

Save Ancient Studies Alliance

Summer 2023 Texts-in-Translation Reading Group

Reading the Abbasid Past: History and Islamic Heritage

The era of the Abbasid Caliphate (750- 1258 CE) is often described as a “Golden Age” of the Islamic World. Throughout the Abbasid Caliphate, communities contributed to global advances in mathematics, science, medicine, literature, theology, art, and philosophy. The famous collection of stories, “One Thousand and One Nights” was compiled during this time and includes the Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid as a protagonist. This reading group will explore the fascinating political, economic, social, and cultural history of the Abbasids and their contributions to the Islamic World and beyond. We will also discuss how history of the Abbasids lives on in our present day in textual and material archives and in intangible heritage practices.

As historians, we will engage current scholarly debates and discussions on heritage and memory to help us analyze the Islamic past and its ongoing relevance to our world today. There are no prerequisites or expectations of prior knowledge of the Islamic World or the Arabic language for this reading group.



Your SASA Educational Ambassadors:

Sara Ann Knutson

What you study & where you are getting your degree: I am an Assistant Professor in the Department of History at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver. I received my PhD in Anthropology from UC Berkeley and I also have degrees in Archaeology and History from the University of Cambridge and the University of Michigan, respectively.

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Social media handles: Twitter:
[@Archaeonetworks](https://twitter.com/Archaeonetworks)

[Session Recordings Playlist - Youtube \(Private\)](#)

[Reading Group Folder Link](#)

Week 1: Introduction to the Abbasid past

Contemporary & Abbasid-era historical perspectives

(1) EI-Hibri, Tayeb. "Introduction." *The Abbasid Caliphate: A History*. Cambridge University Press, 2021. 1- 27.

(27 pages)

(2) Al-Mas'udi. ["Introduction" and from "Harun Al-Rashid and the Death of Hadi" to "Sheep's Head"]. *The Meadows of Gold: The Abbasids*. Translated and edited by Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone. Routledge, 1989. 11-19, 62-69.

(8 pdf pages)

(3) Al-Tabari. [Preface, Translator's Foreword (*skim this section*), The Caliphate of Harun al-Rashid (excerpt)]. *The History of al-Tabari: The Abbasid Caliphate in Equilibrium*, Vol. 30. Trans. C.E. Bosworth. State University of New York Press, 1989. 91-100.

(11 pdf pages)

Guiding reading questions for week one.

- How are the caliphs Al-Hadi and Al-Rashid depicted in the primary source readings for this week? (readings #2 and #3)
- What are some strategies used by Al-Masudi and/ or Al-Tabari to help justify why/ how Al-Rashid ascended to the position of Caliph?

Week 2: Oral Traditions & Literature from the "Golden Age"

Interrogating 1001 Nights & the Legacies of Orientalism

(1) (Forward & Introduction). Paulo Lemos Horta (ed). *The Annotated Arabian Nights: Tales from 1001 Nights*. Liveright Publishing, 2021. Xiii-lxix.

(29 pdf pages)

(2) "The Story of Three Apples." In Paulo Lemos Horta (ed). *The Annotated Arabian Nights: Tales from 1001 Nights*. Liveright Publishing, 2021. 159- 168.

(6 pdf pages; ****NOTE:** pdf page 5 contains an image with nudity—if this bothers you in any way, please feel free to skip this page OR look up an alternate version of the "Story of Three Apples" online.)

**(3) Said, Edward [1978]. "Orientalism." In Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds). *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Routledge, 1995. 87-91
(6 pdf pages)**

Further (optional) reading

- Rachel Winter, "Arabian Nights in the Mississippi Delta: The Embroideries of Ethel Wright Mohamed," in "Art History and the Local," In the Round, Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art 8, no. 1 (Spring 2022), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.13227>.

Week 3: Abbasid Trade & Global Connections

Examining Abbasid & post-Abbasid trade, travel, and cross-cultural interactions

**(1) Ibn Fadlan, Ahmad. "Mission to the Volga." In *Two Arabic Travel Books*. New York University Press, 2014. 191-201, 204- 213. (Introduction is included, but optional)
(12 pages)**

**(2) Kovalev, R. K., & Kaelin, A. C. (2007). Circulation of Arab Silver in Medieval Afro-Eurasia: Preliminary Observations. *History Compass*, 5(2), 560-580.
(13 pdf pages)**

**(3) Bennison, Amira. *The Great Caliphs: The Golden Age of the Abbasid Empire*. Yale University Press, 2009. 137- 157.
(21 pages)**

Group Size: No preference