibn Khaldun (in the Muqaddima) explain the rise and decline of states? What was strikingly novel about his approach?