

MEM Awards

Remarks by the Recipient of the 2016 MEM Lifetime Achievement Award
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The Maturing of Medieval Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies*

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Let me begin by expressing my profound gratitude to the officers of Middle East Medievalists for honoring me with MEM's Lifetime Achievement Award. It is indeed a great honor to be so recognized by my esteemed colleagues—even though such an honor is a kind of double-edged sword. On the one hand, the recognition is a source of deep satisfaction; on the other, it reaffirms the sobering reality that one is nearing the end of one's game. But, since turning the award down would not change the reality of age attained, I am most pleased and honored to accept it. Thank you all very much.

I would like now to spend a few minutes reminiscing on how our "field" of investigation has changed since I first began to study it seriously—which was about a half-century ago, inasmuch as I enrolled in my first Arabic course in the

summer of 1965. Thinking back on the 1960s and 1970s, it is surprising even for me to realize how astonishingly undeveloped the study of medieval Islam and early or medieval Near Eastern history was, compared to the situation today; and those of you who began your studies considerably later, say in the 1990s or after, or who indeed are still engaged in graduate study now, may be interested to learn just how rudimentary things were when I began my formal studies of the Near East, or even when I completed them and took up my first teaching position in Yale's Department of History in the fall of 1975.

First of all, there were far fewer universities than today that offered any instruction in Middle Eastern languages or in the region's history and cultures. Some of the relatively few programs that did exist taught only Arabic, not

* This essay is based loosely on my notes for remarks made at the MEM Members' Meeting held during the MESA conference in Boston, MA, in November 2016.

Persian or Turkish as well, and what was offered sometimes did not lead to a very advanced level of mastery. Enrollments in Near Eastern language courses and courses dealing with Islamic history were generally fairly low in those days, and persuading university administrations to commit resources to what were then generally considered “obscure” languages was not easy. There were summer intensive language courses for American students, but almost all were located in the U.S. In the 1960s there existed east and west coast summer intensive language programs sponsored by consortia of the few universities that had Middle East programs, but there did not yet exist the dozens of summer language programs one sees today. Study abroad programs for Middle Eastern languages did not get underway, really, until the 1970s. I was fortunate enough to participate in the late 1960s in what was perhaps the first such program for Arabic, a year-long program in Lebanon at the Middle East Centre for Arab Studies (MECAS). This was an institution operated by the British Foreign Office in order to train diplomats and army personnel destined for service in England’s many Middle Eastern protectorates—which included, in those days, Sudan, Aden, and the “Trucial States” of the Persian Gulf. This American study-abroad program for Arabic (NUPOSA—the National Undergraduate Program for Overseas Study of Arabic) ran for about ten years with funding from the Carnegie Foundation; it was explicitly designed as a kind of experiment or pilot program, limited to about eight students per year, to see if such a venture might be desirable over the longer term. Eventually, the NUPOSA program’s success led the U.S. government to establish the CASA program

at the American University in Cairo—which in the 1970s became the main study-abroad program for Arabic; and in the past twenty years, many more study-abroad programs for Arabic were established, although today a number of these have been forced to close down because of political instability (notably programs in Yemen and Syria). Language study in Iran has been difficult for American students since 1979 for obvious reasons. I would say that programs for language study in Turkey, which have until recently been quite robust, must be put on our watch list as political developments play out in that country.

All of this shows that the number of people being produced annually with competence in Arabic before and during the 1970s was very small, and often their training was not very deep; and the same was true generally speaking for students of Persian and Turkish. The number of students entering graduate training in Middle Eastern studies was still minuscule, and more importantly, very few of them brought much area background to their graduate studies. Often entering PhD students in the 1960s and 1970s would have to enroll in Elementary Arabic in their first year, because they had had no way to begin the language in their undergraduate institution, and the dearth of study-abroad and intensive summer programs meant that not a few of them in the 1960s and into the 1970s, completed their doctoral studies with only about four years of Arabic training under their belts, barely sufficient to do research in Arabic sources, and often with virtually no active command of spoken Arabic. This is in no way meant as a criticism of these earlier generations of scholars: most were

intelligent, dedicated, and did the best they could with the training they received, but the state of the field before the 1970s was such that they simply could not get really deep training. The robust training available today, with dozens of intensive and summer programs here and abroad, means that, in this respect, we live in a different—and much better—world.

Beyond language training, Middle Eastern studies were underdeveloped in other ways too. There were fewer programs, and the programs were smaller, with fewer faculty in each than is the norm today. There were many dedicated scholars, but when I was studying in the 1960s it was basically the case that important “fields” within Middle Eastern studies were virtually the ‘property’ of one established specialist, whose knowledge of that “field” was considered definitive—if a subject that is the province of only one practitioner can really be called a “field.” So, for example, if you wished to know about Islamic law, you consulted Josef Schacht at Columbia; for anything dealing with the Mamluks, you had to talk to David Ayalon. Similarly, Islamic Art “was” Richard Ettinghausen, succeeded by Oleg Grabar; the life of Muhammad “was” W. Montgomery Watt; numismatics “was” George Miles; the Fatimids—well, hardly anybody studied the Fatimids in those days. But such a situation is clearly unsatisfactory, because one needs the give and take of different contending voices within a specific field to make it vital and, indeed, viable. The absence of sufficient critical scholarly debate meant that many “fields” remained quite static and conservative over generations; one consulted the reigning “expert” and got the information one wanted. In short, in

the 1960s and even the 1970s, our field was much smaller than it is today.

Change came sometimes by a gradual increase in the number of students attracted to a subfield, but more often through the impact of a single book, or the determined efforts of a small group of scholars. The current burgeoning of interest in the Mamluks, for example, began slowly but was really jump-started in the 1980s when Professor Carl Petry of Northwestern and Bruce Craig, the Middle East bibliographer at the University of Chicago’s Regenstein Library, realized their shared enthusiasm and decided to combine forces. Petry’s shoeboxes of bibliography index cards became the basis for the online Mamluk bibliography that has been maintained and expanded ever since by Regenstein’s Middle East collection—and which was then followed by the creation of a new journal, *Mamluk Studies Review*, which is still published (although now only electronically, no longer in a printed version). Both of these institutions have greatly stimulated the vigor of Mamluk Studies.

Similarly, my own subfield of early Islamic history received a double shot in the arm—one just as I was entering graduate school with the publication of Peter Brown’s *The World of Late Antiquity* (1971), another several years later with the publication of Cook and Crone’s *Hagarism* (1977). Brown’s book virtually created the field of “Late Antiquity Studies,” by synthesizing work in what had hitherto been three distinct (and rather sleepy) subfields—late Roman (i.e. Byzantine) history, Eastern church history, and early Islamic history. One can see this impact immediately by considering the titles of books: before 1971, the phrase “late

antiquity” is hardly found in book titles, except for a few in art history (German art historians had first coined the term “Spätantike” around 1900); after 1971, however, one finds a proliferation of book titles referring to aspects of Late Antiquity. And a crucial aspect of Brown’s vision, which broke down old barriers and challenged old paradigms, was his inclusion of the Umayyads and early Islam within the Late Antique world.

The publication of *Hagarism* represented a bracing challenge of a rather different sort, a blunt rejection of traditional views of early Islam and a bold call to study it in a different—and more properly historical—manner. It provoked, at first, both a lot of curiosity and no small measure of rage, but it cleared the way for many new hypotheses about Islam’s origins, and in doing so it revived what had been a moribund subfield, and the energy created by it continues unabated even today, forty years later.

As a result of these developments in the 1970s, there has been a veritable explosion of new and innovative scholarship on many aspects of Islam’s origins, so much so that what had once been a rather small and inactive field is now being articulated into a number of well-developed (and still rapidly growing) subfields. Critical Qur’anic studies, after more than a half-century of hibernation, is once again a lively arena of discussion, partly sparked by the seminal, if frustratingly opaque, studies of John Wansbrough as well as by *Hagarism*; but Qur’anic studies was also spurred on by the fortuitous discovery of early Qur’an manuscripts in Ṣan‘ā’, Yemen, in 1972, and by the return to the public eye in the 1990s of an archive of thousands of photographs of early Qur’an manuscripts

made by Gotthelf Bergsträsser in the 1930s, which the Munich Arabist, Anton Spitaler, inexplicably concealed (claiming that it had been destroyed) until the last years of his life. The study of actual documents for the seventh century, in particular Arabic papyri and the coins of the early Islamic period, has burgeoned in recent years. The archaeology of the Byzantine and early Islamic periods in the Near East, particularly in the Levant, has received a great deal of attention and has brought important insights. Studies of literary sources for early Islam have increased markedly, including Arabic historical writing, collections of sayings attributed to the prophet Muḥammad (*aḥādīth*), and studies of Syriac literature datable to the seventh century CE/first century AH.

I see this increased depth and energy and specialization in medieval Islamic studies reflected also in the creation of several new scholarly associations. In the 1960s and 1970s, we all belonged to the broad “umbrella” organizations, the American Oriental Society and (after its foundation in 1966) MESA, and most of us still do, but we now also have the School of Abbasid Studies first established at St. Andrews University (1979), the International Society for Arabic Papyrology (ISAP, 2002), and the International Qur’anic Studies Association (IQSA, 2012), and it seems only a matter of time before we shall also see the creation of associations focused on the study of the Umayyads, the Fatimids, Islamic archaeology, Islamic numismatics, etc. There are already several active working groups devoted to all these topics, if not yet formal scholarly associations.

In sum, our field—or fields—have matured remarkably since I began my studies. There is now lively debate among

different scholars on a wide range of issues, and studies of medieval Islamic history show much greater methodological awareness and disciplinary rigor than was true a half-century ago.

Other changes in our field of study reflect the changing world of technology in which we live. Online dictionaries allow us to consult multiple glossaries and prepare texts with hitherto unknown ease—no longer must we struggle to balance three or four ponderous tomes at once in our lap as we explore the meaning of a word. This is a tremendous convenience. Far more revolutionary, and with as yet unforeseen impact, is the creation of large databases of medieval texts, such as al-Maktaba al-Shamila (<http://shamela.ws/>). This should finally help us to overcome what has long been a severe obstacle to our collective research, the lack of a truly historical dictionary of Arabic from which one might learn about the historical evolution of a particular word—its changing meaning over time; for now, we can have before us the raw material on which a historical dictionary is based, the instances in which a particular word is used in a large selection of texts, and can perceive the way its meaning may have evolved over time.

Such databases, however, also carry an unintended peril. In the “old days,” one simply had to read through complete texts, or long passages of texts, in the search for a particular kind of information or a particular word. Now, with the ability quickly to search thousands of texts for a desired word or phrase, we confront the temptation to read only those sentences in which the target word or phrase occurs, rather than taking the time to read the larger context in which they are found.

This shortcut leads us to a quicker answer to our immediate question about a word or phrase or concept, perhaps, but if we fail to read broadly we will also miss a great deal. We will miss not only those totally unrelated, but nevertheless interesting, bits of information that we might have noted for a different project, but also much information relevant to the project on which we are embarked, information that might temper our view of what the word or phrase we have ferreted out via the database actually meant. We miss the chance to acquire a sense for the overall “shape” of a complete text, and the outlook of its author or compiler, and we will not encounter repeatedly those peculiar items that seen once or twice appear to be negligible details, but which through repeated occurrence cause us to realize that they are the key to an issue or problem the significance of which we, and others, had overlooked.

A much greater danger for those of us who work on Islamic history and the academic study of Islam and Islamic culture is the dwindling support among the general public, and from our governments and universities, for the humanities in general, including the kind of deep foreign language study that is such a crucial component of our own training. As those of you who heard my Presidential Address at the 2012 MESA conference¹ in Denver will know, I believe that one of the causes for this marked decline in public support for the humanities is the infatuation of

1. The published version of the presidential address, entitled “MESA and the American University” appeared in the *Review of Middle East Studies* 47/1 (Summer 2013), 4-18 and can be consulted online: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41970032>

some scholars since the 1970s, in literature especially, with theoretical approaches that sought to dismember structural and formal regularities of texts as a kind of exercise, without offering any constructive alternative for deeper understanding of those texts. Even more serious was their cultivation of a style of writing that was almost willfully opaque, as if clarity of expression was somehow a flaw. Obscurity, however, is not the same as profundity (although many tried to convince us otherwise). Intentional obscurity in writing is more likely to be a tactic to conceal the fact that the author lacks any really new ideas, than an indicator of the ‘complexity’ of the subject. The average reader, even a well-educated one, could make little sense of the ramblings of most deconstructionists and postmodernists, which they found incomprehensible and, therefore, uninteresting. They could see no benefit in it; it did not help them understand literature or art, unlike some earlier critical approaches, so eventually they decided that the champions of ‘critical theory’ were basically engaged in a confidence game, retailing at high price ideas that were worthless. Several decades of such work, mimicked sometimes by academicians in disciplines other than literary studies such as anthropology, took a terrible toll, persuading much of the general public that humanistic study was little more than academic obscurantism, and causing them to favor the study of things in which the human benefits were obvious: medicine, engineering, IT, the natural sciences economics, and industry.

The utility of the study of STEM, medicine, and such fields is undeniable, but when we consider what are the most pressing problems faced by humankind

in the 21st century, we realize that they cannot be resolved by technology, or at least by technology alone. Global warming threatens the whole planet, but dealing with it requires above all acceptance of our collective responsibility—a question of ethics—and the moral commitment to do something about it. Countering the destabilizing effects of gross economic inequality, both within and between countries, demands the altruism that comes from an awareness of our common humanity, and empathy for others who are different from ourselves. Battling corruption and exploitation of others requires determination to realize ideals of fairness, acceptance of the other, and the conviction that life is not a zero-sum game, that we all do better when benefits are shared. In other words, the key factors in solving our most pressing problems will be those rooted in ethics and empathy, which are values cultivated in the humanities; in abstract terms through the study of philosophy and religion, and in more practical terms through the study of cultures and languages different from our own. Battling Islamophobia in our own societies can best be undertaken if we can call on a robust, and historically grounded, understanding of Islam’s diversity to counter the simplistic negative stereotypes retailed by most Islamophobes. Empathy for refugees is enhanced when we understand the historical and political circumstances that lead people to flee their home societies, rather than simply seeing them as “spongers” wishing to take advantages of the benefits of Western societies. The effort to help shattered Middle Eastern societies or political systems rebuild themselves—assuming our help is wanted—can best be pursued by

those who have a deep knowledge of their history and cultures. All of these concerns point to the importance of having a large cadre of our own citizens—from whatever country we hail—with deep training in the languages, history, and cultures of the region.

As scholars, therefore, we need to be active in defending the humanities, whenever we have the opportunity to explain—to our students and colleagues, to our administrations, to our political representatives, to our neighbors—why they are vital. But another way we can make the case for the humanities is to write up the results of our own original research in a manner that makes absolutely clear what we have discovered and why it is important. We must free our writing

of theoretical or other obscurantism, and show unequivocally how the analytical distinctions we make shed important light on the subject we are studying. But above all, it comes down to writing clearly. If we do not express ourselves clearly, readers will continue to lose interest in what we do—and with good reason.

It is a very good time to be a practitioner of Islamic history or Near Eastern studies. Our fields of study are robust, intellectually aware, and thriving as never before. There is a widespread recognition, today, that the Middle East is an important part of the world and that we need to pay attention to it. We have a lot to contribute as scholars and a lot to say that relates to national and international debates on many topics. Let us say it clearly.