

# **MEM Awards**

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**Remarks by the Recipient of the 2020 MEM Lifetime Achievement Award**  
**Given at the Annual Meeting of Middle East Medievalists**  
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**F**irst and foremost, let me say how much I appreciate the honor that Middle East Medievalists, its members and officers, are doing me in giving me this award. I'm very happy to be a link in a chain that includes scholars of the caliber of Wadad al-Qadi, Fred Donner, and Maribel Fierro, to name just a few of my predecessors. You asked me to speak for half an hour about two things in acknowledgment of the award: my career and the discipline in general. As to the discipline in general, I contributed my two cents of doom and gloom at a recent MESA panel organized by Antoine Borrut,<sup>1</sup> and I do not want to get everyone depressed again—even though my remarks on that occasion included a cent of optimism. So what I will do is talk mainly about my career, and just come back briefly to the discipline at

the end. The main interest of my career from the point of view of readers today is probably that it took shape under conditions very different from what we are now familiar with.

One thing I really like about our field is that if you ask people the simple question “How on earth did *you* get into *this* field?” you get so many different and often colorful answers. So here is mine. It begins with me about seven years old on a hill a few miles north of Izmir. Think of olive trees, vines, and some tents; this is an archaeological excavation led by my father and Ekrem Bey. Ekrem Bey—Ekrem Akurgal—was a good Kemalist, but like many of his generation he kept his notebooks in the Arabic script. This piqued my childish curiosity, and I asked him to write out the Arabic alphabet, which he

1. “The Future of the Field: ‘Premodern’ Islam at the Crossroads,” MESA panel held on October 5, 2020, featuring also Profs. Matthew S. Gordon, Stephennie Mulder, Adam A. Sabra, and A. Holly Shissler.

did. I think I learnt the first two letters before I got bored and ran off to play (since then my work discipline has improved somewhat). I did not get around to learning the rest of the alphabet till I was nineteen and we were living in Bristol. This city had an old and well-stocked municipal library, in which I found and borrowed a copy of Cowan's textbook *An introduction to Modern Literary Arabic*. At that point I went down with mild pneumonia—it was a cold, wet, English winter—and I was feverish as I read through the first pages of the book, with the result that the Arabic words I learnt then are still suffused with a touch of delirium. Once I recovered I made more rapid progress, but there was one problem: the book could not tell me what the language actually sounded like. My solution was to acquire an enormous radio that was powerful enough to tune into Radio Cairo, though not very reliably. The book and the radio at least got me started. Later my teachers at Cambridge warned me that if you persist in trying to learn Arabic, the first fifteen years are the worst. Looking back on it several decades later, I am inclined to see that as British understatement.

But in telling the story of how I learnt the Arabic alphabet, I have skipped over something that matters for the development of my career. Between learning the first two letters and completing my knowledge of the alphabet I had made a rational choice—one of two I have made in the course of my academic career. By way of background, at the age of sixteen I was going to be a physicist, and it is still part of my self-image to believe that I *could* have made it as a fifth-rate physicist. In England in those days you had to specialize at a very early

stage, and I had embarked on a track that focused on physics and math. Soon after I had a truly formative conversation with my math teacher, Mr. Unwin. He told me that as a mathematician I was all right, but nothing special. This was the most valuable piece of career advice I have ever been given, and the next day I switched to a track with a focus on history and English literature. I was not much good at the English literature, but I was some good at the history component. Now comes the rational choice. Somehow I figured out that if you brought an average talent to bear on mainstream history, you faced a lot of competition in an overpopulated field. (Perhaps I should explain that in those days mainstream history meant English and Western European history, with the Celtic fringe and the non-Western world evenhandedly excluded.) By contrast, I was thinking, if you were to learn a language or two and shift to the non-Western world, you would find yourself in a much less crowded part of the Western academy, with much more fresh ground to break. In retrospect I think I got that right, and it has been the foundation of my career.

Here, then, is how I executed my rational choice. I went up to Cambridge and first spent two years reading history, learning how state-of-the-art history was done. The highlights of those years were two people at whose feet I sat, Moses Finley and Michael Postan. In politics they were chalk and cheese, but they were both inspiring intelligent lecturers. Then I went on to two years of Oriental studies, studying Turkish and Persian and some Arabic on the side. That was when I met Professor Arberry. He liked to see every student who was about to embark on Oriental Studies in the Middle Eastern

field for a few minutes, but it tended to be a slightly awkward occasion because he did not have very much to say to the student. Fortunately I had been learning Persian grammar from an old copy of Sir William Jones's little book *A Grammar of the Persian Language*, and I was stuck on a sentence that I could not make syntactic sense of. So I pulled out the book and asked him about it. He took one look and immediately diagnosed the problem: the preposition *bar* had dropped out at the beginning of the sentence. I think he was tickled by the fact that a member of a barbarous generation such as mine should be learning Persian from an eighteenth-century textbook, making this a fleeting moment of warmth and contact. It also taught me a philological lesson: try your hardest to make sense of the text in front of you, but do not forget the possibility that it may not in fact make sense. I applied that lesson a year or so later when reading Hāfiẓ and coming to the half-verse *Zinda Rūd-u bāgh kārān yād bād*, "Let's remember the Zinda Rūd and the *bāgh kārān*." The Zinda Rūd is, of course, the river of Isfahan, but what are *bāgh kārān*? The English translators and the Bosnian commentator Sūdī said it meant "gardeners," but the Persian for "gardener" is *bāghbān*, not *bāghkār*. Now, as it happened, in another of our courses we were reading Rāwandī's *Rāḥat al-ṣudūr*, and there we came upon an account of a garden in Isfahan called the Bāgh-i Kārān. So that was what Hāfiẓ was talking about. No doubt some Iranian scholar had pointed this out long before, but the experience of solving the problem gave me a bit of a high, and the hope that if I tried hard enough I could maybe be some good in the field I was entering. Again, I was fortunate in my teachers. There was

Dr. Hopkins (the father of Simon Hopkins), who took a real interest in his students in very practical ways—he looked at the abominable imitation of print in which we wrote Arabic and pushed us to learn *ruq'a*. And there was Turhan Gendjei, my teacher of Turkish, to whom I owed my awareness of Sūdī. He was a fine scholar, though he did not publish much. He never prepared the texts we read, and for the most part he did not need to. But it was the moments when he was puzzled that were the most valuable learning experience for me: we would be sitting in his study with his books on the shelves around us, and he would reach for the work of reference or the parallel passage that would solve the problem. That taught me a lot about what to do when you are stumped.

College is also about the people you meet in your own age group. Someone who made a big difference to my career was Roy Mottahedeh, who was in Cambridge on a fellowship. I remember puzzling with him about a word spelled *b-m-b* in a Persian text of the early twentieth century. Today a beginner would have no trouble seeing in it the loan-word "bomb," but in those days you did not expect to see such things in the language of Hāfiẓ and Rāwandī. Roy was to play a big part in getting me to Princeton, but that comes later—first comes my time at the School of Oriental and African Studies.

I began my years at SOAS as a postgraduate student doing research under Bernard Lewis. This was economic history based on the Ottoman fiscal surveys of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. I was supposed to be writing a dissertation, but I never actually submitted it—which was not smart, but I got away with it, publishing my work as a book. Lewis then gave me

a lectureship in economic history, but by then I was more interested in other things, so that I never really did much more economic history (apart from a rather juvenile chapter for the second edition of the *Legacy of Islam*<sup>2</sup>). I am not sure that was smart, either, but again I got away with it; nobody seemed to be very concerned to check up on what I was doing. I mention these things because they show you how lucky I was, not just in getting away with it, but also in having a decade in which I could cast around and experiment. For example, I wrote a book about Islam and the nation. I never published it, but this period of my life was fundamental in my formation.

Two people were really important to my development in that period. One was Albert Hourani at Oxford. He was genuinely interested in young scholars and their careers, and kept an eye on mine. Once when he went on leave he asked me to stand in for him and give a course of undergraduate lectures on early Islamic history. That was a subject I knew precious little about when I started, but by the end I was beginning to know my way around. The other person was Patricia Crone, with whom I did the only collaborative work I have done in my career. It is not that I think we were right in much of what we said, but it got me thinking creatively about a lot of things I have worked on ever since.

The final vignette of life at SOAS I want to give you is the *découverte*. It was Colin Heywood who instituted this. He has always been fascinated by Wittek; unlike me, he had met him. In Belgium in the

1930s Wittek and Lemerle had apparently established the principle of the *découverte quotidienne*: every day you had to make some discovery and submit it to your colleagues. In reviving this tradition we quickly decided that *quotidienne* was for gods and heroes, and met once a week instead. A group of us would gather over a bottle of wine after the administration had gone home and the building had gone quiet, and we would discuss some little discovery one of us had made. Colleagues like Robert Irwin, Sandy Morton, and David Morgan would be there. It was a little oasis of calm and camaraderie during Mrs. Thatcher's onslaught on Britain's universities. Inspiring as the *découverte* was, this was a good time to think of emigrating.

That brings me to my time at Princeton. Thanks to Abraham Udovitch and Roy Mottahedeh, I spent a spring semester at Princeton on approval, and a couple of years later, again thanks to them, I got an offer. Accepting it was the second rational choice of my career, but this time I did not need to do any figuring out. Altogether, the last thirty-four years have made a fantastic difference to my career. One aspect of this has been the scale of the available resources. It was my first day on the job when my chair told me that the department had a fund that needed to be spent by a certain date; could I think of a way to spend it? That was the first time I had ever heard anyone ask such a question. The change extended to my salary: from the start I was paid about twice my British salary. With spending habits shaped in Mrs. Thatcher's Britain, I have never quite

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2. Michael Cook, "Economic Developments," in *The Legacy of Islam*, 2nd ed., ed. Joseph Schacht with C. E. Bosworth, 210–43 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974).

adapted to this. At the same time I had the good luck to find myself in a department that was very supportive of my scholarship and sheltered me from much of the waste of time and energy that goes into America's culture wars. I also had the good fortune to meet my wife, Kim Hegelbach, without whose reassuring presence in my life I would have been far less productive over these decades. But in academic terms the biggest change has been my role as a dissertation adviser. During my time at SOAS I had never once had a PhD advisee; since then I have had about as many as I have spent years at Princeton, roughly one PhD dissertation a year, not to mention other dissertations I have played a lesser role in. Most of the ones I have advised have been outside my comfort zone as a researcher. For example, the very first was about the fifteenth-century dream diary of a failed Sufi, and Sufism is definitely not my thing. But it was very interesting. If you think about it, everybody in the field goes on and on about *successful* Sufis, but here was a chance to see what you had to do to *fail* as a Sufi. I tried to get my student to put "failed Sufi" in the title of the book that came out of the dissertation, but he would not hear of it.

Right now I think I have five dissertations still in the oven. One is about what people got out of the *Turāth* in the twentieth-century Muslim world—or maybe just Egypt, since dissertations have a way of narrowing their focus. One is about tracing linkages through women in late *Jāhilī* and early Islamic society, going behind the patriarchal façade of the genealogists. One is about the Mongols and their client states in southern Iran, a basic point being that the Garmsīr is so arid it is hard to cross, particularly for a Mongol

army with all its horses and sheep. One is about state formation in the early modern Yemen: you have the Zaydī imamate tradition, and you have the Ottomans gate-crashing the Yemen till they are kicked out, so what was the Ottoman legacy in governance to the post-Ottoman Zaydī imamate? And one is about the law of *sabb*—what is to be done when *dhimmīs* vilify the Prophet. Here the drama lies in the evolution that takes place within the Ḥanafī law school, and incidentally it dramatizes how spurious the Pakistani blasphemy law is in Ḥanafī terms. So I guess the total number of dissertations I have advised could reach forty before I am done, a good Islamic number. They are obviously all very diverse, but there is one thing I can say about them in general. It seems my advisees genuinely believe I have been doing *them* a big favor, or at least the ones who have submitted their dissertations so far have said so in their prefaces. I have no objection to this, and it is absolutely fine by me if they actually think that way. But the real truth is that *they* have been doing *me* a big favor: these dissertations are my continuing education program, and the older I get the more I need it.

The other thing I will say about them is that they have brought something significant home to me—it is a point I made at that MESA panel already mentioned. We are in a field where there is still an abundance of new ground to break. At that panel I used the case of dynastic monographs as an example; the genre is an old one, going back at least to Wellhausen's *Arab Kingdom*, yet there are many perfectly decent dynasties in Bosworth's handbook that have yet to receive monographic study. But here let me take the example of

the study of the Qur'ān. If anything in our field was saturated with modern scholarly studies, this topic would be it. Indeed, for a long time I thought the study of the Qur'ān was saturated, and I would tend to steer students away from it. But the fact is that some of my former advisees—and not just my former advisees—have done dramatically new work in that field, making really impressive breakthroughs and showing how completely wrong I was in my expectations. So I guess one way to see this award is as encouragement to obsolesce gracefully.

My contacts with scholars in the early years of their careers have not, of course, been limited to Princeton graduate students. In particular, I have been lucky enough to find myself in receipt of funds that I was able to use to bring bright young scholars together in long-term seminars in which a central feature has been the exchange of feedback on their current work. One of these ventures was the Holberg Seminar, and the other, beginning last year, is the Balzan Seminar.<sup>3</sup> Both have helped me, as well as the colleagues who

generously participated in them, keep in touch with new and exciting scholarship in the field and play some part in shaping it. These seminars are yet another contribution to my continuing education program.

With all this I have not left myself much time to cover the discipline in general, and as I said at the beginning I do not want to get back into the doom and gloom. But what I said above about the new ground that is there for the breaking is one big point that an optimist could focus on. We are fortunate not to be in a field so saturated that the only way to make a splash is to be either utterly brilliant or utterly silly. So let me end by expressing the hope that we will get a continuing opportunity to break all this new ground. As a link in the chain of recipients of this award, I would like to think that that I will have successors as distinguished as my predecessors, and that in the future it will still be possible for scholars to have the luxury of spending a lifetime in this field, as I have been privileged to do.

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3. On the Holberg Seminar, see the special dossier published last year in this journal: "Islamic History Broadly Conceived: A Tribute to Michael Cook and the Holberg Seminar," guest-edited by Sébastien Garnier, Matthew L. Keegan, and Pamela Klasova, *Al-'Uṣūr al-Wuṣṭā* 28 (2020). A brief presentation of the Balzan Seminar, which focuses on the formation, maintenance, and failure of states in the Muslim world before 1800, can be found here: <https://www.balzan.org/en/prizewinners/michael-cook/research-project-cook>.