



Paul Cobb in the Penn Museum's Islamic Gallery. Stained-glass windows (16th – 18th centuries) and doors with frame (15th century) from Cairo, Egypt.

BRINGING THE CRUSADES HOME

A SCHOLAR OF THE NEAR EAST TELLS THE STORY OF MEDIEVAL ISLAM

BY ANGELA CONNER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SHIRA YUKOFF

COURTESY OF THE PENN MUSEUM OF ARCHAEOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Usama ibn Munqidh was a pretty famous bloke in his time, says Associate Professor of Islamic History Paul Cobb. Even today the warrior poet is well known among those in the field of medieval Islam. Born in 1095 in Syria, he came from an aristocratic family who had their own castle and their own principality, and he distinguished himself not only for his hunting and fighting skills but for his writings and his vast knowledge of classical Arabic poetry. He was considered the living embodiment of high culture, “adab,” which in Modern Arabic means “literature” but really connotes a refinement at all levels. He wrote everything from poetry and anthologies (one on famous walking sticks) to a set of memoirs and a manual on manners. He also happened to be born at the beginning of the First Crusade and lived to the incredible age—for that time period—of 93.

Cobb’s path to Usama came about indirectly but began when he was an undergraduate and decided to learn Arabic. Studying anthropology and classics at the time, he had the vague notion that he’d like to work on an archaeological dig. Since most of the advertised digs were in the Middle East, he thought it might be a good idea to learn the language, so he took his first course as a freshman and was hooked. “You don’t realize when you first begin to learn it,” Cobb explains, “but any given word that you read on a page can have many nuances of meaning that hover around it. As you get into it, you realize you get, particularly in poetry, a real sense of

many, many layers of meaning and flavor in the text. The playfulness of the language is really wonderful.”

Cobb’s first dig was in Jordan. It was a pivotal experience. His first trip was during the 1980s, a time when Muslims and Arabs were often demonized. But, he says, “to actually go to the Middle East, make friends, hang out, travel around a bit and engage with a living Middle Eastern society was transformative to me.” He never went back—to any other subject of study, that is. Engagement with the people, the culture and specifically the language changed the course of his academic career, and it was his love of Arabic along with the Levant (the

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Paul Cobb with glazed tiles from Ottoman Turkey, 16th – 17th centuries

region of Syria, Lebanon, Israel/Palestine and Jordan) that would lead Cobb to translate Usama's *The Book of Contemplation*.

Though it is often called a memoir, *The Book of Contemplation* is really a collection of anecdotes, not all autobiographical, strung together to elucidate the effects of God's will on man and beast. Whether Usama is writing about himself, the Franks (as the Crusaders were called),

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his neighbors (who were sometimes Franks as well) or the funeral procession for his family's favorite hunting hawk, each story serves to show that God alone chooses the moment for failure or success. More importantly for us, the sum of these stories gives a rare glimpse into everyday life in the medieval Middle East. "I find it very evocative of a world that no longer exists," Cobb says. "He talks a lot about, for example, hunting. This is what you did when

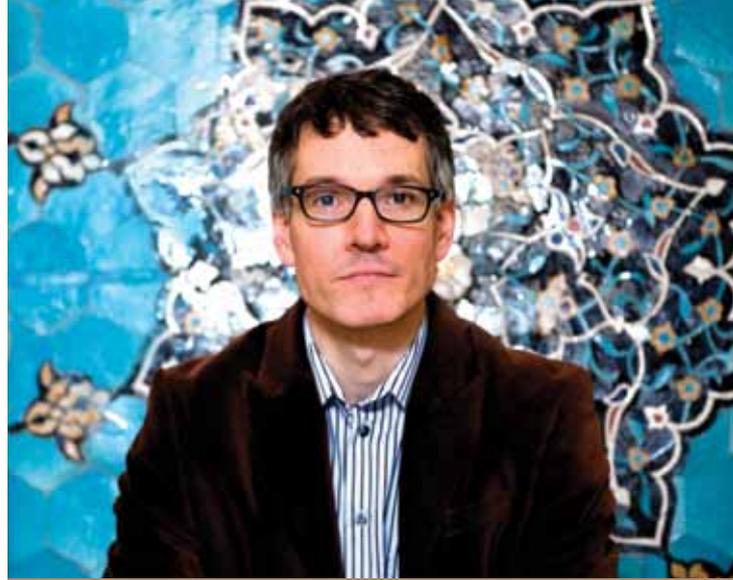
you weren't fighting when you were someone like Usama. And he talks about hunting lions and partridges. There are no lions in Syria anymore!"

The book was translated previously in 1929 by Philip Hitti, the man most considered to be the father of Middle East studies in America. But the fields of Crusade studies and Islamic history have developed and expanded greatly since then. Since Usama wrote in the Middle Ages, Hitti decided to make the text sound "medieval." Using *thees* and *thous* and archaic medieval terms, the book, Cobb might argue, sounds more like Sir Walter Scott than Usama ibn Munqidh, and it's not really true to the author's intent. Only parts of Usama's book are written in an elevated style. Most of the text, Cobb says, is "quite chatty. It's written in a very conversational, modern style, and it's quite witty in a very dry sort of way."

Translation can be an unsung endeavor, particularly when it is assumed that the process consists of nothing more than a one-to-one correspondence between words. This is not the case with Arabic, a lesson Cobb impresses upon his students through close reading of original texts, which to him is "the epitome of the sort of humanistic enterprise that places like Penn make possible."

Cobb has vivid memories of working in Egypt, surrounded by piles of books, trying to research the historical context to the particular use of a particular technical term. To translate Usama, a day's worth of research could be spent on one phrase in Arabic. But the result of that labor, published by Penguin Classics in

Cobb with mosaic tile panel from a Sufi retreat, Iran, early 16th century



2008, is the revelation of a personable and vivid witness to a hinge moment in the history of the relationship between Islam and the West, and a strong antidote to cartoonish images about the Islamic world during the Crusades.

As an historian, Cobb is attracted to narrative, particularly lost narratives. Even before he became interested in Usama and the Crusades, he was drawn to the literary aspects of narrative: how history is written, by whom and for what purpose. “Narrative,” he says, “is a very important tool for depicting the correctness or incorrectness of one’s side.”

Winston Churchill coined the adage, “History is written by the victors,” but that’s not the case with the Crusades. Much of the story we know is told from the viewpoint of the Franks, the people who lost. In medieval Islam, the term “Crusades” did not even exist. Usama and his contemporaries saw the campaigns simply as barbarian invasions, the most recent phase of a much longer history of Frankish aggression toward the Islamic world. And there were worse things going on: the Mongol invasions to the east were much more devastating and frightening.

An Islamic story of the Crusades does exist, just not as a separate narrative. In bits and pieces scattered throughout the larger world of medieval Arabic

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literature, it lives—some of it still in manuscript form. “I am constantly amazed,” Cobb says, “by how much information there is about the Crusades out there, but it’s just very difficult to extract. It’s not conveniently indexed and not easy to access.”

That’s where he is stepping in. With Usama’s story told anew, he is turning his attention to the Crusades themselves. In his next book, Cobb is weaving into a single narrative the Islamic side of the story from beginning to end. “It’s an interesting exercise,” he says. “For one thing, it forces you to grapple with the fact that the history of the Crusades as we understand it today is not written in stone.” ♦

RECREATING THE GIFT

BY PROFESSOR PAUL COBB

I love teaching. What I like best about it is getting students excited about research. I know this will come as a surprise to my colleagues, but research is not something that most people think is fun. And when I can get my undergraduate students immediately engaged with the sources as much as possible—obviously very few of them have the knowledge of Arabic—but in translation, if I can get them grappling with these strange, funny, rich, complicated, befuddling texts, it thrills me.

The other thing that attracted me to Penn is the strong graduate program in Islamic history. I remember when I first arrived at the University of Chicago, the first class I ever took—first class, first semester, first moment in graduate school—was Readings in Arabic Geographers. The professor was the man who became my advisor. We read medieval Arabic geographical texts, kind of like Marco Polo, but in Arabic. They were great fun. Deceptively simple texts, but they talked about the strange customs and commodities of this broader world that medieval Muslims inhabited. They were fascinating on all kinds of levels.

Then, my first semester here at Penn, I decided to teach that very same class. It’s great that I’m able to do that—to teach such classes on a regular basis. There’s nothing more representative of the best of the humanistic endeavor than sitting at a table with a student—undergraduate or graduate—and reading together the same text and going through it and talking about and speculating about meaning and context. The students will laugh to hear this, but it was very moving for me to be able to do that for the first time, to kind of recreate the gift that my graduate teachers were able to give to me.

Adapted from an interview transcript.