

Pre-Modern Arabic Literature:  
An Annotated Syllabus

**Course Description:**

This syllabus draws on our course this semester for readings, discussion, and class format.

This course is intended for undergraduate students of any level, with the understanding that it will ideally be tailored to the needs and interest of each individual student through office hours and constant communication regarding each student's final project. The ideal number of students is probably 6-24. In this way, students who have Arabic language experience would be encouraged to develop their language skills, and every student would be supported as much as possible in pursuing their research interests that related to the course. In a university with strong Arabic Studies, such as The University of Texas at Austin, the course could be conducted in Arabic. However, no knowledge of Arabic will be assumed, in the interest of a syllabus that could be applicable to the widest range of university contexts.

I have taken a very broad approach to selecting literature because this is an introductory class, and I prefer to show the breadth that is available in various aspects of Arabic literature instead of imposing various definitions of 'literature' on the material that is available to us. I have planned this syllabus as if there were one seminar per week, with the understanding that I could adjust it for meeting two or three times per week (some of the readings may be too much, and I have left the last week light to allow more flexibility). Also, classes would generally consist of task-based activities. I have included a few examples to represent possible activities.

**Schedule & Readings:**

The selections listed here emphasize primary sources, with the understanding that theoretical readings could be suggested to students according to their individual interests and research projects.

**Week 1** - This first class meeting serves as a general introduction and provides a chance for students to meet their classmates and introduce themselves, and a chance for me to get a sense of each student's interests.

- Introductions
- Syllabus, course expectations, request meetings in office hours (sign-up sheet in the following weeks if necessary, to begin discussing class projects)
- In-Class Activity: Students sit in circles and are given about five to seven short samples of classical Arabic literature. The pieces have probably all been drawn from Robert Irwin's anthology, and may be prose or poetry. Their assignment is to look at these pieces, and to discuss them together, and to come up with something that they will present orally to the class. They can read, sing, act, etc. for as short as they want, but each group member must make some sort of noise presenting something from the samples. [The object is to have students look at a range of

short selections, to connect them with orality, and to start breaking the ice so to speak among themselves.]

## **Week 2: Historical Context and Early Arabian Poetry in Arabic Culture**

1. pp. 5-21 of Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (NY: Warner, 1991)

2. pp. 3-10 introduction and 45-56 'Antara in

Michael A. Sells, *Desert Tracings: Six Classic Arabian Odes by 'Alqama, Shánfara, Labíd, 'Antara, Al-A'sha, and Dhu al-Rúmma* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1989)

3. pp. 25-27 Robert Irwin, *Night & Horses & the Desert: An Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature* (NY: Random House, 1999)

[ This very briefly introduces al-Khansā' and provides translations of two of her famous poems.]

4. Peter Heath, *The Thirsty Sword: Sīrat 'Antar and the Arabic Popular Epic* (Salt Lake City: U of Utah Press, 1996)

[ I would assign selections from chapters 5-7 (The Heroic Cycle, Use of the Heroic Cycle: Compositional Principles, Compositional Models and Description) because they give a very helpful analysis of narrative techniques in Arabic epics generally, and especially in the epic of 'Antar. ]

Assignment: Write at least ½ page to turn in. It can be in note form, a diagram, or organized into paragraphs. I just want to see evidence that you have done the reading and thought about it, and I'd like to know what you find interesting.

## **Week 3: Literary Developments from the Revelation of Islam**

[This week is designed to give a broader view than usual of religious literature that extended from the revelation of the Qur'an. The objective is to find and think about connections between these various genres and others. These texts may help to provide some context, and alert students to some intertextuality throughout the course. For students with advanced Arabic skills, they could also read famous sermons.]

1. pp. 30-41 "The Qur'an" in Robert Irwin, *Night & Horses & the Desert: An Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature* (NY: Random House, 1999). I would like to show images of some suras from historical manuscripts in class to give students a sense of how this text functions as material culture historically.

2. Hadith handout (compilation of various Hadiths, with priority given to those that are used commonly in conversation in the Arabic world today)

Sources: *Encyclopaedia of Islam* article on *ḥadīth* and Ezzeddin Ibrahim and Denys Johnson-Davies, *An-Nawawi's Forty Hadith* (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 1995)

3. Sira handout (compilation of selections about the genre, such as the EI article on 'sīra', and selections from *al-sīra al-nabawiyya*, translated by Guillaume or Martin Lings or myself, and perhaps the first page of the Arabic by Ibn Hishām, especially if students have any Arabic language experience)

#### **Week 4: A Long-Lived Tale of Longing**

*suggested week to turn in 1<sup>st</sup> response paper – also meet with me to start thinking about your final project if you have not yet done so*

1. pp. 50-57 Robert Irwin, *Night & Horses & the Desert: An Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature* (NY: Random House, 1999)

[This section briefly introduces 'udhrī poetry, 'Umar ibn Rabi'a, and Jamīl.]

2. Entire book: Nizami Ganjavi, *The Story of Layla and Majnun*, trans. Rudolf Gelpke (New Lebanon, N.Y.: Omega Publications, 1997)

[For this class, I would also provide several examples of how the story has lived on in later arts (for example, in the Moroccan *malhūn* poem *sham'a* / Candle by Cherif Ben Ali, known as Ould Arzine (1742-1822), a poet and musician of Fas and in its later rendition by the folksy rock band Jil Jilala in the 1970s). I would present these materials near the end of the class, or simply provide them online.]

#### **Week 5: Oral Epics**

[I wrote my M.A. thesis on *Sīrat al-amīra dhāt al-himma* / The Epic of Princess Ambition. So I have enough material to present some information to the class, including visuals.]

1. Dwight F. Reynolds, *Heroic Poets, Poetic Heroes: The Ethnography of Performance in an Arabic Oral Epic Tradition* (Ithaca; London: Cornell UP, 1995)

[This book is split into two sections: "Part One: The Ethnography of a Poetic Tradition," and "Part Two: Textual and Performance Strategies in the Sahara." I would draw selections from the second section so as to demonstrate the interplay of genres and the *sahra* (evening performance context) as social interaction. I could also assign a brief selection from part one to situate the study.]

2. Remke Kruk, "In the Popular Manner: Sīra-Recitation in Marrakesh Anno 1997" *Edebiyat* 10 (1999): 183-198

[This article provides a very accessible description of an oral epic performance context, and it includes informative photographs. Read alongside Reynolds' *Heroic Poets*, students will grasp how storytellers have continued to recite oral epics throughout the twentieth century, with special attention to performance contexts.]

3. Lena Jayyusi, *The Adventures of Sayf Ben Dhi Yazan: An Arab Folk Epic* (Cairo: American U in Cairo Press, 1999)

[This is a beautiful translation of a relatively short epic. I would assign the brief

introduction (pages ix-xvii) and one of the chapters (for example, chapter 1 is pages 1-13), the choice of chapter depending on my sense of what might interest students most in this class.]

4. Melanie Magidow, "Epic of the Commander Dhat al-Himma" *Medieval Feminist Forum Subsidia Series* no. 9, Medieval Texts in Translation 6 (2019). Available online open-source: [https://ir.uiowa.edu/mff/vol54/iss3/1/?fbclid=IwAR3jmi3gaPOS0ti9\\_Yz4\\_5hMRTiuJuPpGHMKcZvQmU\\_vNRWGfK3WtjF7xrY](https://ir.uiowa.edu/mff/vol54/iss3/1/?fbclid=IwAR3jmi3gaPOS0ti9_Yz4_5hMRTiuJuPpGHMKcZvQmU_vNRWGfK3WtjF7xrY)

## **Week 6: 1001 Nights**

[I would like to find images of manuscripts of *alf layla wa-layla* to show students in class or to provide online for them.]

Husain Haddawy, *The Arabian Nights* (NY: Norton, 1990)

This is one of the few books that I would suggest purchasing for the course. As a result, the reading can allow some flexibility. Pages ix-xiii of the Introduction is required for everyone. Then you may read three stories of your choice (with a story being about 20 pages). These three are highly recommended, and they are all included in volume 1. Come see me if you would like to see the stories in my copy of volume 2:

1. "Prologue" story (pages 1-19)
2. "The Story of the Hunchback" (pages 205-228)
3. "The Story of Jullanar of the Sea" (pages 383-428).

Come ready to tell the stories that you read, and to discuss them with your classmates!

[The flexibility in story selections here allows flexibility in the format of the class. I would ask students which stories they had read, and then put them in groups, either around the same story (to make a display to share with the class, for example) or groups in which each person had a different story to share. Then we would conclude with a class discussion of *1001 Nights* based on the introduction, stories, and their thoughts.]

## **Week 7: Literary Salons**

1. Chapter 1 of Samer Ali, *Arabic Literary Salons in the Islamic Middle Ages: Poetry, Public Performance, and the Presentation of the Past* (Notre Dame, IN: U of Notre Dame Press, 2010)

2. pp. 148-170 Robert Irwin, *Night & Horses & the Desert: An Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature* (NY: Random House, 1999)

[This section includes useful context and excerpts translated from works by al-Tanūkhī and by al-Iṣbahānī.]

3. Selections from Philip F. Kennedy, *Abu Nuwas: A Genius of Poetry* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005)

## Week 8: Maqāmāt & al-Jāhiz

[ I would like to show images of the famous miniatures from *maqāmāt al-Ḥarīrī*, either in class or online for the students this week. ]

1. pp. 84-101; 178-203 Robert Irwin, *Night & Horses & the Desert: An Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature* (NY: Random House, 1999)

[These sections on al-Jāhiz, al-Hamadhānī, al-Ḥarīrī, and the *ikhwān al-ṣafā'* include helpful excerpted translations. I would encourage students to discuss these texts. In addition, there is a text available online (see end of syllabus) from al-Jāhiz that I could use if I had time to prepare the original Arabic ahead of time, and perhaps supplement it with my own translation (?). Their selections begin on page 195 and end on page 220 (obviously a lot more than they have included!) in the following source: al-Jāhiz, "*Kitāb fakhr al-sūdān 'alā l-bayḍān*," *Rasā'il al-Jāhiz* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1964): 177-226.]

2. Judah ben Solomon Harizi, *The book of Tahkemoni: Jewish Tales from Medieval Spain*, ed. David Simha Segal (Portland, OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2001)

pp. 201-204 "Of a Sumptuous Feast and a Bumpkin Fleeced"

pp. 302-306 "The Battle of Sword and Pen for Mastery of Men"

[This collection is very accessible and an excellent example of how pre-modern Arabic literature is linked to literatures written in other languages.]

## Week 9: al-Andalus and Sicily

1. Selections from Chapter 6 (The Lost Kingdoms of the Arabs: Andalusia) in Robert Irwin, *Night & Horses & the Desert: An Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature* (NY: Random House, 1999)

[Ideally, I would be able to provide some alternative translations (especially Alex Elinson's translation of 'Abd al-Rahman's short poem to the palm tree of Ar-Rusafa) and some accompanying selections (especially of Ibn Zaydun and Wallāda). In addition to these, I would probably prioritize Ibn Quzmān, Ibn al-'Arabī, Ibn Sahl, and Ibn Sa'īd al-Maghribī, and might include an example or two from Hebrew poetry of al-Andalus.]

2. pp 1-15; 130-137; 146-150 (introduction and selections from Ibn Ḥamdīs' poetry, al-Idrīsī's *Geography*, and Ibn Jubayr's *Rihla*) in Karla Mallette, *The Kingdom of Sicily, 1100-1250: A Literary History* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania Press, 2005)

## Week 10: Travel Literature

[suggested week to turn in 2<sup>nd</sup> response paper – also start outlining final project for Week 11]

1. Introduction and selections from Abū Faraj al-Iṣbahānī, *The Book of Strangers: Mediaeval Arabic Grafitti on the Theme of Nostalgia*, Trans. and ed. Patricia Crone and Shmuel Moreh (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2000)

2. pp. 1-12; 310-318 Ross E. Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta: A Muslim Traveler of the 14<sup>th</sup> Century* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1986)

[These pages include the introduction and the closing chapter, the latter containing information about how the travel account was recorded and presented, and also providing a historical connection to Ibn Khaldun.]

3. Aḥmad Ibn Faḍlān, *Ibn Fadlan's Journey to Russia: A Tenth-Century Traveler from Bagdad to the Volga River*, trans. Richard Frye (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2005)

[selections, especially the beginning of the account]

4. Allen Fromherz, *Ibn Khaldun: Life and Times* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2010)

[This brand new book has a useful timeline in the beginning. Ibn Khaldun is not known as a traveler, but he is a good example of the mobile intellectuals of his cultural milieu. I have a copy of the timeline and first chapter only, so it is hard to predict if I would assign any selections other than the timeline. I might also include selections from Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddima* (trans. Franz Rosenthal) based on students' interests, for example: poetry, midwifery, music, politics, etc.]

[For students' projects, I might also recommend Benjamin of Tudela, especially his description of Jewish life in Baghdad.]

## **Week 11: Legal Writings**

[I would include digital photos of legal manuscripts, especially from archives in Morocco, in or out of class.]

1. pp. 323-328 Robert Irwin, *Night & Horses & the Desert: An Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature* (NY: Random House, 1999)

[This section provides an overview of al-Ghazzālī, his work, and a translated excerpt from his *Al-munqidh min al-dalāl* / The Deliverance from Error.]

2. The table of contents from al-Ghazālī's *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* / The Revival of Religious Sciences

[I have an incomplete English version of the table of contents, and would provide a complete version for students. Then I would ask them to make some observations about the subject matter that was included in this compendium.]

3. Devin Stewart, "The Humor of the Scholars: The Autobiography of Ni'mat Allāh al-Jazā'irā (d. 1112/1701)," *Iranian Studies* 22.4 (1989): 47-81

[I would like to give students a complete copy of this fun article, but would also like to mention to them that the autobiography begins from page 55, and that is the content for which they will be responsible.]

4. One-page abstract and translation of first fatwa in appendix of:

Jocelyn Hendrickson, *The Islamic Obligation to Emigrate: Al-Wansharīsī's Asnā al-matājir Reconsidered*, diss. (Atlanta: Emory University, 2009)

[I might also include example of legal documents from Hebrew or related to minority issues. The object is to introduce the genre of legal *responsa*, and to stimulate discussion.]

5. pp. 82-85 Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988)

[This very brief section, and its accompanying photos of manuscripts, give an idea of text production and use in a traditional *madrasa* context. There are of course extensive other sources for students interested in learning more about *madrasas* throughout the Arab world. For a Jewish counterpart, see "A Medieval Curriculum of Advanced Jewish and Secular Studies" translated from *Tibb al-nufūs* late 12<sup>th</sup> c. in Norman Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Source Book* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979): 226-228. In the same book, there is a potentially interesting translation from a Geniza manuscript, titled "A Petition to a Court Jew in Fatimid Egypt" (p. 204).]

## **Week 12: Merchants & Trade**

*final project outline DUE*

[I would like to provide students some images of the Geniza manuscripts, and might also draw images from, or at least show in class, the following books as a documented case of trade:

Stefano Carboni, *Venice and the Islamic World, 828-1797* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2007)

Deborah Howard, *Venice and the East: The Impact of the Islamic World on Venetian Architecture, 1100-1500* (Yale UP 2000)

Rosamond E. Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza: Islamic Trade and Italian Art, 1300-1600* (U of California Press, 2002)]

1. pp. 42-59 "International Contacts" in Vol. 1: Economic Foundations of S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1967)

[This section offers students a brief historical look at the travel and trade that was occurring in this region. I have limited the secondary source to a minimum in order to allow for more investigation of primary sources.]

2. Selections from S. D. Goitein, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973)

[These letters and business documents provide a fascinating window into medieval international commerce and the social realities for these traders.]

3. Selections from Roxani Eleni Margariti, *Aden & the Indian Ocean Trade: 150 Years in the Life of a Medieval Arabian Port* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina Press, 2007)

[This book covers a period from the late 11<sup>th</sup> to early 13<sup>th</sup> century in this port city, and offers an unprecedented view of an unmoving location in the midst of a vibrant trade network. I would like to include copies of the images and maps used in this book, along with those sections most tied to Arabic manuscripts.]

## **Week 13 – In the Kitchen**

1. Nawal Nasrallah, *Annals of the Caliphs' Kitchens: Ibn Sayyar al-Warraq's Tenth-Century Baghdadi Cookbook* (Leiden: Brill, 2007)

pp. 29-45 on Baghdad cuisine generally and in the al-Warrāq text

pp. 67-78 Translated Introduction and Table of Contents of al-Warrāq text

2. Selections from Geert Jan Van Gelder, *God's Banquet: Food in Classical Arabic Literature* (NY: Columbia UP, 2000)

[This book is published in the UK under the titled *Of Dishes and Discourse: Classical Arabic Literary Representations of Food*. I would like to gather several translated excerpts to offer a condensed version of the book, since no one section seems sufficient.]

3. Charles Perry, "What to Order in Ninth-Century Baghdad," *Medieval Arab Cookery: Essays and Translations* (Devon: Prospect Books, 2001): 219-223.

[This short essay includes a rich translation and explanation of the great food scenes in *al-maqāma al-baghdādiyya*. There is a Hebrew rendition of the same *maqāma* on this syllabus already. I would refresh students' memories of it, and probably also share the Arabic version with them in class, along with some *kunāfa* at least (as it is mentioned), and perhaps other food. Students could try recipes of cuisine from Arabic culture for the final class if they wanted to meet outside of class to cook.]

## **Week 14**

- wrap-up discussion ?
- student presentations ?
- remind students of due date for final projects

[This week is left flexible in order to include something that was intended for earlier, especially as I did not account for any vacations such as spring break or Thanksgiving in the above schedule.]

## **Assignments & Grading Policy:**

- Attendance and Participation (20%)
- Two written responses to the readings and class discussions, preferably spaced out through the semester (40%)
- Final paper project investigating some aspect of Arabic literature, whether or not it was discussed in class. Topics must be discussed with professor in individual meetings to be scheduled as soon as possible. (40%)



**Medieval Sourcebook:  
Abû Ūthmân al-Jâhiz:  
From *The Essays*, c. 860 CE**

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***On the Zanj* [ "Black Africans" ]**

Everybody agrees that there is no people on earth in whom generosity is as universally well developed as the Zanj. These people have a natural talent for dancing to the rhythm of the tambourine, without needing to learn it. There are no better singers anywhere in the world, no people more polished and eloquent, and no people less given to insulting language. No other nation can surpass them in bodily strength and physical toughness. One of them will lift huge blocks and carry heavy loads that would be beyond the strength of most Bedouins or members of other races. They are courageous, energetic, and generous, which are the virtues of nobility, and also good-tempered and with little propensity to evil. They are always cheerful, smiling, and devoid of malice, which is a sign of noble character.

The Zanj say to the Arabs: You are so ignorant that during the *jahiliyya* you regarded us as your equals when it came to marrying Arab women, but with the advent of the justice of Islam you decided this practice was bad. Yet the desert is full of Zanj married to Arab wives, and they have been princes and kings and have safeguarded your rights and sheltered you against your enemies.

The Zanj say that God did not make them black in order to disfigure them; rather it is their environment that made them so. The best evidence of this is that there are black tribes among the Arabs, such as the Banu Sulaim bin Mansur, and that all the peoples settled in the Harra, besides the Banu Sulaim are black. These tribes take slaves from among the Ashban to mind their flocks and for irrigation work, manual labor, and domestic service, and their wives from among the Byzantines; and yet it takes less than three generations for the Harra to give them all the complexion of the Banu Sulaim. This Harra is such that the gazelles, ostriches, insects, wolves, foxes, sheep, asses, horses and birds that live there are all black. White and black are the results of environment, the natural properties of water and soil, distance from the sun, and intensity of heat. There is no question of metamorphosis, or of punishment, disfigurement or favor meted out by Allah. Besides, the land of the Banu Sulaim has much in common with the land of the Turks, where the camels, beasts of burden, and everything belonging to these people is similar in appearance: everything of theirs has a Turkish look.

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**Source.** <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/860jahiz.html>

Scanned by: J. S. Arkenberg, Dept. of History, Cal. State Fullerton. Prof. Arkenberg has modernized the text.

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