

The Khalili Research Centre
for the Art and Material Culture of the Middle East



Research Seminar, Michaelmas Term 2018-19
Thursdays 5:15pm at Wolfson College, Oxford OX2 6UD. All welcome

11 October WEEK 1	Hassan Chahdi Collège de France (Paris)	The Qur'an, its Transmission and Textual Variants: Confronting Early Manuscripts and Written Traditions
18 October WEEK 2	Sean Leatherbury Bowling Green State University/University of Oxford	Intricate Geometries from Byzantine Church to Umayyad Palace: Motifs and Meanings in the Mosaics of Late Antique Syria
25 October WEEK 3	Robert Schick Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz	The Decline of Christianity in Southern Jordan after the Muslim Conquest
1 November WEEK 4	<i>No seminar</i>	
8 November WEEK 5	Ayda Kaplan Centre d'Etudes sur les Chrétiens d'Orient (Brussels)	Syriac Calligraphy: Introducing a Neglected Field of Study
15 November WEEK 6	Agnieszka Lic Independent Scholar (Krakow)	Seventh- to Ninth-Century Churches in the Persian Gulf as 'Museums of Forms'
22 November WEEK 7	Alastair Northedge Université de Paris I – Panthéon-Sorbonne	Dehistan: Archaeology of a Medieval Pilgrimage City
29 November WEEK 8	Susana Calvo Capilla Universidad Complutense de Madrid	The Artistic Undertakings of Caliph al-Hakam II in Cordoba

Free mini-bus service to Wolfson College departing every 20 minutes from Blackwells, Broad Street, and Keble College, Parks Road. Last return service 6:40pm from Wolfson. For more information and a real-time tracker, please visit: <https://www.wolfson.ox.ac.uk/minibus>

Hassan Chahdi

Postdoctoral Researcher, Collège de France (Paris)

11 October (Week 1)

The Qur'an, its Transmission and Textual Variants: Confronting Early Manuscripts and Written Traditions

The constitution of the canonical text of the Qur'an, as reported in Islamic tradition, is characterised by numerous contradictions. I intend to show that several key concepts, such as the 'Seven *Aḥruf*' hadith, contributed to legitimise the 'Uthmanic recension. Al-Zuhri's position in narratives of the collection of the Qur'an will be discussed along with his controversial status as a transmitter. A broader investigation of the early transmission of the Qur'an will show that the accepted canonical readings, rather than to be the result of an exclusive prophetic instruction, are rooted in part in analogical reasoning (*qiyās*) and tribal dialects. The confrontation of extant early codices and specialised literature will finally suggest that non-'Uthmanic codices were still in circulation when the canonisation phase should have been completed. In sum, a different history of the Qur'an emerges from the confrontation of Islamic tradition with the codices.

Sean Leatherbury

Assistant Professor of Art History, Bowling Green State University

Research Associate, Ioannou Centre, University of Oxford

18 October (Week 2)

Intricate Geometries from Byzantine Church to Umayyad Palace: Motifs and Meanings in the Mosaics of Late Antique Syria

Since its discovery in the 1930s, the mosaic pavement of the bathhouse at Khirbet al-Mafjar, Hisham's Palace, near Jericho, has delighted historians of Islamic art. The pavement is the most elaborate extant floor mosaic from an Umayyad building. While scholars have considered the mosaics, they have tended to focus on the figural panel of lions hunting gazelles that decorates the reception room (*diwan*) on the northwest side of the baths. This paper instead focuses on the geometric mosaics of the rest of the building, placing them in their regional Syro-Palestinian context as the heirs of a great tradition that was especially strong in Syria. Building on recent work on the mosaics, this paper posits that the mosaics are not only "deeply rooted in the artistic world of Late Antiquity" (Ali and Guidetti), but have more specific roots in the fourth-century experimentation with geometric patterns as suitable motifs for the floors of churches and synagogues in Syria, the region at the center of the Umayyad world. Intricate geometries not only kept potentially problematic figural imagery off the floor, but also opened up new worlds of abstraction and meaning. Tracing the movement of these geometric motifs within Syria opens up a window into artistic and cultural practices between Byzantium and the Umayyad Caliphate, and highlights the transfer of patterns and meanings between the two, potentially shining new light on the significance of similar motifs in Umayyad and later religious buildings (e.g. the Dome of the Rock).

Robert Shick

Research Associate, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz

25 October (Week 3)

[The Decline of Christianity in Southern Jordan after the Muslim Conquest](#)

In the 6th century AD the population of southern Jordan was solidly Christian, as attested in historical sources and documented archaeologically by some fifty churches and hundreds of Christian tombstones from dozens of sites. But for how long did the Christians continue to thrive after the Muslim conquests of the 630s? Excavations of churches show little trace of any Christian presence beyond the 9th-10th centuries, and often demonstrate an end to the Christian use of church buildings even earlier, while Christians are scarcely attested in historical sources after the 8th century. That end of evidence for Christians between the 10th and 12th centuries seems to genuinely reflect the sharp decline of the Christian population well before the Crusades. When the Crusaders appeared in the early 12th century, local Christians became visible again, but only in a few sites, and only until the Crusader presence came to an end, after which Christians again mostly disappeared from the historical and archaeological record, as they dwindled to the small remnant population known in modern times.

Ayda Kaplan

Researcher, Centre d'Etudes sur les Chrétiens d'Orient (Brussels)

8 November (Week 5)

[Syriac Calligraphy: Introducing a Neglected Field of Study](#)

Unlike Arabic, Syriac script has never been studied for its beauty, with scholars focussing on script as a vehicle of content rather than artistry. The term 'calligraphy' has scarcely been used, let alone standardized, in relation to this tradition. The purpose of this paper is to introduce the Syriac art of the pen. While beauty is subjective, the lecture will provide an overview of the different types of Syriac writing based on a new classification method. Based on a selection of images, we will also provide a comprehensive description of techniques and features that can serve as a basis for their assessment.

Agnieszka Lic

Independent Scholar (Krakow)

15 November (Week 6)

[Seventh- to Ninth-Century Churches in the Persian Gulf as 'Museums of Forms'](#)

Discussing the importance of stucco decorations in Islamic art Oleg Grabar wrote: 'There was almost no end to the ways in which it could be used and transformed (...). Thus throughout almost the entire history of Islamic art monuments with stucco decoration appear as museums of forms' Although he was referring to Islamic art exclusively, it is striking how successfully it describes also Christian stuccoes of the Persian Gulf and how accurate the phrase 'museum of forms' reflects the character of Christian art of the region. Why is it so? What does the boom in Christian stucco production of the 7th-9th centuries tell us about the development of Christianity in the Persian Gulf? What happened to the experimental and creative approach of the Gulf stuccoists after the 9th century?

Alastair Northedge

Professor Emeritus of Islamic Archaeology, Université de Paris I, Panthéon-Sorbonne
22 November (Week 7)

Dehistan: Archaeology of a Medieval Pilgrimage City

Dehistan (medieval: Ribat Dehistan) is one of the most interesting medieval sites, as the city plan is the best preserved of the Iranian cities of the period, being situated in a desert environment. In fieldwork between 1996 and 2012, it proved possible to demonstrate a classic development from ribat in the 3rd/9th century to pilgrimage city, part abandoned under the Il-Khanids, with the rich finds found elsewhere in pilgrimage towns. Unusually, there is also an extensive extramural landscape of the period, preserving buildings outside the walls, and field systems, virtually the only one surviving in the Middle East.

Susana Calvo Capilla

Professor of the History of Art, Universidad Complutense de Madrid
29 November (Week 8)

The Artistic Undertakings of Caliph al-Hakam II in Cordoba

The two great artistic undertakings of the Hispano-Umayyad caliphate, the palatine city of Madinat al-Zahra and the enlargement of the Great Mosque of Cordoba, are largely attributable to the patronage of al-Hakam II (r. 961-976), first as prince and later as caliph. Both constituted a perfect visual representation of Umayyad ideology and one of the most potent instruments of legitimation of the caliphal title. Then began the greatest period of creativity and wealth in the art and culture of al-Andalus. Many studies have addressed the history of the caliphate insisting on the figure of 'Abd al-Rahman III, the political and military architect of the new state, as well as on the meaning of the Cordoban caliphate within the Dar al-Islam. However, while modern historiography tends to focus on the first caliph, Arabic sources extol the personality of his son al-Hakam II, his inclination to knowledge and his patronage of the arts and sciences. In this lecture, I would like to focus on this second caliph who played an essential role in the visual construction of the Caliphate of Cordoba and analyse the main artistic undertakings of the caliphate within a broader cultural context.