

Introduction: A Note from the Holbergians

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On the last day of each year's Holberg Seminar, we Holbergians would gather at the home of Michael Cook and his wife Kim for a delicious and delightful dinner. The final meeting was held over four days in the summer of 2018, and there was a feeling of nostalgia in the air as we picked over our coffee, wine, and dessert at that closing dinner. Rather spontaneously, each member of the group shared their own reflections and heartfelt thanks to Michael, to Kim, and to the professors and graduate students who made up the Holberg Seminar. For many of us, these meetings were the highlight of the academic year: an opportunity to gather with a wide range of excellent scholars who would read our work and respond to it thoughtfully. But the Holberg Seminar's long duration meant that it was also a time when we could be ourselves, without the facades and performances of knowledge that we all sometimes fall back on in academic settings.

That level of comfort did not come spontaneously. Many of us faced the first meeting of the Holberg Seminar with both excitement and trepidation. We were to be surrounded by well-established scholars and brilliant graduate students from an array of different fields. But after four years of exhausting and exhilarating meetings, what had once seemed intimidating was now a room full of familiar faces and supportive colleagues who could find our mistakes with kindness, broaden our knowledge of adjacent fields, and deepen our understanding of our own texts. This kind of supportive community is precious in academic life. And it takes time. Each summer, we met for four days, from the early morning to the late evening. Soon enough, everyone had little choice but to lose the academic personas they assumed and be themselves. Michael designed the seminar so that we devoted at least three hours to each submitted thesis chapter or article draft. The format

was intense and exhausting, but also extremely stimulating. After three hours of questions, corrections, and comments, the Holbergian in the “hot seat” was inevitably exhausted but also inevitably enriched. It is, after all, such a rare experience for a graduate student to have so many thoughtful and meticulous responses to a piece of writing prior to the dissertation defense. Each meeting broadened our horizons and inspired us to venture into fields beyond our own.

The fact that the Holberg Seminar was such a success and had such an impact on so many graduate students will come as no surprise to those who know Michael (as he asked us to call him at our first meeting). He is a consummate engineer of pedagogical spaces. In the Holberg Seminar, he gathered a group of scholars who worked on different fields of Islamic history, from the earliest Arabic historiography to early modern Persian literature, Islamic theology, and social history. This plethora of academic perspectives from diverse subfields meant that our fellow Holbergians were often asking us questions that we had never thought to pose before, thus revealing the blind spots of our individual specialties and academic disciplines. The Holbergians came with academic training from Egypt, France, Germany, England, the Czech Republic, and the United States, and we each came to learn something more about these distinct academic traditions as the years went on, just as we also came to appreciate the particular quirks and queries we were likely to receive from our colleagues. As we developed our own scholarly voices, we learned to appreciate the proclivities and predilections of the other Holbergians. The peculiar styles of the members’ contributions became a source of warmth, familiarity, and community. These divergent methodological approaches proved harmonious rather than cacophonous, thanks to Michael and to the other Holberg faculty members.

Antoine Borrut, Jack Tannous, and Khaled El-Rouayheb, the other Holberg faculty members, each contributed in their own way. Antoine helped us see new connections to existing scholarship, enthusiastically circulating sources that were related to each paper as he helped guide the discussion. Khaled’s quiet, calm voice would offer succinct comments that often revealed the unresolved issues lurking behind each paper. Jack’s perspective from Late Antiquity offered material that many of us would have overlooked, and he delivered it with the affable air of a storyteller. Special thanks are also due to Marina Rustow and Lale Behzadi, who brought their expertise as guest scholars, as well as to Sabine Schmidtke, who hosted us at the Institute for Advanced Studies for part of our deliberations in 2017. The willingness and ability of each of these scholars to reach outside of their own subfield to engage with the wide variety of scholarly disciplines on offer at the Holberg was a model for us all, encouraging us to stretch ourselves beyond our habitual modes of thinking. We also wish to thank the staff at Princeton’s Department of Near Eastern Studies for their administrative support in organizing our visits.

And, of course, there’s Michael, who made Holberg happen. One remarkable thing about Michael is his indefatigability through the long days of Holberg. He seemed to derive immense energy and pleasure from listening to the conversation unfold around each paper, smiling or chuckling at this or that comment. But in his typical, self-effacing manner, he would wait patiently for everyone else to offer up their thoughts. He would then take out his scribbled notes to see if something had been left unsaid. When we had exhausted our stores,

Michael somehow still had a crucial nugget that we had overlooked. The unselfishness of allowing others to speak first was not, we imagine, simply a matter of temperament. The point of the seminar was to build knowledge as a group, not through attacking one another or posturing, but rather through a collective intellectual effort. Scholarship need not be a solitary affair, and Michael's gift to us was making our graduate education that much less solitary. It is much more fun and much more fruitful when scholarship is undertaken together and when critiques come from colleagues who are looking out for you and not trying to tear you down. It is a testament to Michael's spirit of scholarly generosity that we have all benefited so much from the Holberg experience and that it generated personal and scholarly connections that will long outlast it. For many of us, it is difficult to imagine what would have come of our graduate experience without it, but one thing is certain: It would have been a lot less fun.

We, the graduate students of the Holberg Seminar, dedicate this special dossier to Michael Cook for giving us that annual experience of academic camaraderie and rejuvenation. It was at that final dinner that one of our number asked Michael if, upon receiving the Holberg award for a career of academic excellence, he might have spent his award on a yacht or something of the sort. In his typically humble manner, he replied that he doesn't know how to sail (this story is a case of *riwāya bi-l-ma'nā* and not *bi-l-lafz*). But given the frequent appearance of Michael's broad smile during the swampy Princeton summer days we spent around a seminar table, we like to hope that Michael is pleased with what came of his award.