

MEM Awards

“The Shape of a Career”

Remarks by the Recipient of the 2013 MEM Lifetime Achievement Award

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I must begin by expressing my thanks to the officers and board of Middle East Medievalists for bestowing on me the honor of a Lifetime Achievement Award. It comes from a group of colleagues whose work I greatly admire, and who have been at the heart of the extraordinary progress in studies on the medieval Middle East over the past two decades. No less important, they have also ensured that this field has remained a visible and sometimes even influential presence in an area where contemporary issues threaten to dominate if not obliterate all other perspectives. I have found it deeply rewarding to be part of the common enterprise during such a dynamic and creative period.

A year shy of half a century as a student (always a student) and scholar of Middle East Studies, along with a university teaching career of forty-three years, might seem to demand a serious review and evaluation of one’s contributions to the field, a retrospective of achievements and shortcomings that goes beyond a

rueful, “What happened? Where did it go? What did I actually do with all that time, now mysteriously vanished?” More dubiously, it might also encourage one to claim some deep wisdom, even the power of prophecy. In these remarks I hope to avoid both temptations, alluring as they are. What I will try to do is to identify what has motivated (and continues to motivate) my writing and teaching, what has led me to take the somewhat meandering path I have chosen to follow.

To some degree, to be frank, it was all an accident. My grandmother—an old-school evangelical Southern lady of the best kind—told me reams of Bible stories when I was a child and shared with me her good personal library on the ancient Near East, and so I fell into a fascination with the peoples and cultures of those lands—at first the ancient world of Sumerians, Egyptians, and Hittites, but soon enough the medieval and modern periods. I was an odd kid in many ways. Thus in the summer between my junior and senior

years in high school I read Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, all of it. Obviously I could not grasp Gibbon on any but the most superficial level, but from him I did get a vivid sense (without being able to articulate it) of the *longue durée* and the grand narrative. The ways of imagining the past, however inchoate, which were planted in my childhood and adolescence—images of a region which drew one back to the beginnings of agrarian and urban society, the sense of vast spans of time that stretched unbroken down to the present day, the notion that it was possible to encompass all this in a single story, however complicated—have guided my approach to history ever since.

My undergraduate studies as a history major at Amherst College added another dimension to this. In my time there, at least, history was taught chiefly through a close confrontation with contemporary sources. It was a hermeneutic rather than synthetic approach, and if this approach left major gaps in our overall knowledge, it did teach us to bring our own questions to the texts and not to be awed by claims of superior authority.

It was during my graduate studies at the University of Michigan that these various half-formed approaches and sensibilities began to take on a coherent shape. I was in the first place fortunate to study with a remarkable and extremely diverse group of fellow students, and through them I was exposed to a wide range of experiences of the Middle East and ways of thinking about it. Much the same was true of my teachers. In that milieu, a narrow vision was not really an option. Quite by happenstance, Andrew Ehrenkreutz became my dissertation adviser. Andrew was a highly innovative scholar in many

ways; sooner than most he saw how emerging technologies might advance our field. In this regard, however, I am afraid I disappointed him. He thought I might do a computerized study of Mamluk coinage or something of that kind, but I both valued my eyesight and knew my technological limitations. Instead I chose to undertake a political study of Saladin's successors in Syria—a superficially traditional topic, but one that opened up some exciting perspectives.

The Ayyubids were not a long-lived dynasty—some ninety years at most—but they proved to be a window not only on a mature (though still very dynamic) political and cultural tradition, but also on a critical moment in Eurasian history. The stage was filled with Mongols, Crusaders, the burgeoning commerce of the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean basins. As all of us know, dissertations often lead you into long, narrow tunnels, and it can be very difficult to dig your way out of them. But I was lucky. Since almost every big thing in the thirteenth century intersected in Ayyubid Syria, a broad sense of time and space, integrated within an overarching narrative, was only enhanced. Clearly the Ayyubids, fascinating as they were (at least to me), were only one point on a big canvas. The question was, what to do next.

One choice, the obvious one, was to dig more deeply into this important and very rewarding period. I certainly did not abandon the world of the Ayyubids after publishing my first book, since I have continued throughout my career to write about Syria (and secondarily Egypt) in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. But I quickly made a conscious decision to focus my attention elsewhere, and that elsewhere has turned out to be all over the

map. At times I have felt a bit like a dabbler, all the more as the path—the many paths—I have taken have very often originated in proposals and suggestions from colleagues and friends. But if I am suggestible, I cannot be gulled into doing something that I do not want to do. And so a glance at my bibliography will reveal work of varied size and scope on the analytic theory of history, Arabic historical writing (both medieval and modern), the early caliphate, the Middle East in the twentieth century, and most recently Christian communities under Muslim rule between the seventh and eleventh centuries.

But in this dabbling there has been a kind of coherence, a purpose and goal. It has first of all been an effort to see whether I could bridge in my own mind the vast chasm that separates the community's first decades from the Muslim societies of my adult lifetime (roughly since 1967). Was it possible to grasp each of these eras, and much in between, in its own unique terms, and yet see them all as part of a continuous process of fourteen centuries? Second, I wanted to place the phenomena of Islamic and Middle Eastern societies within a broad matrix, to see them as an integral element in Eurasian history—hence my interest in Rome and Sassanian Iran in Late Antiquity, in the convulsions of the Crusades and the Mongol conquests, and in the profound cultural and social disruptions of modernity and post-modernity.

Obviously I am not the only scholar to attempt this. Most historians of the medieval Islamic world are engaged in such a quest on some level. On the level of the grand narrative, Marshall Hodgson's *Venture of Islam* (now almost half a century old, though I encountered

it when it was brand new) set a very high bar in its critical self-awareness, moral commitment, and effort to define the broad themes and concepts that should guide our understanding of Islamic and Islamicate cultures. Likewise, a previous awardee of this honor, Ira Lapidus, has constructed a wonderfully comprehensive and balanced presentation of “Islamic history” in his *History of Muslim Societies*, soon to be released in its third iteration as he continues to rethink the issues posed by this immense subject. However, I have chosen to take a different path—not by trying to construct an overarching synthesis, but by probing discrete points in the story in some depth. The closest I have come to such a synthesis is *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry*, which is really an effort to define and evaluate a rather peculiar and idiosyncratic field of study. Moreover, it proceeds by probing a series of particular problems, not by trying to survey the field as a whole. There is a synthesis implicit in my work, I hope, but I have so far kept that synthesis in my head.

What now, then? I have envisioned two major projects, and we will have to see whether I am given time and energy to bring them to fruition. The first I have already alluded to: a study of the adaptation of Christian communities in Syria and the Jazira to Muslim rule in the first four centuries of Islam—in essence, from the initial Arab-Muslim conquests to the coming of the Turks. This topic is driven by many things: current events in the region, the impressive and often moving physical traces left by these communities in Late Antique and early Islamic times, and most of all by the need to recognize that Muslims were for several centuries a minority among the

peoples they ruled. We all need to remind ourselves that the Islamic empire was for a long time an empire of Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians, and only slowly became chiefly an empire of Muslims. The sources are both scattered and overwhelming; the scholarly literature is dense and sophisticated on some topics, a void on others. Progress is slow, so we shall see.

The second project—at the moment more a vision than a work in progress—rather belies my claim to have sidestepped any attempt at a grand synthesis. I have imagined a history of Eurasia (stretching

from Ireland to Japan), and going from Alexander the Great to Chinggis Khan. I have traveled widely enough to see that such an enterprise is both possible and deeply meaningful, and I have given some thought to the conceptual and literary framework for it. It is a large enough project, I believe, to earn the approbation of my first mentor, Edward Gibbon. For it I have done a lot of reading and a little writing. I cannot say when it will move from sketchbook to work bench, but when it does I will let you know.