

History 225: The first Islamic empire

Fall, 2014

Mr. Chamberlain

1101 Humanities, T, R, 1:00-2:15

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Office hours: 4:00-6:00 Fridays, though once we start working on papers I'll be available most days of the week—just get in touch by email.

The Arab conquests of the seventh-century CE are often treated as a decisive break in the history of the Middle East, one that divides study of the region into the firm categories of the “ancient” and “Islamic”. The Islamic empires that followed the conquests are usually treated more as Islamic than imperial developments. This class, asking how the Arab conquest of the East Roman and Sasanian empires resulted in a new universal empire, will question the notion of a clean break. Rather than taking the period immediately prior to the rise of Islam as our starting point, we will seek out long-term continuities in the history of the region, especially those relating to the appearance and historical development of the universal cosmopolitan empire. Questions include: what distinguishes such empires from other forms of political organization; how did the formation of ever-larger political entities lead to ever more universal cultural fusions; in what respects can the Arab conquests be seen less as a new departure than as a culmination of social, political, and cultural processes that had long shaped the region; what kinds of evidence can we examine to compare and contrast periods in which the languages and literary and history-writing traditions are so different; how can material evidence help us to understand long-term developments that are difficult to follow in documentary or literary evidence.

We will begin by asking how the region's physical environment and human adaptation to it shaped the development of its political organization. We then move on to an examination of the universal cosmopolitan agrarian empire in comparative context. The main part of the course looks at approaches to understanding the Arab conquests and the formation of an Islamic empire and high culture through the height of its power and the beginning of its fragmentation around 900 CE.

Requirements include two papers, both an assessment of an argument or approach to a major question by, in the case of the first paper, one or two authors, in the second a larger number. I hope to work with each of you individually on each of these papers and will schedule office hours accordingly.

Texts and sources: most of the readings for class and nearly all for your papers will be available on learn@uw, as will slideshows, presentations, lecture outlines, and suggested paper topics. Two textbooks, which should be available used through Amazon and other online dealers:

Textbooks, available through Amazon or other outlets.

Hugh Kennedy, When Baghdad ruled the ancient world (Cambridge, MA, 2004).

Hugh Kennedy, The great Arab conquests (Philadelphia, 2007).

Tom Holland, In the shadow of the sword: the birth of Islam and the rise of the global Arab empire (New York, 2012)

Trigger Warning:

While I cannot promise that this year's version of History 225 will cover all of the following, each has appeared in recent courses and might well reappear this term: surgical removal of testicles, mass starvation, drug abuse, paganism, dragons and drakonophobia, assassination, famine, theological dualism, cannabis, cannibalism, racial stereotyping, poisons and poisoning, domestication of animals, ritual prostitution, the Black Death, theodicy, plunder as a way of life, eunuchs, iconophobia, cabbage taboos, surgical removal of penises, invention of distilled spirits and of coffee drinking, papoutsiphobia, apocalyptic ideation, primitive communism of property and wives, environmental devastation, agricultural slavery, domestic slavery, sexual slavery, concubinage, debauchery as a way of life, military slavery, mongols behaving badly, malfeasance in office, animal cruelty, slaves on thrones, slaughter of prisoners of war, satan and all his works, biological warfare, executioners and executions, debased coinage, claims of divinity, beheadings, bureaucrats, medical quackery, arrogance of ruling groups, cluelessness of revolutionaries, crucifixion, plagiarism, public display of corpses on gibbets, massacres, numerology, genocide, Aristotle, red banquets, strangulation by bowstring, taxes, inventive methods of torture, peace as the accidental absence of war, death by stoning, making piles of skulls for public edification, making drinking cups out of the skulls of vanquished enemies, exemplary executions and massacres, public worship of giant gilded phalluses, and the conviction, conscious or unconscious, avowable or unspeakable, of superiority on the part of nearly everyone in all cultures and social groups over thousands of years.

Lecture schedule and readings. Please note that aside from the required textbooks chapters taken from books should be available on learn@uw; articles you can find through JSTOR via Memorial Library's web page.

Week 1: Introduction; environment and human ecology.
-Ibn Khaldun, al-Muqaddima, selections on learn@uw.

Weeks 2 and 3: The ancient universal cosmopolitan empires.

-Van De Mieroop, A history of the ancient Near East (Oxford, 2007), pp. 1-125.

-Spiro Kostoff, The city shaped: Urban patterns and meanings throughout history (London, 1991) pp. 29-41.

-Peter Green, From Alexander to Actium: the historical evolution of the hellenistic age, pp. 312-335

Week 4: The Near East in Late Antiquity

-Christopher Kelly, "Empire Building," in Bowersock et al., Late Antiquity: a Guide to the post-classical world, pp. 170-195.

-Garth Fowden, Empire to Commonwealth: consequences of monotheism in late antiquity, pp. 138-175.

Week 5: Arabia in Late Antiquity: the penetration of the late antique world into a tribal, mostly stateless, and in large part pagan world.

-Jonathan Berkey, The Formation of Islam: religion and society in the Near East, 600-1800, chap. 3, "Arabia before Islam".

-Start reading Tom Holland, In the shadow of the sword. Keep up in weeks to come.

Week 6: The Arab conquests and the formation of an Arab/Muslim state

-Hugh Kennedy, "Islam," in Bowersock et al., 217-237.

-Donner, "The Arab conquests", on learn@uw

-Morony, "The Nature of Continuity," Iraq, 507-526

-Start reading Kennedy, The great Arab conquests (Philadelphia, 2007)

Week 7: The formation of the Islamic "conquest state"

-Finish Kennedy's The great Arab conquests, start Kennedy, When Baghdad ruled the world

Week 8: Change and continuity in post-conquest Iraq.

-Michael Monony, Iraq after the Muslim conquest (Princeton, 1984), selections on learn@uw.

Week 9: From the ancient to the "Islamic" city

-H. Kennedy, "From Polis to Madina - Urban Change in Late Antique and Early Islamic Syria", Past and Present 106 (1985)

-Spiro Kostoff, The city shaped: Urban patterns and meanings throughout history (London, 1991) pp. 159-189

Week 10: Art, architecture, and urban form as sources for the history of empire

-Grabar, selections from The Formation of Islamic art and The Dome of the Rock

Week 11: Baghdad, center of the world and culmination of trends towards universal empire.

-Kennedy, When Baghdad ruled the ancient world

-Jacob Lassner, The shaping of Abbasid rule, and The Topography of Baghdad in the early Middle Ages, selections on learn@uw.

Week 12: The transmission of knowledge and the history of ideas.

-Dimitri Gutas, Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbāsī Society (2nd-4th/8th-10th Centuries (1998).
-F.E. Peters, Allah's commonwealth, selections.