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Integrating Islam in the History of Pre-Modern Europe and the West

Session VII-08, sponsored by Organized under the auspices of The Mediterranean Seminar, 2022 Annual Meeting
On Saturday, December 3 at 8:30 am

PANEL DESCRIPTION

The separation of European (often referred to as “Western”) history and the history of the Islamic world that has been a feature of academia up to today is giving way increasingly to historical perspectives that integrate these two fields or conceive of them both as part of a history of a larger (Abrahamic) West. Nevertheless the supposed dichotomy between these two social/cultural/political regions persists in both academic and popular discourse. This panel brings together a diversity of scholarly voices (three women and one man, including two graduate students, one early-career and one tenured scholar) to address topics relating to the integration of the history of pre-Modern Europe and the Islamic world. Taking a literary approach, in “Arabo-Islamic Travel Writing as Literary Historiography: Narrating the Memory of al-Andalus,” PhD candidate Reem Taha, uses early modern travel literature, as an entrée into the ambiguous and shifting frontier between the Islamic and Christian European worlds, in an age of mass forced conversion, displacement and colonization. Focusing on the Morisco (forcibly converted Muslims) of the Iberian Peninsula and North Africa, she examines dynamics of conversion, exile and diplomacy in the context of a western Mediterranean history that bridges these two worlds. Second is “Hussein's Progress: In Search of an Ottoman Embassy to Europe (1618-1619),” in which PhD candidate, Constantine Theodoridis studies seventeenth and eighteenth-century Ottoman diplomats to Europe as a vector for contact and acculturation, and reflects the common diplomatic culture that bridged the Ottoman and European worlds. His account of the ambassador Hussein's journey from the Sublime Porte to the Netherlands illustrates the impact such missions had both on Europeans and the Ottomans. Next, post-doctoral lecturer, Emma Snowden, in “Medieval North Africa as a Colonial Power” shows how North African empires, such as that of the Almohads, can be seen as colonial powers vis-à-vis the Christian and Islamic Mediterranean. European sources and established historiography portray these polities all but inevitably as tributaries or the junior partners in bilateral dynamics of imperial expansion. Finally, associate professor Sarah Davis-Secord turns to the presence and impact of Muslims on the history of the Italian mainland during the Middle Ages in “Christians and Muslims in Dialogue in Early Medieval Italy.” Established historiography largely ignores this history, focusing instead on the narrative of Muslim conquest, occupation and decline on the island of Sicily. The implication of Muslims in the history of Italy (and Europe) was far more broad than this limited view suggests, and provides and provides another example of the overlap and integration of Islamic and European history. The panel is organized and chaired by Brian Catlos, a leading scholar of Muslim-Christian relations, whose on work has promoted this historiographical integration; he will comment on the papers and moderate what will certainly be a lively discussion involving the panelists and the audience.

DISCIPLINES

History
Literature

PARTICIPANTS

- [Dr. Brian Catlos](#) -- Organizer, Discussant, Chair
- [Dr. Sarah C. Davis-Secord](#) -- Presenter
- [Emma Snowden](#) -- Presenter
- [Mr. Constantine Theodoridis](#) -- Presenter
- [Reem Taha](#) -- Presenter

PRESENTATIONS

- [Dr. Sarah C. Davis-Secord](#)
[Christians and Muslims in Dialogue in Early Medieval Italy](#)

Muslim individuals and communities were integral to the development of the early medieval Italian landscape, culture, and economy to a far greater degree than has been previously acknowledged. Mainland Italy is often omitted from scholarship on medieval Muslim-Christian encounters, or of the history of Islam in Europe, because Muslims had only a brief presence on the peninsula. When the presence of Muslims in early medieval Italy is discussed, it is most often framed in terms of violence and destruction. However, I argue that Muslim settlers, traders, and mercenaries made significant contributions to the development of early medieval southern Italy. This paper will focus on Italo-Greek texts that portray interpersonal encounters between Muslims and Christians, along with extended conversations between individuals of the two faith cultures. In these Greek Christian sources, I find that medieval Italian Christians imagined a variety of circumstances in which interactions with Muslims could be productive, and even peaceful. Violence, raiding, and destruction were certainly part of the story of Muslim presence in early Italy; but so too were more mundane interactions such as interpersonal dialogue, sharing food together, and diplomatic exchange. This paper will focus on two case studies, one found in the bios of Vitalis of Castronuovo (d. ca. 994) and the other in the bios of Neilos of Rossano (910-1004). In both of these Greek saint's lives, we find the featured saint engaged in extended conversations with Muslim individuals, resulting in peaceful outcomes. Both Vitalis and Neilos are depicted as willing and able to talk to Muslims, who are likewise willing and able to talk to them. The Muslim interlocutors are at times shown to be thoughtful, responsive, and even friendly toward the Christians. They share food, offer help, return captives, and promise to cease violent attacks. These imagined conversations and their peaceful outcomes demonstrate that the range of possible encounters between local Christians and Muslims extended far beyond a simple narrative of invasion and raid. Without analyzing the full range of possible Muslim-Christian relationships, both peaceful and violent, we risk misunderstanding the impact that Muslims had on the development of medieval Italian society. This paper, and the larger project from which it arises, seeks to restore the place of Muslims within medieval Italian culture in all its depth.

- [Emma Snowden](#)
[Medieval North Africa as a Colonial Power](#)
- Scholars have grown increasingly comfortable with labelling medieval Christian Iberian states as colonial powers, especially from the thirteenth century, as Castile-León and Aragón furthered their conquests of Muslim territories. North African dynasties like the Almoravids and Almohads, on the other hand, have more often been referred to as empires—and, as Michael Gomez notes, in this they are still an exception to the general tendency to ignore medieval African empires. While these Muslim and Christian states certainly differed in a number of respects, this paper will argue that modern Eurocentrism and colonial legacies have precluded serious consideration of the ways medieval North African states exerted colonial power in Europe. It will further reflect on some of the insights that can be gained from analyzing ways that Islamic dynasties—including the Umayyads, the Almoravids, and the Almohads—acted colonially in the Middle Ages. Some of these produced settler states, a connection that has been obscured by the use of the term successor states. To demonstrate this, I will draw on evidence from Arabic, Latin, and Romance chronicles produced medieval Iberia and North Africa, drawing comparisons between both Muslim and Christian historical writing and between medieval and modern colonial powers. Ultimately, I propose that understanding medieval Islamic states, and particularly North African ones, as colonial powers rather than merely objects of colonialism, is an important piece of integrating and redefining the role of Islam in the history of premodern Europe and the west.

- [Reem Taha](#)
[Arabo-Islamic Travel Writing as Literary Historiography: Narrating the Memory of al-Andalus](#)
- This paper analyzes travel narratives in Arabic between Iberia and North Africa in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to analyze the shifting Mediterranean frontier, cohering around watershed moments for the Muslim and Morisco communities in Iberia: 1492 and 1609-14. I argue that shifting boundaries are reflected in these travelers' identities that can be seen as both/and constructs. As case studies, I analyze biographies and travel narratives by Leo Aricanus/Hasan al-Wazzan (d. ca. 1550), Ahmad ibn Qāsim al-Hajarī/Diego Bejarano (d. ca. 1640), and Mohammed al-Wazir al-Ghassanī (d. 1707), who represent the Morisco community at different stages of their history. Leo/Hasan was born during a period of uncertainty for the Muslims of Granada, and although not a Morisco per se (a proto-Morisco, I would argue), his family left Granada for Fez circa 1490; Ahmad/Diego was a Morisco who witnessed the events of the Inquisition and eventually fled to the Maghrib in 1598; and al-Ghassanī was a descendant of Morisco exiles in the Maghrib and was the first documented Arab and Muslim traveler to Iberia after the expulsion of the Moriscos. These watershed moments are documented by these travelers whose identities are products of the turmoil in the Mediterranean. The different ways in which they negotiate their identities and grapple with their circumstances and hybrid identities enable us to understand the Mediterranean as a site of diplomacy, fluidity, and exchanges, rather than mutual hostility. Leo/Hasan describes himself as a “wily bird” called Amphibia who has the ability to swim with the fish and fly with the birds. He writes of his experience between cultures and languages, where he identifies himself with what is most convenient for the situation, choosing when to present himself as Granadan or African. Ahmad/Diego similarly grappled with a double identity and served as a translator between Arabic and Castilian, which made him a cultural mediator. Al-Ghassanī, a century later, narrates an Arabo-Islamic memory of Christian Spain as he travels through its monuments and landscapes, also conjuring a maurophilic memory of the veil of otherness lies similarity, established by the hybrid identities and the persistence that memory. The Mediterranean Sea, in these narratives, is transformed from a border to a connecting vessel that facilitates continuities between north and south and challenges binary oppositions that distinguish “Europe” from the “Islamic world.”

- [Mr. Constantine Theodoridis](#)
[Hussein's Progress: In Search of an Ottoman Embassy to Europe \(1618-1619\)](#)
- It is often asserted that, before the eighteenth century, the Ottomans practiced a ‘unilateral’ style of diplomacy in their dealings with European states; that they only dispatched ‘ad hoc envoys’ to settle specific practical issues; and that Yirmisekiz Mehmed Çelebi, who led an embassy to France led in 1720 was ‘the first Ottoman ambassador to the West’. Yirmisekiz looms large in the literature because he left an extensive account of his embassy, with several observations on French society; this account established a new genre of Ottoman writing – the sefaretname, or ‘embassy book’. Earlier Ottoman envoys to Europe did not leave such written accounts and therefore it is no accident that their missions remain undocumented and unappreciated. In order to address this problem, this paper offers a blueprint on how to tell the story of an Ottoman mission to Europe in the absence of a sefaretname. Among the several diplomatic missions that the Ottomans dispatched in the seventeenth century, the delegation that visited Paris, London, and the Dutch Republic in 1618-1619 under the leadership of chias Hussein stands out by the total mileage it covered. It also happens that it can be reconstructed with surprising detail by combining materials from the Dutch, French, and English archives, as well as a few printed publications. Hussein's delegation was tasked with informing European potentates that their treaties with the Ottomans would remain valid during the reign of the new sultan, Osman II (1618-1622). The purpose of this mission was not just ceremonial: its aim was to sustain the ‘culture of presence’ valued by both parties. In fact, this paper argues that, reading against the grain, it is possible to see the Ottoman delegation engage in a shared, but also contested idiom of diplomatic practices ranging from gift-giving, audience protocol and settling issues of precedence, to the liberation of slaves. By accessing the actual practices employed in each case it is possible to write a more integrated history (and to establish a more complex genealogy) of European-Ottoman diplomacy.

