

Course Outline (Spring 2022)
Tuesdays 3:00-5:30 PM
Bloomberg 178

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Office Hours: by appointment

AS 100.387– *Everyday Life in the Medieval Middle East*

This seminar explores various aspects of daily life in the medieval Middle East—from dress and diet to marriage and divorce; from the burdens of taxation (on average urban craftsmen and peasants) to the fate of Jewish grass widows (unsupported women, whose merchant husbands had disappeared for years). Our focus in this seminar will *not* be the usual highlights of textbooks and surveys—i.e., not on kings, courts, and battles (political history) nor the rarified worlds of intellectuals in universities. But how do we write such histories when most of our extant historical sources (e.g. chronicles) focus on elites and high culture—the worlds of their authors and audience: male, Muslim, notables, especially the ‘*ulamā*’ (religious scholars). These traditional sources are also biased towards the exceptional: they focus on unusual and strange events (what authors considered ‘important’ by virtue of being unusual).

By contrast, this seminar will focus on *documentary* (rather than narrative) sources and how we can use these documents to write the social history of (i) **everyday life**, i.e. the humdrum, slow rhythm of daily life, especially that of (ii) **non-elites**, including Christians and Jews, women and children, and the urban poor. Over the course of the semester, we will explore different genres of documentary evidence—from court records (marriage contracts and legal suits) to material culture (including surviving hats and even a chess set). In discussing individual primary documents, we will think about ways of interpreting them, reading them serially and *against* other types of evidence.

Our geographical focus will be the central Middle East—and specifically, urban centers. A disproportionate amount of the surviving evidence comes from Egypt, primarily due to the region’s arid climate and low, stable humidity, which allowed the safe preservation of papyrus and paper documents. But we will also explore material from other places, notably Jerusalem and Damascus as well as Egyptian Jewish merchants’ letters to and from India. One of the most important documentary caches we will rely on is the Cairo Geniza, an attic storeroom in a synagogue that housed tens of thousands of documents from the medieval Jewish community of Cairo. Our approximate temporal ‘bookends’ are (i) ca. 1000 A.D., after paper-making technology had definitively spread throughout the region (displacing the more expensive and limited parchment and papyrus) and thus, leaving us a dense evidentiary trail, and (ii) ca. 1500 (just before the Ottoman conquest of the region).

Each week will be devoted to a specific theme (e.g. family, dress, taxation). Our readings for that ‘module’ will consist of a few **secondary studies** (labeled **A**), which will provide background to the week’s topic, and some **primary documents** (labelled **B**) that address the topic directly. You will prepare these in advance of our meeting; in class, we will do close readings of the *primary documents*, discussing what we can learn from each one, and how it fits (or doesn’t) with the overviews in the A article/chapter assigned. To take one example: in week 7, we discuss *Housing*: the readings will include

three articles/chapters on housing in medieval Cairo [7A.i – iii] + five primary documents: two rental contracts; two estate inventories including furniture lists, and a legal suit around real estate [7B.i – v].

All primary sources will be in translation. The documentary genres we will explore include:

- **Private Letters and Marriage Documents** from the Muslim, Coptic Christian, and Jewish communities. Through these documents we will explore **familial** patterns like patrilocal residence, polygyny and divorce, but also more intimate **personal relations**. For example: What can a single trousseau list tell us about the living conditions of its subject?
- **Biographical Dictionaries**: One of the most important genres of medieval Islamic societies is this contemporary *Who's Who* of notables. While the focus is usually on religious scholars, late-medieval dictionaries increasingly include women, Coptic Christians, and non-elites; they also feature a keen interest in social detail and gossip. We will use these to explore **Family History**, and the **history of children and childhood** (e.g. was childhood considered a different phase of development during the Middle Ages?).
- **Endowment (Waqf) Deeds**: A central social, economic, and legal practice in medieval Islamic societies, charitable endowments [*waqf*] were extensively used by families and communities, including non-Muslims to fund charitable institutions (e.g. mosques, *madrasas* [universities], churches). In addition to discussing **housing and residence**, will also use these to discuss **charity and poverty relief** (alongside Geniza *charity lists* of the Jewish community).
- **Real Estate Documents (e.g. house lease)**: We will study examples to discuss **urban space and residence patterns**, as well as **non-elite domestic architecture**, like the *rab'* (medieval Cairene tenement buildings with small rental apartments), for which we have detailed textual descriptions. How can the 'biography of an object' (e.g. a house) help us reconstruct its wider social history?
- **Court Records, including, Legal Suits, Depositions, Estate Inventories** (which list items owned by the city's poor women and men—and capture an important moment when families interacted with the state/Treasury). Through these documents we will ask questions like: When and why did people go to court (rather than use other informal means of conflict resolution)? When and why did non-Muslims choose to address Islamic courts instead of their own communal courts?

Finally, and throughout the course, we will be thinking about the reasons behind, and conditions for, the production and different rates of survival of certain documentary genres (versus others).

For the first two weeks, we will be meeting online; we'll use the same Zoom link if we need to do that again, for any reason:

<https://zoom.us/j/95307489805?pwd=ZzR4OGpyN1pBTGozbUZtVm51REhZQT09>

Meeting ID: 953 0748 9805

Passcode: 399249

Course Requirements & Grades

This is a seminar: students are expected to attend *all meetings*; prepare the readings, and actively participate in class discussions. Two unexcused absences result in an automatic F for the course.

Exams There are no in-class ‘exams’; your assignments will be in the form of essays (for which you may consult your notes and readings).

Grades will be assigned as follows:

20% Attendance and **participation** (includes your presentations of articles and primary documents: at the start of our meetings, each of the assigned readings will be introduced by a student.

Presentations of secondary source: in 5-7 mins, each presentation should identify the article’s sources used and the main argument, and discuss any relationship to other readings. End with 1-2 *discussion* questions (i.e. not informational/background, but ones to start class discussion).

Presentations of primary sources: in 5 mins, quickly summarize content, then provide 2-3 discussion questions (what’s interesting, surprising, new, etc.). *Connections to other primary documents and/or how the document fits/doesn’t fit with secondary reading are key.*

45% **Three Short Response Essays**: Each essay will respond to prompt/question; you will have a choice of answering one of two questions; a third option will consist of an unseen primary document that you analyze and provide a commentary on. Your essays must discuss (i.e. cite and analyze) at least two primary documents/passages (your choice from the assigned readings). Essays should be ~3, 4, and 5 pages, respectively (~900, 1200, and 1,500 words, respectively); they are assigned 10%, 15%, and 20% of grade. Essay Questions /texts will be posted on the Blackboard; for due dates, see Table overleaf.

25% Two **Final Essays**, with a similar format: students answer two of four questions/prompts (a fifth option consists of an unseen primary document/text; see above). Each essay should be ~4 pages (~1,200 words). Questions posted on Blackboard: Fri. 4/29 at noon; answers due by 5pm on Sunday 5/1.

10% **Timeline Project** (group project): each group of student picks a topic (e.g. a commodity, a city; a dish; a religious practice, e.g. funerary customs) and constructs a timeline of major changes that affected it between 1000 and 1500 A.D. The timeline should also correlate these changes to other *related* developments, e.g. changes in long-distance trade; political upheavals; outbreaks of the plague, etc. You must clear the topic with me/your TA first; not all themes lend themselves to this kind of analysis.

<p>Written Work All student work to be submitted either (i) through Blackboard, or (ii) by email to both myself and Mr. Shai Gerberg (your TA)—depending on the instructions for the specific assignment. In case of the latter: send the message with attached file (MS Word <i>or</i> PDF—not both). <u>Formatting</u>: Margins: 1” all around; double-space texts; font size 12 point. The first word in the filename should be your last name; number all pages.</p>

Unexcused late submissions (e.g. without a doctor's note) are penalized one grade 'notch' for each day late (e.g. an essay drops from A- to B if handed in two days late). No exceptions.

Readings

"Do not read superficially, lest you do me an injury, and derive no benefit for yourself. You must study thoroughly and read continually; for you will then find the solution of those important problems of religion, which are a source of anxiety to all intelligent men."

— Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed* (13th-c. Egypt)

"Context is one of the most important indications of the speaker's intended meaning. Overlooking context is likely to lead to misunderstanding and false argumentation."

— ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, 14th-c. Muslim polymath

"Generally speaking, when reading a short book, you will complain that it can be easily finished. Yet, when reading a long book, you will complain that it is hard to finish. Reading a book of resentment, your hair will bristle with anger; while reading a joyful book, you will beat your spittoon until it is broken. [To strike a balance] whenever you read a book, you should have other books at hand as well."

— Wu Congxian, late-Ming Chinese writer

Pay heed to these wise words when reading—and writing. You are responsible for completing all assigned reading—carefully, critically, and thoughtfully—before coming to class. Occasionally, I will provide a few points or reading questions to guide you (e.g. what to look for in a text), but you are responsible for asking your own active questions of the texts, rather than languishing in passive reading.

The themes covered in each lecture are outlined in the table overleaf (pages 4-5). A more detailed outline with the specific readings for each class will be posted on Blackboard.

No books are required for the course. All readings will be uploaded to the Blackboard as PDFs.

Writing

Plagiarism will result in an automatic F for the course. Keep all your notes and source material and be prepared to explain any writing you submit. In your response and exam essays, I am looking for indications that you have read and thoughtfully engaged the material—originally and critically. An essay is an argument; I need not agree with yours, but I expect it (i) to address the issues raised in class and in the readings; (ii) to be clear and coherent, and (iii) be logically supported. I will discuss and provide suggestions regarding essays during the semester. Always remember the difference between a statement and argument (supporting evidence); we are only interested in the latter.

Primary Source Essays/Responses Primary sources provide an example of the actual texture of medieval texts and their worlds—we will interrogate the context of their production and audience; the social realities they recount and reflect. The short-response essays are intended to provide a first-hand experience of the task of historical inquiry: how can we use a text to illuminate the history of a practice, a social group, or a period?

Everyday Life in the Medieval Middle East — Weekly Topics Outline

WEEK/DATE	A. BACKGROUND/CONTEXT READINGS	B. PRIMARY SOURCE/S
Week 1 ⁱ Jan. 25th [online]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Primary vs secondary sources - What can historians learn from each? What can we comfortably generalize from them? 	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Introduction (syllabus + in-class reading of primary documents)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PRI: A curious Coptic-Arabic sheet from 11th-c. Teshlot, Middle Egypt • PRI: A Jewish woman's petitions from medieval Cairo
Week 2 Feb. 1st [online]	<p>Background: Survey of medieval Islamⁱⁱ <u>Rise of Islam and Arab-Muslim conquests</u> Kennedy, <i>Rightly Guided Caliphs</i> (pp. 50-69) Eggers, "Umayyad Administration" (pp. 44-60)</p> <p><u>Mamlūk society (Late-medieval Egypt-Syria):</u> Lapidus, <i>Muslim Cities...</i> chap. 3 (pp. 79-115). Van Steenbergen, <i>A History of the Islamic World, 600-1800...</i> (2020), section 8.2.3 (= pp. 196-201) + chap. 10 and 13 (pp. 229-253 and 330-367).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PRI: <i>Extracts on early caliphs & conquests</i> • PRI (painting): Anonymous, <i>The Reception of the Ambassadors in Damascus</i> [1511] • Each student posts (a) one question about a person/group discussed in van Steenbergen's chap. 13 + (b) one question about the painting. • Each student answers one (a) and one (b) question posed by another student.
Week 3 Feb. 8th	<p>Public Life in a Medieval Cities I: Christians and Jews in Islamic societyⁱⁱⁱ</p> <p>Wasserstein, "Ahl al-dhimma" (pp. 201-208) Bulliet, <i>View from the Edge</i>, chap. 3 (pp. 37-66) Shohsan, <i>Popular culture in medieval Cairo</i>, chap. 3 ("Nawruz: a world upside down", pp. 40-51) Duma, "Coptic martyrs in late-medieval Cairo" (pp. 1-39)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PRI: <i>The Pact of Umar</i> (two versions) • PRI: "No compulsion in religion" [Qur'anic verse and exegesis] • PRI: Two texts on collecting the jizya • PRI: Jāhiz, "Why [commoner] Muslims prefer Christians to Jews and Zoroastrians" • PRI: Cases of public conversion to Islam in Damascus and Cairo (late 15th c.)
Week 4 Feb. 15th	<p>Public Life in Medieval Cities II: Learning & Study^{iv}</p> <p>Hirschler, Konrad. <i>The Written Word in the medieval Arabic Lands</i>. "Introduction"; "A City is Reading"; "Learning to Read" (pp. 1-10, 32-70, and 82-113) Ghersetti, "Stupid school teachers in classical Arabic sources" (pp. 75-96) Melammed, "He said She said: A Woman Teacher in Twelfth-century Cairo" (pp. 19-35) Olszowy-Schlanger, "Learning to read and Write in Med Egypt: Children's Exercise Books from the Cairo Geniza" (pp. 47-69)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PRI: Sakhawi's biography of his son • PRI: Ibn Khaldūn's description of Mamlūk Cairo
Week 5 Feb. 22nd	<p>Public Life in Medieval Cities III: Muslim Devotional Cultures^v</p> <p>Frenkel. "Popular Culture in Islam (early-middle periods)," pp. 1-16. Shoshan. <i>Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo</i>, chap. 1, "Sufism and the people" (pp. 9-22). Abdulfattah. "Relics of the Prophet and Practices of his veneration in medieval Cairo" (pp. 75-102). Ohtoshi. "Cairene Cemeteries as Public Loci in Mamluk Egypt" (pp 83-116).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PRI: ibn Battuta [visit to Egypt], <i>Travels</i> I: 30-68. • VIDEO: Your bespoke guided tour through the monuments along 1 km of central Historic Cairo (introduction; video; QnA) ○ Each student (a) posts one question about one of the monuments + (b) answers one question posed by another student (about a different monument)
Essay 1	Questions posted: Friday 2/25 @ noon	Essay 1 due: Sunday 2/27 by 5pm

WEEK/DATE	A. BACKGROUND/CONTEXT READINGS	B. PRIMARY SOURCE/S
Week 6 March 1st	Food and Diet, Dining and Take-Out^{vi} Watson, "A Medieval Green Revolution" (pp. 29-48); Goitein, <i>Mediterranean Society, vol. IV Daily Life</i> , pp. 226-259; Lewicka, Paulina. <i>Food and Foodways of Medieval Cairenes...</i> → 351-86 (eating places), 457-482 (non-alcoholic drinks).	Waines, "Cookery" in <i>NCHI</i> , vol. 4; Lewicka, "Spices and Herbs in medieval Near East"
Week 7 March 8th	Material Culture I: Housing and Neighborhoods^{vii} Goitein <i>Mediterranean Society</i> IV: 12-21, 47-78 [houses] and 105-138 [furnishings]. Sabra, Adam. <i>Poverty and Charity in medieval Islam</i> (2000), pp. 101-9 [housing] and 112-116 [food].	PRIMARY: • Goitein, <i>Mediterranean Society</i> 4: 78-82 [three houses]; 273-282 [house prices: Groups I and II only] and 291-6 [collective housing rents]
Week 8 March 15th	Family Life: Marriage, Divorce, Children^{viii} Yossef Rapoport. <i>Marriage and Divorce in Medieval Islamic Society...</i> chaps. 2-4 and Conclusion (pp. 31-88 and 111-115). Eve Krakowski, <i>Coming of Age in Medieval Egypt...</i> chaps. 7-9.	PRIMARY: • Zinger, "Jewish Women in Muslim Legal Venues. Seven documents..." (pp. 38-66) • A Cairo Divorce, 1470 (4 pp) • Three Muslim marriage contracts with wives' stipulations
Essay 2	Questions posted: Wednesday, 3/16 @ noon	Essay 2 due: Friday 3/18 by 5pm
<i>Week 9^{ix} Spring Break = No Meeting on March 22nd</i>		
Week 10 March 29th	Dress^x Mayer, <i>Mamluk Costume...</i> "Clothes of Ulama" + "Robes of Honor" + "Dhimmis" + "Women" (pp. 49-74) Textile Hist. through Objects (6-pp overview)	• PRI: Geniza Trousseau Lists, Estate Inventories (5 doc.): Docs. 1, 2, 4, 6, 10. • PRI: A modest women's belongings (Jerusalem, 1393) • PRI: Three Jewish estate inventories (Jerusalem, 1390s)
Week 11 April 5th	Poverty and Charity I: The Jewish Community^{xi} Mark Cohen, <i>Poverty and Charity in the medieval Jewish community of Egypt...</i> Introduction + chaps. 4-6 (=pp. 1-32 and 130-173).	PRI: Cohen, <i>Voice of the Poor...</i> • Docs. 35-37 and 39-41 (pp. 73-76 and 78-82: Debt & Poll Tax) • Docs. 43-49 (pp. 83-94: women's letters) • Docs. 50-52 and 56 (pp. 95-98 and 101-2): Letters regarding Public Charity • Docs. 58-59 (pp. 107-120: Alms Lists)
Week 12 April 12th	Poverty and Charity II: Jewish and Islamic Charity; Waqf (Pious endowments)^{xii} Mark Cohen, <i>Poverty and Charity in the medieval Jewish community of Egypt...</i> 189-242 (= chap. 8: Charity). Sabra. <i>Poverty and Charity in Medieval Islam...</i> pp. 69-129 and 169-177 (chaps. 4-5 and Conclusion).	PRIMARY: Cohen, <i>Voice of the Poor...</i> • Doc. 80 (pp. 176-181: Donor List) • Doc. 86 (pp. 186-187: A Woman's Will) • PRI: Inscription outside the Umayyad mosque: Waqf charities (15th-c Damascus)
Essay 3	Questions posted: Friday 4/15 @ 12pm	Essay 3 due: Sunday 4/17 by 5pm

WEEK/DATE	A. BACKGROUND/CONTEXT READINGS	B. PRIMARY SOURCE/S
<p>Week 13 April 19th</p>	<p>Travel and Trade Iⁱⁱⁱ Lambourn, Elizabeth. <i>Abraham's Luggage. A social life of things in the medieval Indian ocean world</i> (2018), Introduction + chaps. 2, 4, 7, and 9 (pp. 1-36; 37-63, 104-128; 189-219, and 240-251).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PRI: Goitein, ed. <i>Letters of medieval Jewish traders...</i> (1973): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Letters #1, 9, 10, 15-16, and 79-80 (= pp. 26-34, 62-71, 89-95, and 335-339).
<p>Week 14 April 26th [last class]</p>	<p>Travel and Trade II^{iv} Goldberg, Jessica. <i>Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean: The Geniza Merchants and their Business World</i> → "chaps. 3, 5, and 7 (= pp. 56-92, 120-184, and 187-210).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PRI: Goitein, ed. <i>Letters of medieval Jewish traders...</i> (1973): Letters <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. #23-24 (= pp. 119-127; diff partners: letters A-B) 2. #25 (= pp. 128-134; continues partnership, letter C) 3. #32 (= pp. 163-168; N scholar, Normans) 4. #48-51 (pp. 232-239; purple, address band, acc/s reused; SPA ship seized [plate image+ my image]) 5. #52 (pp. 239-243; business epidemic; Nile journey; exchange rate confusion)
<p>Final Essay Final Exam posted: Fri. 4/29 @ noon Final Essays due: Sunday 5/1 by 5pm</p>		