

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

What was everyday life like in the Middle Ages? 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 in medieval Cairo (unsupported women, whose merchant husbands had disappeared for years, on the high waves of the Indian Ocean). 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—and thus tell us most about their authors and primary audience: male, Muslim, notables, especially the ‘*ulamā*’ (religious scholars). 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 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 (on Wednesdays, see below), we will also think about ways of interpreting them, including how to read these *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 have encouraged the preservation of papyrus and paper documents. We will however, 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 Jewish community of Egypt. Our approximate temporal ‘bookends’ are (i) ca. 1000 A.D., after paper-making technology had definitively spread throughout the region (displacing parchment and papyrus) and thus, leaving us a dense evidentiary trail, and (ii) ca. 1500 (just before the Ottoman conquest of the region).

Starting Week 3, the course will take the following general structure (in most cases; see pp. 4-5):

- Mondays will be devoted to a specific theme—and here we discuss secondary studies on the topic (labeled **A**);
- Wednesdays consist of in-class close readings of primary sources usually related to the theme discussed in A (Monday); e.g. week 6, we discuss a few articles/chapters on housing on Monday [**6A**]; that Wednesday [**6B**], we focus on a handful of primary sources (e.g. house deeds) and discuss those documents in relation to the themes raised in 6A.

We will identify our meetings thus: 3B. = week 3, Wednesday meeting [= discussing primary sources].

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).

Course Requirements & Grades

Students are expected to attend *all seminars*; prepare the readings and actively participate in class discussions. Three unexcused absences result in an automatic F for the course.

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

Grading Per university policy for this semester, the default grading for all Homewood undergraduate classes is S/U grading (Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory). However, students will be able to opt for standard letter grading in this course. To opt for a letter grade, you must let me know by email (to me and your TA) by Tuesday 9/15.

Grades will be assigned as follows:

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- 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—see below on the format of those short introductions).
- 25% **Two 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). Essay #1 should be ~3 pages (~900 words, assigned 10% of grade); Essay #2 ~5 pages (~1500 words, assigned 15% of grade). Essays are due the Sundays before W5 & W11 (see Table overleaf). Essay Questions and texts will be posted on the Blackboard.
- 20% A **Midterm Essay** consisting of short-essay questions. There will be a *choice*: students answer two out of four questions; each essay should be around three pages (~900 words). Questions posted on *Blackboard* after Week 7; answers due by 5pm on the Sunday before week 8.
- 25% A longer **Final Exam:** this has a similar format to the midterm: students answer three out of five questions (a sixth option consists of an unseen primary document/text; see above). Each essay should be ~2 pages (~600 words). Questions posted on Blackboard: 12/9 at noon; answers due by 5pm on December 13th.
- 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.

Written Work All student work to be submitted either (i) through Blackboard, or (ii) by email to both myself and Mr. Vaclav Zheng (your TA)—depending on the instructions for the specific assignment. In case of the latter: send the message with attached file (MS Word *or* PDF—not both). **Formatting:** 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.

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 [of any text] 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, we will provide a few points or reading questions to guide you (e.g. what to look for in a text, or how it may differ from another), 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 to address the issues raised in class and in the readings—and to be coherent and logically supported. I will discuss and provide more suggestions regarding essays later in 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—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 cultural history of a social group or period?

Everyday Life in the Medieval Middle East — Weekly Topics Outline

• = primary source

WEEK/DATE	A. MONDAYS: THEME	B. WEDNESDAYS: PRIMARY SOURCE
Week 1 ⁱ Aug. 31 & Sep. 2	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Introduction (syllabus + reading of 3 primary documents)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A curious Coptic-Arabic sheet from Teshlot: imagine/reconstruct its history [with images] • A Jewish woman's petition from medieval Cairo 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your bespoke guided tour through the monuments along 1 km of central Historic Cairo (introduction; video; QnA)
Week 2 Sep. 9	<p><i>No class Monday 7th (Labor Day)</i></p>	<p>Background: Survey of medieval Islam Rise of Islam in Arabia; Arab-Muslims conquests Features of medieval Islamic cities Spread of paper-making technology; impact on medieval societyⁱⁱ</p>
Week 3 Sep. 14 & 16	<p>Public Life in a Medieval Cities Iⁱⁱⁱ Lapidus, <i>Muslim Cities</i>... 1-43 and 79-142. Middle Period States: the Mamlūk system Muslims, Christians, and Jews in medieval Islamic society</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The <i>Pact of Umar</i> (two versions) • A court case about a Cairene Synagogue ... • Maqrīzī's 7 'orders' of med. Egyptian society • Writing on the wall: Sovereign Decrees inscribed on urban walls (15th-c Syria)
Week 4 Sep. 21 & 23	<p>Public Life in Medieval Cities II: Learning and Celebrating^{iv} Shoshan. <i>Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo</i> pp. 1-32 & 40-66. Hirschfield. "A City is Reading" pp. 1-10 & 32-70.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ibn Battuta [visit to Egypt], <i>Travels</i> I: 30-68. • Ibn Khaldūn's description of Mamlūk Cairo • Medieval Jewish and Christian Europeans describe <i>The Mother of the World</i> (Cairo)
<p>Essay 1 Questions posted: Friday 9/25 @ noon Essay 1 due: Sun. 9/27 by 5pm</p>		
Week 5 Sep. 28 & 30	<p>Food and Diet, Dining and Take-Out^v Lewicka, Paulina. <i>Food and Foodways of Medieval Cairenes</i>... → 1-22 (intro); 67-132 (Menu); 351-86 (eating places) From Mystics' Aid to Party Drink: The introduction of coffee and the stir it caused (Hattox)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shopping list for a wedding • Four Geniza merchant letters: moving pepper across the Indian Ocean • Ibn Daniyāl's lewd shadow play (excerpts) • An 'appointment decree' on party-crashing (12th-c. Baghdad)
Week 6 Oct. 5 & 7	<p>Public Life in a Medieval City: Religious Cultures^{vi} Relics in medieval Cairo Funerary cultures and the City of the Dead Coptic Martyrs in late-14th-c. Cairo</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visitors Accounts of the City of the Dead; Mourning rituals (and their regulation); Visitation guide-books • Coptic Christian accounts of conversion, apostasy, and martyrdom in Egypt • Cases of public conversion to Islam in Damascus and Cairo (late 15th c.)
Week 7 Oct. 12 & 14	<p>Material Culture I: Housing and Neighborhoods^{vii} Goitein <i>Mediterranean Society</i> IV: 56-78 Rymond, "The <i>rab</i> ', collective housing" (pp. 59-65) Luz, "Urban residential houses in Mamluk Syria" (pp. 339-355) Ibrahim, "Residential architecture in Mamluk Cairo" (pp. 47-58) Behrens-Abouseif, "Location of non-Muslim quarters..."</p>	<p>Material Culture II: Dress "The <i>Tirāz</i> system [official textile manufacture]" (pp. 137-163)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sumptuary and Sartorial decrees in 14th-c. Cairo • Med. Egyptian hats (curious paper stuffing) • A lease deed for a house in Fustat 12th-c. • Two Geniza docs: Upper floors of Cairene house; A three-story provincial house
<p>Midterm Questions posted: 10/16 @ noon Midterm Essays due: Sunday 10/18 by 5pm</p>		

WEEK/DATE	A. MONDAYS: THEME	B. WEDNESDAYS: PRIMARY SOURCE
Week 8 Oct. 19 & 21	Poverty and Charity ^{viii} Sabra. <i>Poverty and Charity in Medieval Islam...</i> pp. 69-129 and 169-177 (chaps. 4-5 and 7). Cohen, <i>Poverty and Charity in the medieval Jewish community of Egypt ...</i> pp. 1-32; 139-155 (women); 174-189 (beggars or petitioners).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Petitions for communal and sovereign charity • Jewish Charity ‘dole’ Lists • Petitions for support in Paying the poll-tax
Week 9 Oct. 26 & 28	Family Life I: Marriage, Divorce, Children ^{ix} Rapoport. <i>Marriage and Divorce in Medieval Islamic Society</i> → pp. 12-69 and 111-115. Krakowski & Rustow. “Formula as Content: Jewish Institutions, Cairo Geniza and New Diplomatics” Gil’adi, Avner. <i>Children of Islam: Concepts of Childhood in Medieval Muslim society...</i> pp. 60-66 & 69-93 Hirschler, Konrad. “Learning to Read” (pp. 82-112) Olszowy-Schlanger, Judith. “Learning to Read and Write in Medieval Egypt: Children’s Exercise Books from the Cairo Geniza” (pp. 47-69)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marriage contracts (Muslim and Jewish) with wives’ stipulations • Familial Private letters • Egyptian Children’s’ Epitaphs – early- vs late-medieval • Private letters: Intransigent fasting daughters • Child Custody: A 15th-c. Meccan family drama • A 14th-c Jerusalem couple’s curious divorce • OBJECTS: Children’s dolls and dress from Fustat (9th-11th c.)
Week 10 Nov. 2 & 4	Travel and Trade ^x Goldberg, Jessica. <i>Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean: The Geniza Merchants and their Business World</i> → chaps. 1, 5, 10, and 11.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Letters of Jewish merchants in the Mediterranean • Geniza documents re <i>agunas</i> (grass widows) • Quasayr documents: A 13th-c. merchant’s house and rubbish heap/archive (Red Sea)
Essay 2	Essay 2 Questions posted: 11/6 @ noon	Essay 2 due: 11/8 by 5pm
Week 11 Nov. 9 & 11	Dealing with the State: Taxation and the Countryside ^{xi} <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rapoport, <i>Rural Economy and Tribal Society in Islamic Egypt...</i> [s] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The problem of non-Muslim bureaucrats: an-Nabulusi on shifty Coptic clerks (13th c.) • The small archive of a Coptic tax-collector • What state? A Geniza letter on ‘capillary patronage’
Week 12 Nov. 16 & 18	The State II/Justice I: Petitioning and Protesting ^{xii} Darling, Linda. “Medieval Egyptian Society and the concept of the Circle of Justice” (pp. 1-17). Lapidus, Ira. “Common People between Violence and Impotence” in <i>Muslim Cities...</i> (pp. 143-184). el-Bendary. “Between Riots and Negotiation. Urban Protest in Late-Med. Egypt & Syria” (pp. 5-41).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Petition to Fatimid royal lady: “Tell the amīr to get his hands—and soldiers—off my grain!” ⇔ contemporary price of grain • St Catherine’s monastery petitions against Bedouins and sovereign decrees
<i>Week 13</i> ^{xiii}	<i>Thanksgiving Break = No Meetings (Nov. 23rd and 25th)</i>	
Week 14 Nov. 30 & Dec. 2	Justice II: Going to court ^{xiv} Tillier, Mathieu. “Courts of Law (<i>qadi</i> and sovereign courts)” (pp. 39-46). Peirce, Leslie. <i>Morality Tales: Law and Gender in the Ottoman Court of Aintab</i> → selections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Court documents related to Coptic Christian in late-medieval Cairo • The Biography of a (mainly Coptic) Alley in late-medieval Cairo [real estate documents]
[week 15] Dec. 7th only	Imagining the Mediterranean World from your Study: An 11th-c. Middle-Class Cairene’s Atlas Rapoport and Savage-Smith, <i>Lost Maps of the Caliphs. Drawing the World in 11th-century Cairo</i> [selections]	[no class]
Final Essay	Questions/Documents posted: Friday 12/9 @ noon	Final Essays due: 12/13 by 5pm