

Pop Culture in Medieval Islam  
Spring 2022 RELS 26940-01  
Wednesdays 7-9:40 PM, Kauke 039

Sarah Mirza, office hours MW 12-1 pm  
Kauke 005 (Teams calls and other appointments available)

I heard Bunan saying: I memorized the entire Qur'an, but I've forgotten all but four words: 'Give us  
our lunch.'

-al-Khatib al-Baghdadi, *The Art of Party-Crashing*

*How can we study what goes on at a party? What if that party occurred 1,200 years ago and we have to piece together the details?*

Most people in the medieval Islamic world spent a good deal of their time doing, talking about, and writing about neither religion, nor politics, nor law, but how to have a good time. This class is an introduction to this fun-loving world, with its attendant obstacles and dangers, through a social history and architecture/urban design approach. I've chosen three particular social activities to focus on in order to keep us grounded (literally, grounded, since we'll be mapping the streets of the cities): partying, drug addiction, and coffee culture.

Throughout the semester, with a partner, you will answer these questions: Where did these people hang out? What did these places look like? What did they do once they were in those spaces? How did they relate to each other? How were these activities determined by the urban landscape and economy? Our historical data on these subjects is ripe for various types of Marxist analysis, looking into how social life, urban planning, technology, food, and conversation complicate our notions of class, access and power, ideology, and resistance.

Be prepared to: attend every class, work intensively with a partner, complete weekly homework that requires converting historical texts into visual representations, and be able to answer quiz questions about each reading.

Required Texts:

Al-Khatib al-Baghdadi, Trans. Emily Selove, *Selections from the Art of Party-Crashing in Medieval Iraq* (Syracuse UP, 2012) ISBN 978-0815632986

Ralph S. Hattox, *Coffee and Coffeeshouses: The origins of a social beverage in the medieval Near East* (University of Washington Press, 1985) ISBN 978-0295962313  
Any edition is acceptable for either.

Both of these books are also available as ebooks through CONSORT

All other readings are on [medpopculture.voices.wooster.edu](https://medpopculture.voices.wooster.edu)  
Password: bunan

Map resources:

<https://cmes.uchicago.edu/page/maps> (political history of Middle East through maps)

<http://www.oldmapsonline.org/> (search by location for historical maps)

[https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/history\\_middle\\_east.html](https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/history_middle_east.html) (more historical maps of Middle East)

Assessment:

weekly homework and quizzes: 13 @ 10 points each (lowest quiz grade is dropped)

project steps 1 (groundwork): 20 points

project steps 2-6: 40 points each

project step 7: presentation 25 points, manual 75 points

total: 450 points

**All assignment deadlines are in bold on the schedule**

Weekly quizzes will cover one or a combination of the homework questions on the readings. If you miss a quiz due to illness/emergency, contact me to schedule a makeup quiz before the next class session

Please refrain from use of any electronics during class time, so that you are paying attention to each other.

Semester-long project

This project will require some reading on your locale outside of the course material. I will provide readings and resources to start you off, but this will also require some searching on your part (using the footnotes and bibliographies of the provided readings), depending on where you and your partner take your project.

For each project step you and your partner will write a report explaining your choices and citing all references (Chicago or MLA Style; tutorials are on Voices), and give a presentation in class in which you and your partner present the state of your research (10 minutes). Project steps that require visualizations should be on 11.5X17" paper and to scale. You will be assessed based on the thoroughness of your explanations, the strength of your evidence and clarity of your argument, as well as historical accuracy and proper application of theoretical frameworks.

1/19

week 1: Is there such a thing as "Islamic culture"? How "Islamic" was the medieval Islamic world? Approaches to social history; the longue durée.

1. Braudel, "The longue durée," read only part I pp 171-183 (Culture as developing under structural constraints, including economic, geographic, etc. What does he mean by the longue durée and its antithesis, event-based history?)
2. Guardian article on E. M. Thompson (This exemplifies the kind of approach we will be applying to our material. What was his subject? His sources? What made these distinctive as historical approaches?)
3. Morony, "The age of conversions" (How many different types of medieval conversion to Islam were there, and what were the various motivations for them? What arguments have been made about the relationship between conversion to Islam and developments of mass institutions? Note that Morony criticizes these arguments)
4. Ahmed, excerpt from *What is Islam: the importance of being Islamic*, pp.46-57 (Note how the category/descriptor "Islamic art" seems to have no basis)
5. Start to learn your way around the old city maps of Baghdad and Cairo. You will be making your own city and neighborhood maps, so start to pay attention to detail. See if you can locate the residential zones in each. Baghdad: [https://archnet.org/sites/3826/media\\_contents/117958](https://archnet.org/sites/3826/media_contents/117958)  
Cairo (use the magnification to zoom into different zones): [http://digitool.is.cuni.cz:1801/view/action/nmets.do?DOCCHOICE=1169695.xml&dvs=1515280357970~929&locale=en\\_US&search\\_terms=&adjacency=&VIEWER\\_URL=/view/action/nmets.do?&DELETED\\_RULE\\_ID=3&divType=](http://digitool.is.cuni.cz:1801/view/action/nmets.do?DOCCHOICE=1169695.xml&dvs=1515280357970~929&locale=en_US&search_terms=&adjacency=&VIEWER_URL=/view/action/nmets.do?&DELETED_RULE_ID=3&divType=)

1/26

week 2: Where did people eat and drink?

1. Lewicka, "Restaurants, Inns and Taverns that Never Were: Some Reflections on Public Consumption in Medieval Cairo" (How did people eat, where did they eat, who is moving in and out of these spaces, did people eat out, where did people drink, and who was partying at home? What are the options for public gathering?)
2. Read half of al-Baghdadi, *Selections from the Art of Party-Crashing* (**Start filling out the questionnaire**)

2/2

week 3: Describing/diagramming social space and activity; what is private/public?

1. Raymond, "The Spatial Organization of the City" pp 59-70 (What is considered public or private areas in the city? How does authority differ by zone?)
2. Raymond, "The Economy of the Traditional City" (Commercial infrastructure and apparatuses are linked to architecture)
3. Lindsay, "Cities" (introduction to basics of currency)
4. Levy, "Self and the City: Literary Representations of Jewish Baghdad" (How is identity formation related to organization of space and participation in activities? The importance of the quarter and the neighborhood)
5. **Examine plans for public buildings and residences, mosques, sufi zawiyas, public squares, libraries, hammams, bazaars, gardens**
6. **Complete map of Baghdad**

2/9

week 4:

1. Finish al-Baghdadi, *Selections from the Art of Party-Crashing* (**Complete questionnaire and start forming a cast of characters for your site**)
2. Ahsan, excerpt from Social Life under the Abbasids, "Housing" (**Take notes for your site interior, making sure to represent cooking facilities, private quarters, courtyard, entrances/exits, toilets**)
3. Wheatley, "Levels of Space Awareness in the Traditional Islamic City" (What does he mean by space awareness and how does he assess it?)

2/16

week 5:

practice theory, social capital, built environment, Marxist theorists, music and performance

1. Vásquez, excerpts from More than Belief ch 9, sections on Bourdieu and Gramsci pp 240-251 (Bourdieu on relation between individuals and social structures and norms and the mechanics by which norms are transmitted and reproduced. Gramsci on how popular culture can critique the common sense, forming resistance against political ideology. Both conceive of class as fluctuating and based on non-monetary forms of capital)
  2. Leyden, "Social Capital and the Built Environment" (Pay attention to the concepts and his conclusion. What is social capital? What is the built environment? How do they relate? What kind of processes is he studying and what does it tell us about everyday life? Can you imagine this approach applied to the medieval Islamic world? What would be the advantages/disadvantages of such an application?)
  4. Brown and Brillhart, "Boutique Hotel Manual" (Understand basics of this publication, as it will be the format for your final project)
  5. Shay, *The Dangerous Lives of Public Performers*, ch. 4 (What is the relationship between music, class, sexuality, and non-binary gender categories? Where would you find music? Which activities are associated with music?)
- project step 1 due**

2/23

week 6: Who were the singing girls?

1. Excerpts from al-Jahiz, Epistle of the Singing Girls
2. Richardson, "Singing Slave Girls (*Qiyān*) in the 'Abbasid Court in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries" (Dynamism in status of elite slave girl. How can her presence transform a space?)
3. Mauss, "Techniques of the Body" (What is habitus? How can this help us study social activity? Is the habitus of singing girl different from that of a party-crasher? **Sketch out the habitus of your character**)

3/2

week 7: Drug-addiction and friendship networks

1. Hamarneh, "Pharmacy in Medieval Islam and the History of Drug Addiction" (What were addictive drugs associated with and what were they used for? Who used them? How accessible were they? What did drug use have to do with social organizations?)
2. Richardson, "Drug Overdose, Disability and Male Friendship in Fifteenth-Century Mamluk Cairo" (How does disability impact public space, authority, romance? What are the activities through which friendship is enacted, experiences that bring people together across classes?)
3. Collins, "Market Dynamics as the Engine of Change" (**Use this to start sketching out links between your characters as well as their social capital. Where are the points of contact between people, over which activities do they gather and interact, who converses together, who has something to exchange with others?**)

**project step 2 due**

3/9

week 8:

1. Raymond, "The Management of the City" (Various neighborhood governing bodies and behaviors. Who "owns" a space?)
2. Thys-Şenocak, "The Gendered City" (How does she break down the concept of public/private and gendered divisions of space? Nuances of access, gaze as part of access)

SPRING BREAK

3/30

week 9: Social capital, public sphere

1. Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital" (**Profile your character through application of each of these categories of capital.** What are the differences between Leyden's definition of social capital and Bourdieu's.)
2. Habermas, public sphere, ch 1 (What is his argument about public/private space and potential for resistance?)

**project step 3 due**

4/6

week 10: Public sphere, popular culture, law

1. Emami, "Coffeeshouses, Urban Spaces, and the formation of the public sphere in Safavid Isfahan" (How are the activities and clientele of coffeeshouses a function of their location in urban space?)

4/13

week 11: Coffee culture

1. Mikhail, "The Heart's Desire: Gender, Urban Space and the Ottoman Coffee House" (What is his critique of Habermas' notions of public/private and male access to political organization? How were new

coffeehouses related to already existing spaces and activities? How was hospitality structured, considering whether people had domestic kitchens, the locations where they ate, the larger neighborhood socialization culture, the architecture of coffeehouse, and development of social networks and access to information)

**project step 4 due**

4/20

week 12: The coffee ban

1. Hattox, *Coffee and Coffeehouses*, ch 1-4 (What were the factors causing the spread of coffee? What were the motivations (not the reasoning) for the ban? Which activities and characteristics were associated with coffee?)

4/27

week 13: Coffee and social change

1. Hattox, *Coffee and Coffeehouses*, ch 5-8 (How does coffee culture change the habitus of hospitality and conversation?)

2. Gramsci, selections from the *Prison Notebooks* (What does he mean by cultural hegemony? Ideology? Common Sense? How does domination occur?)

**project step 5 due**

5/4

week 14: Cultural hegemony, empire, and religious identity

1. Lears "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities" (How does he explain the Gramscian relationship between hegemony and culture? How can we measure the agency of individuals in development of culture?)

2. Salzmann, "The Moral Economies of the Pre-Modern Mediterranean" (What is his critique of the concept of empire and the related category of religious identity? How does he call into question whether both empire and religion are culturally, geographically, and definitively bounded?)

**project step 6 due**

Final Exam: 4-6:30 PM Coffeehouse party in character

**project step 7 due: Collective manual and presentation, individual reports**