

Introduction: The Holberg Seminar

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In recognition of his remarkable contributions to scholarship on the history and traditions of Islam, Michael Cook was awarded the prestigious Holberg Prize in 2014. Established by the Norwegian Parliament in 2003, the award is intended “to increase awareness of the value of academic scholarship in the arts, humanities, social sciences, law, and theology.” In keeping with his abiding commitment to teaching, Michael decided to use part of the award to establish the Holberg Seminar, envisioned as an international graduate seminar on pre-1800 Islamic history. Michael invited Khaled El-Rouayheb (Harvard University), Jack Tannous (Princeton University), and myself to assist in organizing the seminar, starting with the selection of participants. Drawn from a considerable pool of applicants, a highly cosmopolitan group of ten students—hailing from the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, and Egypt—was thus formed. The plan was to work with the same cohort over several years; when a few participants withdrew for personal reasons, they were replaced by equally talented peers.

The inaugural meeting took place in June 2015. Subsequently, the seminar met in Princeton every summer until June 2018. Each of the annual meetings began with a dinner followed by three to four days of dense programming. The final session always took place at Michael’s home and was followed by a lovely farewell dinner. Each year, the students had the opportunity to extend their stay in Princeton for a few days to enjoy the endless resources of the Firestone Library.

The central aim of the Seminar was to provide the participants with sustained and high-level feedback on their research and writing at a formative stage in their careers. This approach generated an extraordinary level of discussion, far superior to anything I have

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experienced to date in my own career. The format followed, in part, Michael's practice of using his own graduate seminar as a "dissertation chapter clinic." Each year, several of the Holberg students submitted chapters of their theses or draft articles in advance; each submission was then read by all the participants and divided among multiple discussants. We usually spent about three hours on each paper. A typical day entailed discussing a first paper in the morning, a second one in the afternoon, and a third one over dinner. Conversations often continued well into the evening. Another option was for participants to give a talk on a topic of interest, such as new scholarly trends or recent publications. When time allowed, faculty members also presented new research of their own. In this fashion, the students were exposed to what can be termed best intellectual and scholarly practices.

In addition, following our initial meeting, we decided each year to invite a major scholar to present her own work and share with the students the trajectory of her career and the lessons it offered to those embarking on similar paths. Marina Rustow (Princeton University), Sabine Schmidtke (Princeton, Institute for Advanced Study), and Lale Behzadi (University of Bamberg) all proved significant sources of inspiration for the participants. Sabine Schmidtke also generously hosted part of the seminar at the Institute in June 2017, thus giving the students an opportunity to interact with IAS visiting scholars that year.

Another, more latent purpose of the seminar was to provide a setting in which the students would get to know each other's scholarly profiles well, develop relations of trust, and network with each other, as well as with the faculty members and other guests. Only time will tell, of course, but the co-convenors anticipate that the Holberg Seminar will continue to bear fruit in the work of its graduate participants.

List of the Holberg Participants:

Najah Nadi Ahmad
Theodore S. Beers
Sébastien Garnier
Lidia Gocheva
Matthew L. Keegan
Pamela Klasová
Daisy Livingston
Christian Mauder
Eugénie Rébillard
Naseem Surhio
Edward Zychowicz-Coghill