Asyssya to Liberia
Written by Richard Congivton
It around 600 BC when a god-fantasized migration from Phoenicia, along the eastern Mediterranean coast, west to the metal-rich island of Sardinia, and thence, he combined and reinterpreted several early Egyptian symbols to make the beak-shaped panel. Both his move and his craft were part of the flow of trade, arts and cultures that defined much of the pre-Roman Mediterranean and Near East, which this winter became the focus of the second of Ar't's third exhibition to explore early cross-cultural exchanges.

Suffaces of Duneen County, 1500-1700
Following the end of the Duneen kingdom in south-central Ireland was home to a hereditary class of kings. Coated with gold and silver, these works were part of the royal offerings to the gods, and were intended to protect them in the afterlife.

New Rituals, New Religion
Dahomey during the 16th and 17th centuries was transformed by the appearance of a new culture. As part of the shift to a state religion, the king and his close associates were deified and venerated. The king was a priest, and the people were expected to worship him. The king's power was derived from his ability to perform rituals that were believed to bring about good fortune for the community.

And so it was, the exhibition will explore the art and culture of the Middle East from the 16th to the 17th centuries, with a focus on the role of art and architecture in the formation of identity and the construction of power. The exhibition will feature works from major international collections and private collections, and will offer insights into a period of high ritual expression, where art and architecture were closely intertwined with politics and religion.

Pearl of a String: Art and Identity in the Islamic World
The exhibition explores the art and identity of the Muslim world, focusing on the role of art and architecture in the formation of identity and the construction of power. The exhibition will feature works from major international collections and private collections, and will offer insights into a period of high ritual expression, where art and architecture were closely intertwined with politics and religion.


dubai, uae, march 22 - the dhabi museum is currently presenting an exhibition of artworks from the islamic world, which is the most comprehensive exhibition of islamic art ever held in the united arab emirates.

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The Busbecq Letters 24
Written by Jane Waldron Grutz

Dispatched in 1554 to Istanbul by the Hapsburg archduke to defuse rivalry with the Ottoman sultan, ambassador Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq spent seven patient years securing a treaty and, to the delight of curious Europeans, writing thoughtful letters devoted to his insider’s glimpses of the most powerful empire of his time under its most powerful sultan, Suleiman “the Magnificent.”

Dubai Melting Pot 32
Written by Felicia Campbell | Photography & video by Celia Peterson

Beyond the shadows of Dubai’s skyscrapers lies working-class Satwa, and along its main drag Al Diyafah, a treasure-trove of restaurants serves up a hemisphere-spanning selection of Asian and Near Eastern home-cooking.

Travelers of Al-Andalus, Part II: Abu Hamid Al-Garnati’s World of Wonders 36
Written by Ingrid Bejarano Escanilla and Louis Werner
Art by Belén Esturla

Over his 90-year lifetime, this chronicler of fact and unabashed fancy trekked, sailed, caravanned, studied and traded from the far Arab West to the northern- and easternmost reaches of the 12th-century Islamic world.

Classroom Guide 40
Written by Julie Weiss

Suggestions for Reading 42

Events & Exhibitions 46
Top: Around 700 BCE, the Phoenician settlement of Spal, a predecessor of Seville, Spain, was large and established enough that its priests used this sumptuous, intricate and heavy gold necklace for rituals. Part of the four-piece Carambalo treasure, it shows the high art that Phoenicia spread throughout the Mediterranean.

Right: Dated slightly earlier and resembling others from Greece and Anatolia is a bronze cauldron from Tomb 79 in Salamis, Cyprus, that features eight griffin and four siren-men protomes.

Far right: Under Ashurnasirpal II, the Neo-Assyrian empire began its expansion west to the Mediterranean. This 113-centimeter (44 ½”) magnesite statue is a rare sculpture in the round from the period.
It was the start of the Iron Age, in the first half of the first millennium BCE, and trade routes wove the Near East, North Africa and the lands of the Mediterranean into a deeply symbiotic web of cultures.
On Samos,
a speck of a Greek island off the Turkish coast, one of the oddest treasures on display in the Archeological Museum is a locally discovered, bronze mace-head depicting the frightful demon Pazuzu.

It came from Mesopotamia, more than 1500 kilometers to the east. In Tuscany, Italy, equally fearsome lion heads, imported from the kingdom of Urartu in what is now Armenia and eastern Turkey, ring the tops of bronze cauldrons. In the waters off southeastern Spain, a recently excavated shipwreck yielded African elephant tusks inscribed with the names of Phoenician gods. These prizes likely came from a Phoenician colony near Seville or Cádiz, some 4000 kilometers from the heartland of the Phoenicians at the eastern end of the Mediterranean. And these same seafaring merchants can be thanked for the very existence of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which were written down from oral tradition between the eighth and the sixth centuries BCE, after the Greeks had adopted the Phoenicians’ clever idea of writing by using an alphabet.

It was the start of the Iron Age, the first half of the first millennium BCE, long before “globalization” and the Internet came to define our own hyper-connected era, and trade routes had already woven the Near East, North Africa and the Mediterranean into a highly complex, deeply symbiotic web of cultures. By Homer’s time, around the beginning of the millennium, there was a flourishing, intercontinental trade in exquisite gold, jewelry and ivory, exotic cult objects, intricately crafted furniture and polished silver bowls masterfully incised with elaborate scenes of heroic hunting and battle, as well as more ordinary wares.

Likely carved early in Ashurnasirpal II’s 24-year rule (probably in 880 BCE), this winged figure was among the gypsum bas-relief frescoes that decorated the Northwest Palace at Nimrud, the first Neo-Assyrian location in which such frescoes are known to have been produced. The cuneiform script in the middle records the ruler’s lineage and describes the city and palace. Originally, it was brightly painted.
The kingdoms, territories and cultures were many, but there was one major driving force behind these exchanges: the Neo-Assyrian empire. At its height in the seventh century BCE, it stretched from its capital at Nineveh in present-day Iraq to encompass Babylonia and western Iran, northern Egypt, the Levant and Anatolia. Heir to the less extensive—and less voraciously expansive—Assyrian empires of the third and second millennia BCE, it nevertheless did not project itself into the Mediterranean. To reach west, the Neo-Assyrians allied with the Phoenicians, who brought back tribute, carried on maritime commerce and searched for resources.

Fueling much exploration was the search for iron, which proved superior to bronze for tools and weapons. Phoenician sailors and traders established posts across the ancient world, including the North African coast at Carthage, the major islands of the Mediterranean and along both the southern and western coasts of Iberia (now Spain and Portugal).

Even King Midas, who was a real sovereign in seventh- or eighth-century BCE Phrygia (now Turkey), played a part in intercultural diplomacy. According to the Greek historian Herodotus, Midas was the first foreign ruler to pay homage to the prophetic oracle at the Greek sanctuary of Delphi. This journey took him across the Aegean Sea some 800 kilometers west. Although legend has it that everything Midas touched turned to gold—perhaps the story pertains to an earlier king also named Midas, but no one is quite sure—the majestic throne he bestowed on the oracle at Delphi was made of wood and ivory. A figurine that helped decorate this continent-spanning gift, 35 centimeters (9") tall and bug-eyed, with his left hand resting on a tamed lion and the right grasping a spear in a traditional “Master of Animals” stance, stood this winter among other prize objects in the exhibition “Assyria to Iberia at the Dawn of the Classical Age” at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art.

“We think of ourselves as living in a global age, but really you have to look far back in time to see how closely people interacted,” explained exhibition curator Joan Aruz as she guided me around the galleries. The first millennium BCE was the first era in which the arts and goods from different cultures were transported across three continents—much of it from western Asia (the Near East) and Africa to southern Europe, she said.

“You have to understand this phase in order to appreciate what came afterwards, but most people are unaware of what was going on before the Greek classical period. They think it just emerged out of the head of Zeus, like Athena,” she added with a laugh.

Taking a broad measure of the wide-ranging debt the western classical world owes its mostly Near Eastern antecedents, the exhibition’s focus lay not on individual kingdoms or states, not on life in Assyria or Phoenicia, Egypt or Judah, Elam, Urartu, Greece, Etruria or Iberia—the list goes on—but on what linked them all: artistic, cultural, economic and religious exchanges. Over the five years it took to develop the show, Aruz and her colleagues selected and secured some 260 objects from 41 museums and institutions in 14 countries. Staging a exhibition restricted to a single civilization would have been child’s play by comparison.

Aruz and her team brought ample experience to the challenge. “Assyria to Iberia” was the third in a series of major

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**Assyria and Syria**

The kingdoms of Assyria and the modern state of Syria are distinct territories. At its peak in the seventh century BCE, the Assyrian empire encompassed the whole of the modern nations of Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait and Bahrain, as well as the Turkish-Greek island of Cyprus, together with large swathes of Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Sudan, Libya, Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan. Much smaller is modern Syria, established as an independent state in 1924 after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and bordered by Lebanon and the Mediterranean to the west, Turkey to the north, Iraq to the east, Jordan to the south and Israel to the southwest.
exhibits telling the stories of early arts and trade from the Indus valley in the east to the westernmost reaches of the Mediterranean. In 2003, “Art of the First Cities” examined Mesopotamian and Sumerian cultures in the third millennium BCE. “Beyond Babylon,” the second episode that followed in 2008, looked at the dominant Babylonian empire of the second millennium BCE. This latest installation encompassed the first half of the first millennium, the early Iron Age, when Assyria controlled the Near East until the Babylonians and the Medes overthrew it at the end of the seventh century BCE.

It was a war-ravaged era, but also one of tectonic cultural ferment. The period brought a deluge of Near Eastern art styles, religious and mythic symbols and imagery, as well as new techniques for fashioning gold, silver, bronze, glass, pottery and stone, surging westward, carried largely by Phoenician merchants, itinerant artisans and Greek mercenaries. The Mediterranean was awash in sculptures of snarling bronze griffins, striding sphinxes, voluptuous goddesses, fantastic bird men and triumphant kings. Many of the creature-images had apotropaic functions, that is, they were talismans, placed on wall reliefs, furniture, cauldrons and other objects to ward off evil.

Like its predecessor exhibits, much in “Assyria to Iberia” was both revisionist and expansive, a story writ large that heightened awareness of the richness of the arts and cultures of the Near East and, most of all, their pervasive influences on the esthetics of what later emerged as the western classical world.

“The public at large is more focused on current events and doesn’t realize what vital centers of culture these places were,” Aruz pointed out. For example, she added, the area of Mosul, Iraq, hotly and painfully contested in recent years, was the heartland of the Neo-Assyrian empire.

Ambitious as it was, the exhibition could not cover everything. The presentation only touched on the extensive and powerful Arabian spice routes, for instance, although intriguing scholarly tidbits surfaced during symposia in conjunction with the exhibition. Aruz herself was particularly enthused about a recent find at Megiddo in Israel, in which traces of cinnamon were identified inside Phoenician jars.

“When you realize this cinnamon came from Southeast Asia, it’s just amazing to see how far these people were traveling along the spice routes,” she explained.

The exhibition also brought welcome attention to rarely viewed artifacts from lesser-known, far-flung local collections, including islands such as Samos, Rhodes and Sardinia, as well as Yerevan in Armenia and others. In addition, out-of-sight pieces in well-known institutions like the British Museum and others were brought out of storage and placed on view often for the first time in decades, if ever. Time and again during our tour, Aruz introduced an object by saying that few people, if anyone, had seen it before. Quite a number, she said, she discovered by chance while visiting a museum to inspect a known object only to stumble, happily, across others either on display or languishing in the basement. With this exposure, these smaller museums are likely to attract more visitors and scholars, she predicted.

Occasionally, Aruz’s archeological sleuthing had more than a whiff of Indiana Jones. Unlike the cinematic tomb raider, however, Aruz wielded neither a whip nor a trained monkey, but her museum’s prestige. This secured more easily the numerous items from museums that had lent the New York institution objects for previous exhibitions, and
it opened new doors—literally, in one case. Although Grana-da’s archeological museum has been closed for decades, she brushed this inconvenience aside and arranged to view pieces she had heard about from colleagues: alabaster jars transported to Iberia all the way from Egypt to serve as burial urns in a Phoenician cemetery. One jar even bore the jowly visage of Bes, the ancient Egyptian deity invoked to safeguard mothers, children and households.

London’s British Museum presented an opposite challenge. With holdings so vastly numerous, so encyclopedic, many antiquities remain out of sight, including, it turned out, a uniquely intimate banquet relief of Assyrian king Ashurbanipal and his consort. Depicting the couple on their thrones, each raising saucer-shaped drinking cups to toast his victory over the Elamites, this gypsum-alabaster sculpture is one of the few images to show Assyrian potentates not bashing heads, hunting lions or casting baleful gazes upon their subjects. (Nonetheless, the severed head of the vanquished Elamite king dangles from a nearby pine tree, somewhat spoiling the moment of repose, at least to modern eyes.)

“This stone panel was shrouded in gloom,” said Aruz, “but I immediately realized we had to have it.”

On Samos, the otherwise unassuming antiquities collection revealed another astonishing lode. “What is amazing here is that you walk into a place that is almost never visited and it is absolutely packed with Near Eastern artifacts,” the curator observed. Virtually all of them landed on the island as votive offerings for the temple sanctuary of Hera, the Greek goddess of women and marriage (and the wife of Zeus). Phoenician merchants, Greek mercenaries in the Assyrian army, emissaries and pilgrims from around the Near East and the Mediterranean flocked to the sanctuary, known as the Heraion, and their donations beseeched the goddess’s favor.

As a result of such diffuse origins, some items on Samos are like detective mysteries waiting to be solved. A bronze equine chest plate, or frontlet, depicts four female figures and three feline heads. An inscription in Aramaic describes it as a gift to the ninth-century bce king Hazael of Aram-Damascus. The funny thing is that an identical inscription turned up on a matching bronze blinker, used to shield a horse’s eyes, discovered some 325 kilometers across the Aegean in Eretria, north of Athens, where it had been a dedication to another Greek sanctuary, that of Apollo, god of the sun, arts and prophecy. Aruz concluded that both items probably originated in the same set.
“How could this have happened?” she wondered aloud as we studied the reunited artifacts. One scenario, she proposed, is that Assyrians carried the valuable set of luxury fittings back from Damascus to their capital of Nimrud after defeating Hazael; from there, Greek mercenaries who had fought for the Assyrians brought them as gifts for the gods on their return to their homeland. Or, she speculated, perhaps there were sanctuary officials who traveled, working a network—“the way we look for items on eBay or the Internet”—to seek out valuable dedications for their temples.

“Both explanations may be true,” the curator suggested. “It’s just mind-boggling to speculate where these objects may have traveled.” Similarly, a 13-centimeter (5\(\text{\textprime}\)) bronze figurine of a mushushu, a mythical dragon-monster, also surfaced at Samos’s Heraion. Why a beast sacred to the Babylonian deity Marduk, and likely crafted in Babylon, ended up being presented to a Greek goddess more than 1500 kilometers west remains an enigma as well as a symbol of an era of cultural cross-pollinations.

This theme of wide dispersal of similar objects ran throughout the exhibition. A pair of bronze bowls, both a bit more than 21 centimeters (8\(\text{\textprime}\)) in diameter and both bearing finely wrought, standing sphinxes symbolizing Assyria, posed with their paws atop the heads of defeated Asiatic enemies, appear so nearly identical they might have come out of the same Phoenician workshop. But one was unearthed on Crete, and the other at a palace in Nimrud. Perhaps both did originate in Phoenicia, or perhaps an itinerant Phoenician artisan made his way to Crete: The only thing anyone knows for sure is that they are still more evidence of a culturally interwoven world.

For the Assyrians, the bloody business of battle, conquest
and looting were their strong suits; modesty was not. Slab-like stone plaques, many as tall or taller than a person, like the one in the exhibit picturing a hawk-headed guardian spirit that once was brightly painted, adorned Nimrud’s Northwest Palace. Nearly all bore what scholars call the Standard Inscription exalting Ashurnasirpal II, “king of the world, king of Assyria ... the mighty warrior ... whose hand has conquered all lands.”

One of those conquered lands was the kingdom of Urartu, north of Assyria, in what is now eastern Turkey and Armenia. Famed for their metalwork, Urartians fashioned weapons, helmets and shields embossed with lion-headed serpents and sacred trees to ward off evil in general and their Assyrian foes in particular. Bashed, bent and ripped with gaping holes from spear thrusts, one magnificent, burnished shield on display illustrated an object lesson in defeat. “This is just a taste of what it must have been like to go to war against the Assyrians,” Aruz wryly observed as we regarded the crumpled armor.

But it was the gruesome depiction of the battle of Til Tuba, in what is now southern Iran, that most forcefully drove home Assyria’s take-no-prisoners battle ethos. This wall-sized, almost panoramic relief, more than two meters high and nearly five-and-a-half wide, details more than a dozen brutal scenes: In one, the Elamite king Teumann and his eldest son are beheaded in front of one another, surrounded by a fray of upended chariots and carnage; in another, Assyrians force the Elamites’ Babylonian allies to their knees to grind the bones of their own ancestors in humiliation.

More tranquil scenes of daily life were not generally regarded as worth the effort of sculpture: War, hunting, invoking gods and

Around the seventh century BCE, Phoenician craft workers near Cádiz and Seville incised and carved numerous ivory and bone objects in Near Eastern styles, including this 13-centimeter (5”) plaque that shows a griffin, a hunter and a lion.

Showing that cross-pollination was nothing particularly new even in the late Bronze Age, this ivory game box depicting a chariot hunt dates from 1250-1100 BCE. Found on Cyprus at Enkomi, it displays Aegean, Canaanite, Egyptian and Mesopotamian motifs and styles.
monsters for apotropaic protection were the rule. That’s why the isolated domestic tableau showing a woman sitting on a chair, her feet daintily folded beneath her and proudly holding up a threaded spindle, seems so exceptional. Its realism and simple humanity impart a rare confidential glimpse into a private domain in the distant past. Tellingly, the bitumen relief sculpture is not Assyrian, but Elamite.

No less unusual and compelling is another ivory relief that stopped us in our tracks: It shows a Nubian boy being mauled by a lioness. “There’s such a strange combination of violence and tenderness, as the lioness cradles the boy’s head in her paw even as she is tearing out his throat with her teeth,” said Aruz. In spite of its grisly subject, there was an ineffable compassion toward the boy’s sacrifice, as if in it there lay some mystical meaning waiting to be decoded.

Among the largest items in the exhibit, two imposing basalt monoliths, from the Syro-Hittite site of Tell Halaf, attested to the persistence of a restoration team in Berlin that faced a mountain of nearly 30,000 archeological fragments, the remains of some 30 sculptures that shattered in a World War II firebombing. The splinters had languished in the cellars of the Pergamon Museum for nearly six decades, East German officials having judged the works as irretrievably lost.

Optimistic experts from the reunified country, however, thought otherwise. It was, essentially, a series of giant, 3-D puzzles—less complicated no doubt than putting together the split German nation, but monumental nonetheless. Beginning in 2001 and finishing nine years later, the experts reassembled more than 30 sculptures. One scorpion-tailed bird man with a distinguished beard stood over a meter and a half tall, and he guarded the site’s Western Palace much like the better-known winged sentinels at Nineveh and the scorpion-men standing watch over the sunrise in the Mesopotamian epic of Gilgamesh.

Nearby was a distinctly less impressive chunk of basalt. A little larger than a hand span on each side, the rather ordinary-looking stele turned out to be a unique document of dramatic historical importance. Inscribed in Aramaic, the text recounted the

“A strange combination of violence and tenderness,” said curator Joan Aruz of this ninth- or eighth-century BCE plaque of ivory, gold and semiprecious stones, shown here nearly slightly larger than life-size, from Nimrud’s Northwest Palace. Though Neo-Assyrian in origin, its style is Phoenician and its iconography draws from Egypt, where such images expressed royal authority over territory, here interpreted as Nubia due to the youth’s hairstyle.

“The Near East in antiquity was, as it is today, a diverse and complicated milieu of distinct polities, states and empires that cannot be fully understood without focusing on the cross-currents of their interaction.”

—Thomas P. Campbell, director, Metropolitan Museum of Art
conquests of the ninth-century BCE Syrian king Hazael, and among them appears a royal descendant of the House of David. This is the sole known mention of the Davidic dynasty outside the Bible, the first archeological evidence of the historical existence of King David as the founder of Judah.

Among the show’s most delicate, hauntingly arresting works were *Tridacna squamosa*, or giant clam shells, as big across as a hand, incised with mind-blowingly detailed tableaux including miniature musicians, lotus buds, palm trees and—rather incredibly—in kilts riding jauntily caparisoned horses. The hinged knob of one shell was carved to resemble the head of a woman, or perhaps the goddess Astarte, her long tresses morphing into feathers as they streamed down the shell back that undulates like waves. Another shell bore the incised head and face of a bird at its top; swooping wings etched on the shell’s exterior protectively sheltered a pair of compact sphinxes. *Tridacna* clams thrive in the warm waters of the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Gulf and the Red Sea, and their shells were imported over vast distances to be engraved in Levantine workshops. From there, they were exported across the Near East and the Mediterranean as luxury containers for cosmetics.

The most publicized of the show’s curatorial coups involved, perhaps not surprisingly, gold. Aruz’s acquisition for loan from Seville of the seventh-century BCE Carambolgo treasure made front-page headlines in Spain. Weighing in at a stupendous 2.4 kilograms (5¼ lb), the solid gold necklace, bracelets and plaques were items worn by Phoenician priests who presided over ritual sacrifices of animals to the Phoenician deities Baal and Astarte by colonists of Spal, near what is now the modern city of Seville.

So valuable are these relics that the city’s archeological museum displays replicas, and the originals are kept in the vault of the national bank. When Aruz insisted that the Metropolitan would accept only the originals, the Spanish authorities took her to the vaults and made the New York show a rare occasion when the public was allowed to view them.

Like any power, Neo-Assyrian domination did not forever endure. After bringing the Near East to heel for centuries, the once-invincible empire was fatally weakened in the mid-seventh century BCE by a civil war between jointly ruling, rival brothers. One of them, Ashurbanipal, was portrayed in the show on a stone stele bearing a basket of earth on his head to symbolize his role in rebuilding Babylon after his grandfather Sennacherib had mercilessly sacked the city some two decades earlier. To his elder brother Shamash-shuma-ukin, named by their father as the king of Babylon, the inscription pledged fond wishes: “May his days be long and may he be fully satisfied with (his) good fortune.”

But after 16 years of sharing power, Shamash-shuma-ukin revolted against his brother. Ashurbanipal mounted a four-year siege of Babylon that produced a famine that drove the city’s inhabitants to cannibalism. The defeated brother immolated himself in the flames of his burning palace in 648 BCE. Some 36 years later, in 612 BCE, Ashurbanipal’s capital city of Nineveh was in turn sacked by vengeful Babylonians. The Neo-Assyrian empire gave way to Neo-Babylonian rulers. Not long after that, they too gave way, to Persians, who brought about yet another fall of Babylon in 539 BCE.

Some 200 years later, armies under the command of a Macedonian warrior later dubbed Alexander the Great brought an unprecedented wave of Greek conquest that swept from west to east, reversing the flow of culture and exchange, setting the world stage for the rise of western classical cultures. ☎

In addition to contributing regularly to *AramcoWorld*, Paris-based Richard Covington (richardpcovington@gmail.com) has written about culture, history and science for numerous publications.

www.metmuseum.org

Related articles at www.aramcoworld.com
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Roads of Arabia: M/A 11
SEA CHANGE comes to BAGAMOYO
Be happy, my soul, let go of all worries. Soon the place of your yearnings will be reached. The town of palms, Bagamoyo. Far away, how my heart was aching. Be quiet, my heart, all worries are gone. The drum beats, and with rejoicing we are reaching Bagamoyo.

— SONG OF THE CARAVAN PORTERS (circa 19th century, original in Swahili)

On the winding, palm-studded road, halfway from Dar es Salaam north to Bagamoyo, traffic comes to a standstill where crews have been working their way up from the capital, doubling the width of the old, two-lane road. Buses and cars negotiate dusty twists and turns until the road narrows and the lush green valleys open up and come in close on both sides. At Bagamoyo town, small shops and art galleries dot the roadsides; old men wearing kanzu and kofia glide by on worn bicycles while clusters of young men wearing flashy caps wait in the shade with their motorbikes. Women draped in colorful headscarves and bright dresses, others in skinny jeans and T-shirts, saunter in pairs or alone along the road carrying packages on their heads. Along Bagamoyo’s scraggly, white-sand coast, the tide slips in. By nightfall it is quiet, and only an occasional bark from a dog pierces the silence.

All across the United Republic of Tanzania, as it has been known since 1964, it is general election season as President Jakaya Mrisho
Kikwete’s second and final five-year term comes to a close in October. On the outskirts, opposition Chadema party supporters wave their blue, white and red flags from honking cars, as they attempt to stake a claim here in Kikwete’s birthplace, 70 kilometers north of the capital, Dar es Salaam. Indeed, most Bagamoyo residents support Kikwete as a native son and, for his part, Kikwete has focused in his final term on setting up his beloved hometown for an unprecedented future by laying plans for a “mega-port” that would compete with—and dwarf—not only the Tanzanian ports in Dar es Salaam, Tanga and Mtwara, but also the Kenyan ports of Lamu and Mombasa.

Quiet as it may seem today, Bagamoyo is no stranger to great changes. Located within the Pwani (Coastal) District of Tanzania, it’s a well-worn, old city, population estimated at 30,000, that is lined with historical architecture inspired by the ruined Kaole mosque, built out of coral stone by traders who arrived in 1250 CE from Shiraz (now in Iran). Their commerce first linked this coast to the Arabian Peninsula, Persia, India and China.
by German, Indian and Arab designs, alongside a fledgling modern commercial district. Once integral to the “Swahili coast” commercial network that stretched more than 1000 kilometers from Mogadishu in central Somalia to Kilwa in southern Tanzania, it was also the link between the African interior and the rest of the world via the island of Zanzibar, just 40 kilometers offshore.

To 34-year-old entrepreneur Felix Nyakatale, whose restaurant Poa Poa is a four-year-old success story, Bagamoyo feels like “a ghost town on the verge of a major wake-up call.” Born and raised in northwestern Tanzania, land of Mt. Kilimanjaro, he came to the coast with a pioneer’s spirit that saw opportunity in burgeoning tourist traffic hungry for smoothies and pizzas as well as local fish, savory stews and ugali (hot, doughy cornmeal). Tall, lanky and handsome, Nyakatale speaks softly and confidently about his decision to open a restaurant. “There’s nothing else like this here. People come to us looking for music, for friends.”

Located on the first floor of a restored, historic two-story Swahili house where he conveniently lives on the airy top floor, Poa Poa represents business savvy, risk and social change. “Everybody’s coming here,” Nyakatale says with pride. “We have locals, regulars and expats too, tourists, just visiting. It’s a good mix. We’re always busy.” To him, the development plans bring hope. “At the rate Bagamoyo is growing, Poa Poa will thrive. We’ve even built a brand new kitchen. Take a look.”

Bagamoyo is one of the oldest towns on Tanzania’s map. Its origins predate Periplus of the Eritrean Sea, the guide to maritime travel among China, India, East Africa and Arabia written by an anonymous Greek seafarer in the first century CE. As far back as 600-800 CE, Bantu-speaking Zaramu, Ziga, Doe and Kwere tribes lived here, having originated in the interior of what was then referred to by explorers as Azania. Subsisting on fishing, hunting and gathering, they and their lives were disrupted in 1250 by the arrival of a cluster of families from Shiraz, Persia (now Iran). Attracted by fertile land and ample fishing, the “Shirazis” established a port and settlement a few kilometers southeast of Bagamoyo that is known to this day as Kaole.

Now ruins where flies buzz and crickets croak in murky mangroves, Kaole evokes a critical historical moment, explains Abdallah Ulimwengu, executive secretary of the Bagamoyo Tour Guide Association. He ambles over to the crumbling arches of a long-abandoned mosque, and with a distant gaze he distills Bagamoyo’s complex and spotted history.

Although Islam’s presence in East Africa officially dates back to seventh-century Ethiopia, he says, the Shirazis were

“We welcome development of every kind, as long as there’s a clear plan,” says Abdallah Ulimwengu of the Bagamoyo Tour Guide Association.

Built by Omani sultans based in Zanzibar, the old customs house was later used by Germany, which made Bagamoyo its headquarters in East Africa in 1884.
likely the first Muslims to come to this south-central coast. Here they constructed the region’s first mosques out of ragged coral rock, which they inscribed with rough Arabic calligraphy. Arriving with porcelain from China, jewels and housewares, Kaole merchants went on to export ivory, rhino horns, animal skins, tortoise shells, glass beads, daggers, bowls and other treasures, often to the Swahili city-state of Kilwa, 300 kilometers to the south and at the southern limit of the monsoon winds whose annual cycles powered Indian Ocean maritime trade. Minted copper coins from Kilwa, in the name of Shirazi ruler Ali ibn Al-Hassan, hint at the extent of trade along these shores. The name Kaole itself, Ulimwengu points out with a smile, comes from a Bantu expression *chite kalole mwaarabu vitandile* that means, roughly, “Let’s go see what the Arabs are doing.”

Kilwa thrived as a trade hub until the early 1500s. En route to India, Portuguese explorer Vasco de Gama arrived on the Swahili coast in early 1498, and he was followed by Francisco de Almeida, who is said to have ransacked Kilwa in 1505. Soon afterward, the Portuguese easily conquered Kaole and ushered in 150 years of notoriously unrelenting rule.

In 1698, Omani Sultan Saif bin Sultan reclaimed the coast by waging and winning the battle at Fort Jesus in Mombasa, Kenya. Soon afterward, Oman assumed power over much of the Swahili coast, including the islands of Zanzibar. To secure Kaole, the sultan commanded Persian Shomvi settlers from the northern Swahili coast and hired nomadic Baluchi mercenaries from Pakistan. Kaole stabilized, but not for long.

According to Ulimwengu, an “unruly mangrove invasion” brought on Kaole’s gradual demise. Now in his 40s, he has spent the last 15 years unraveling Bagamoyo’s past. Originally from Kigoma, Tanzania, he came to Bagamoyo after living in South Africa for many years, and he says he was immediately drawn to the stories buried here.

“Others say the growth of nearby Dunde town overshadowed Kaole as a central port, but I think it was the mangroves,” he says, pointing to the swampy marshes nearby. “There’s no way boats could pull up to a shore like this.” Over the next 200 years, Omani sultans rose and fell from power as dynasties changed, and Kaole faded out of use, forgotten.

By the early 1830s, Sultan Said bin Sultan had moved his court from Muscat, Oman, to Zanzibar’s Stone Town. When he died in 1856, his son Majid bin Sultan continued to rule Zanzibar, and from there, Majid oversaw a slave-and-ivory trade that relied on Bagamoyo as a gateway to and from the African interior. By mid-century and for some years beyond, an estimated 20,000 to 50,000 slaves (as well as great quantities of ivory, much of it carried by captives) transited annually through Bagamoyo. Although a few remained to serve Bagamoyo’s elite, the vast majority were sent first to Zanzibar, where they worked on clove or sugar plantations or served as domestics; many others were sent farther, to the Middle East and Indian subcontinent.

In town, the old slave market has become The Bagamoyo Art Market, supported by the town’s artist community around the Bagamoyo Institute of Arts and Culture, which teaches Tanzanian painting, sculpture, drama, dance and drumming.
By this time, the port had shifted from Kaole to what is now known as mji mkongwe, “old town,” where today Arab, German and Indian buildings, in varied states of decrepitude and restoration, still line the cobblestone road that runs parallel to the sea through three neighborhoods. Ulimwengu knows each crumbling building along this thoroughfare, where young men on motorbikes chat in roadside clusters, waiting for passengers. “Most Bagamoyo youth have no idea of this history,” he says. One street over, on another sun-kissed and dusty road, Ulimwengu points to local artists who have transformed the wooden pavilion that once was the slave market into an outdoor gallery featuring painting, sculpture and wood carving. The gallery, he says, expresses a collective desire among young Bagamoyo artists to join the larger world economy, while history’s voices still seem to echo on every street corner.

By 1845, the British patrolled the Indian Ocean. The global abolition movement had led to a ban on the Indian Ocean slave trade, and it was officially gone by 1873, when it was abolished in Zanzibar. Hundreds of former slaves and their families relocated, sought work and attempted to receive what education they could. French and British Catholic missionaries set up schools in Zanzibar in 1860 and in Bagamoyo in 1868. The sultan and local shaykhs generally welcomed these missions in what some historians see as a mixture of strategic compromise and religious tolerance.

In 1884, Germany secured administrative rule over
mainland Tanzania, then called Tanganyika, and set up its colonial capital in Bagamoyo and, from there, threatened Oman’s seat of power in Zanzibar. With German rule came taxation, and with that came resistance: In 1889, Bushiri bin Saleim al Harth led an unsuccessful rebellion on Bagamoyo’s shores that became known as the Bushiri War.

Although Bagamoyo had become the most important port and capital of German East Africa, the Germans decided in 1891 to shift their port south to Dar es Salaam while maintaining administrative headquarters in Bagamoyo. Some say Dar es Salaam could accommodate larger ships, but Ulimwenгу suggests also that the Germans had been intimidated by Bushiri, who had come from the Pangini district north of Bagamoyo, and Dar es Salaam, being farther south, offered politically safer territory.

Under German rule, Bagamoyo residents continued to subsist on farming, fishing and dhow-building among the string of seaside villages in what is now the greater Bagamoyo district. Across the water in Zanzibar, the sultans of Oman still ruled, and the two powers entered into an agreement that extended the sultan’s rule 16 kilometers inland from the Bagamoyo coast.

After Germany’s defeat in World War I, Bagamoyo again faced change under British control. Street names changed. New roads and railways were built. After 43 years, in 1961, Tanganyika negotiated its independence from Britain and, in 1964, joined Zanzibar under a name that recognized both territories: “Tanzania.” Its first president, Julius Nyerere, was devotedly referred to as mwalimu (teacher), and he traveled to Bagamoyo early in his presidency promoting self-determination and Ujamaa, the socialist movement that shaped Tanzania’s future. Soon afterward, Bagamoyo found itself host to a training center, located on the road between Bagamoyo town and old Kaole, for soldiers of the Mozambican Liberation Front (Frelimo), who sought the independence of Tanzania’s southern neighbor Mozambique from the Portuguese rule that endured there.

**Now, 51 years since Tanzania’s independence,** Bagamoyo residents once more face what may prove to be a sea change, in both literal and figurative senses of the term. Last year, President Kikwete approved 16 development initiatives totaling $800 million in partnership with President Xi Jinping of the People’s Republic of China. Under the 30-year framework agreement signed in March 2013, these projects promise to utterly change Bagamoyo’s economy, its coastline and even its ecosystem with East Africa’s largest-ever port, an international airport and an industrial park.

Because no ground has yet been broken, it can appear that Bagamoyo residents remain relatively unaware of these plans beyond the news in *The Citizen* or word of mouth. However, local leaders have been briefed, community organizers have held meetings, and some properties slated for acquisition have been assessed for compensation. According to Kikwete’s office, port construction is to commence July 1.

The mega-port plans have stirred both anxiety and excitement. Kenya-based development consortium Trademark East Africa notes it will “tilt the scale in regional trade in favor of Tanzania.” Yet Bagamoyo residents like Anthony George Nyanga, a middle-aged community organizer who relaxes in a plastic chair with a cold orange Fanta after his workday, confesses he’s worried the port will overshadow the needs of local people. “Our youth: We need to create more jobs for them, give them more opportunities. Our education system faces terrible challenges. To succeed, you are not just carrying yourself; you carry your community.” But Felix Nyakatale of Poa Poa restaurant shrugs. “I’m confident that Bagamoyo is a city that is growing,” he insists. “I’m thinking about how to keep people coming through my door.”

That may not prove difficult: Estimated to be nearly five kilometers long and 1½ kilometers inland, in its grandest version the Bagamoyo port will handle more than 20 million containers per year. (For comparison, Dar es Salaam currently handles 500,000 to 800,000 per year; Tanga and Mtwara less.) According to *The Guardian*, the mega-port will
facilitate not only “China-bound shipments” from Tanzania, but also shipments of in-demand minerals mined from Zambia, Zimbabwe and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) as well as export trade from Malawi and Burundi.

With the anticipated flow of goods, services and human resources, Bagamoyo residents struggle to make sense of its scope and scale. Bagamoyo town is part of Bagamoyo district’s 16 wards in the Pwani region, with a total population of just over 350,000 people. It is mainly questions that arise in her mind, says Terri Place, a soft-spoken, pensive American who has lived in Bagamoyo town for 20 years and who directs The Baobab Home, a school and orphanage. Questions about local competition, such as what happened with a recent bio-fuel project that ignited disputes among local farmers and foreign investors over land. “Will this private partnership grant China too much autonomy?” she muses. “Will the Chinese perhaps use a portion of the coast as a military base as they have in Pakistan?” (Although Chinese officials have adamantly denied this rumor, it lingers in residents’ minds.) And mostly, she says, everyone is wondering where exactly will the new mega-port be built?

While steeped in uncertainties, the recently released Bagamoyo Special Economic Zone Master Plan shows the mega-port spanning about five kilometers of coastline from Mlingotini up to Mbegani, impacting at least six of the small fishing and farming villages in between. Those villages, as well as Pande, Konde and Zinga, have already been surveyed and evaluated. Rajab Rajab, a 40-year-old fisherman and long-time resident of Mlingotini, a village with just under 2,000 residents, sits on a worn wooden bench with his toes digging into the sand. He explains there’s not a day that goes by when residents don’t speculate about the ways their village will change. The new port, he says, seems likely to take up at least half of Mlingotini, and this will change everyone’s relationship to Waso Bay, the stretch of sea between Mlingotini and Mbegani where for hundreds of years coastal residents have perfected the art of dhow-building and fishing.

This, he says, may bring opportunities, too. He partners with the Bagamoyo District Council’s Sustainable Eco-Tourism for the Enhancement of Poverty Alleviation and Bio-Diversity Conservation, which wants to increase employment by “working with the tourism sector to understand marine life” through research and diving. Rajab, who greets everyone he encounters on the sandy road, takes pride in his inherited relationship to the ocean and all of its related customs and traditions. He knows that the port will require dredging to allow large ships to dock; he knows this will stir up silt from the seabed that may suffocate coral. Along with current poor practices such as fishing with explosives, as well as pollution in general, Rajab is keenly aware of how the mega-port’s changes will irrevocably disrupt the relationship among people, land and sea. “Our elders have called several meetings and we discuss this matter as a community, but we are still uncertain,” he says.
A few kilometers north of Mlingotini, government surveyors have evaluated the villages of Mbegani and Pande, where Hassan Alawi, a 38-year-old fisherman, walks comfortably barefoot in the midday heat. He says his modest house and several fruit trees have been evaluated twice, once in 2011 by the Economic Processing Zone Authority and last March by the Tanzania Port Authority (TPA), under whose auspices the mega-port project now sits. Alawi and his village of approximately 700 people say the TPA told them that a move is imminent and the compensation will be generous: at least 10 million shillings (about US$6,000) per hectare, along with additional for the house and fruit trees. Alawi believes the change will bring work to his struggling community. He hopes “we can all move together as a village, as family.”

Also slated for relocation is Tanzania’s College for the Advancement of Fisheries, which currently stands where the bulk of the mega-port is imagined. Established in 1966, the college is now the official Tanzanian government agent for all fisheries-related education and training. Abdilah Kamota, acting business support director, says the college is ready to move, and he is eager to see the confirmed design plans. Kamota hopes the port will provide work for the college’s 400 students, and he would like to see the construction of a “mega-float” outfitted with state-of-the-art fish-attracting devices, which, he maintains, would raise local competitiveness in regional and international markets. Kamota says he is “not afraid of change.” He is confident that if they have to move, it will be to “even better facilities.”

Indeed, according to the Bagamoyo Department of City Planning’s Notice Board, up to 321 residents from four villages have already been paid undisclosed relocation fees. Over heaping plates of rice and meat stew one day at Dee’s, a popular spot in the newer part of Bagamoyo, historian Ulimwengu insists, “We welcome development of every kind, as long as there’s a clear plan.” Nonetheless, he worries about protection for heritage sites, historical buildings and diverse ecosystems. “We can’t refuse the factories and the port, because we need the work,” he explains, adding that laws—such as the 1979 Antiquities Act—should be enforced.

Ulimwengu’s colleague, Benedicto Jagadi, lead conservationist with the Bagamoyo Department of Antiquities, situated within the Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism, underscores the adage that people must know their history to know their future. Sitting in his tiny office within the Old Fort, overlooking the main road in the old town, he takes out his reference books when explaining Tanzanian law. Pointing to specific codes, Jagadi explains that the law defines any building constructed before 1860 as “historical,” as well as any building built after 1860 that still has historical value. Jagadi is confident that protected areas such as the Kaole ruins and the old town will therefore not be affected. Others are less convinced.

Elder and community leader Hatibu Bakari, born in Bagamoyo in 1925, remembers bygone days with his friend Mohammed Issa Mitoso, born in 1939, who lives near the Rammiyya School for Islamic Studies in the neighborhood known as “Rammiyya B.” At noon, the two sit in faded, red-velvet chairs in the small, dim living room of Bakari’s single-story, classically Swahili-style home. Outside, his wife shoos away a squawking chicken and empties a plastic tub of water into a patch of hot sunlight. Inside, Bakari and Mitoso recall what they say was a time of peace, respect and trust. Bakari remembers when everyone “left their doors open, and
children still feared their parents.” Mitoso concurs. “There’s no ‘please’ around here; it’s just ‘give me now.’” Mitoso attributes his nostalgia to a Bagamoyo more aligned with Swahili cultural values and traditions, including ustarabu (civility), ukarimu (hospitality), upole (kindness), samehe (forgiveness) and subira (patience). “Change requires a great deal of patience,” says Mitoso. “And changes happening here in Bagamoyo are happening too fast.”

Bagamoyo’s younger generation has a different story to tell. Eager for change, many young people cite employment as the number-one struggle facing their generation. Shafee, 18, makes his living driving a bajaj, the affordable, three-wheeled, covered motorbike. He picks up passengers with a friendly smile even in the darkest hours, and he is always on call, just to make ends meet. He knows Bagamoyo’s bumpy, potholed, dug-up roads well, having zoomed around the sprawling town for more than a year. “I come from a very poor family,” he says, with little means to pay for school and even less opportunity or connections to find work. “Teach me English,” he says. “I need to practice
so I can talk better with my passengers.” An endearing student, he keeps a notebook of English words in his back pocket. Shafee admits that he knows little about the mega-port, and he simply wishes to “find my life” and make his family proud by earning a decent income.

Other young Tanzanians have migrated to Bagamoyo in recent years hoping to benefit from port and rail construction jobs, as well as new restaurants and hotels that are anticipated to accompany a surge in business and tourism. Emma Mihayo, a planner at the Bagamoyo Office of City Planning, reports from her cramped office, at a desk piled with official papers, that hundreds of new residents, many from Dar es Salaam, Zanzibar and Tanga, often arrive with little and squat on Bagamoyo’s expansive wild forests and farmlands. She says she and her two colleagues together receive inquiries about impending relocations on a daily basis. Most eager, she says, are those living in poverty, and she adds that it’s still unclear exactly where villagers will go, and whether or not they will be able to move as whole villages or scatter depending on available lands.

Young people are also turning away from the traditional village work of fishing and farming, raising coconuts, cassava and bananas, and they prefer instead seemingly more promising options such as driving or tourism hotel, resort and restaurant work in Dar es Salaam and Zanzibar.

This worries Rajab of Mlingotini because he notices that “young people are forgetting their ancient ties to the land and sea, and this has become our culture.” Disconnected from the past and yet uncertain about the future, many young Bagamoyans appear to have limited options while they await these seemingly imminent changes.

Vitali Maembe, an activist, musician and educator in his early 30s, started the Jua (“Sun”) Arts Village to help young people find their voices and connect to tradition through the arts. In a rented house that overlooks a field, young people gather to learn and play modern as well as traditional music. After practice twice or three times a week, the loosely formed band talks about the issues facing young people today over chai and biscuits. Handwritten posters taped to the walls explain words like “democracy” and “unity.” Amid conversation, they casually practice guitar riffs and drumbeats.

Traditional fishing and farming, raising coconuts, cassava or bananas, all appeal less and less to the town’s largely young population. Rajuba Vwai, above, grew up as a fisherman and farmer in Mlingotini, but he recently signed up for training as a tour guide. Bajaj driver Shafee, 18, left, knows every road and pothole in Bagamoyo. “I come from a very poor family,” he says, adding that making his family proud by earning a decent income comes first.
In this election season, Maembe, a folk guitarist and singer well known for his outspoken musical campaigns against corruption, has been approached by both the ruling and the opposition parties to promote their campaigns. Maembe has rebuffed both, stating, “I’d rather be an independent artist, singing from my heart about what I believe in.”

Working to keep girls in school and boys off the streets is one of his passions, and through festivals, workshops and person-to-person dialogues, he is a striking example of Bagamoyo’s potential to harness the youth energies that can put Bagamoyo on the map again, not only as a commercial and shipping center, but also as a center of arts and culture. He’s hoping that with the presence of Tanzania’s only performing arts college, the Bagamoyo Institute of Arts and Culture, Bagamoyo will be built no less on the pillars of traditional culture.

As youth sing their hearts out on Maembe’s porch at sundown, worn fishing dhows bob at sea, none wandering from their rusted anchors. At dawn, fishermen wearing sun-faded, oil-stained shirts and loose, rolled-up pants walk slowly along the shore. Young men also pass by, hawking snacks carried in worn plastic rice bags.

Looking far out on the horizon, it is hard to imagine how this now-quiet town may soon be catapulted into the future as a transoceanic trading hub far beyond what any Shirazi, Portuguese, German or British ruler might have ever imagined. As Bagamoyo braces for yet another period of historic change, the clockwork of the Indian Ocean’s tides lulls the collective anxiety. With Kikwete’s legacy projects in place, it seems only a matter of time before residents will join a new geopolitical matrix, and no one knows yet how many more hearts may be unburdened, or how many laid down, along this historic shore.

Founder of the Jua (“Sun”) Arts Village that offers art, dance and music to children and youth, Vitali Maembe plays guitar and sings with his students. A respected musician, he creates a Tanzanian yet universal sound that touches Bagamoyo’s historic tensions between distant and local, tradition and change.

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When Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq was born in the Flemish town of Comines near the village of Busbecq in 1522, few would have predicted the role he would play as an intermediary between his fellow Europeans and their imperial neighbors, the Ottoman Turks. As the illegitimate son of the Count of Busbecq, a nobleman in the court of Ferdinand I, the Hapsburg archduke of Austria, his birth was not particularly propitious.

In time, however, he would earn a name for himself not only as a diplomat to the court of the Ottoman Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, but also as a respected writer. For an audience eager to know its geopolitical rival, military foe and occasional ally, his published correspondence provided a uniquely candid and popular “insider’s view” of the workings of the most powerful empire of the day.

At the time of Busbecq’s birth, western Europeans were looking warily to the East. It was within living memory that in 1453 the Ottomans under Mehmed II captured the Byzantine capital of Constantinople (today’s Istanbul). One year before the boy’s birth, in 1521, Mehmed’s great-grandson Suleiman conquered Belgrade, which put the Hungarian capital of Buda (now Budapest) within his sights. Eight years after that, Ottoman forces were besieging the gates of Vienna.

The Turkish advance was halted, but their power was feared and the Hapsburg-Ottoman continental rivalry endured, both on the battlefield and through diplomacy. As in many campaigns, propaganda was a weapon. In western chronicles of the era, “the inhumanity of the Turks was emphasized above all else, and the stereotyped Turk, villainous, savage and bloodthirsty ... was firmly established in the historical traditions of the West,” wrote Sıla Şenlen of Ankara University in a 2005 paper. For their part, the Turks looked upon the Latin Christians with disdain.

It was Busbecq who offered a more balanced view of the Ottomans to his fellow Europeans, based on firsthand

Above: Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq was 32 when he met 60-year-old Suleiman the Magnificent, and the two held their first frosty peace talks in Amasya, Turkey, in 1555. Busbecq’s long trip from Vienna allowed him to engage in his favorite pastimes: visiting classical ruins, collecting ancient coins and manuscripts and documenting all that he saw.
experience. As Archduke Ferdinand’s envoy to Turkey from 1554 to 1562, he wrote a series of letters to his friend Nicholas Michault, who was at that time a fellow Hapsburg diplomat assigned to the Portuguese court. A keen observer of both nature and human nature, Busbecq marveled at the beauty of the Ottoman lands. He delighted in the Turks’ kindness toward animals, and he greatly admired the discipline and fortitude of the common Turkish soldier. He was also sincerely impressed by the grandeur of the Ottoman court and of a bureaucracy he found staffed by men who were valued for their talent rather than their family ties.

Yet for all his admiration for the Ottoman systems of society and government, Busbecq was clear-eyed about the threat Suleiman posed to a less-than-united western Europe. “On their side are the resources of a mighty empire, strength unparalleled, experience and practice in fighting, a veteran soldiery, habituation to victory, endurance of toil, unity, order, discipline, frugality and watchfulness,” he wrote. “On our side is public poverty, private luxury, impaired strength, broken spirit, lack of endurance and training.... If there is war can we doubt what the result will be?”

Busbecq was relatively new to the role of diplomat when he set out as the Hapsburg ambassador to Turkey in the autumn of 1554. His only previous assignment had been earlier that year to England, where he served as Ferdinand’s representative at the wedding of Ferdinand’s nephew, Philip II of Spain, to Mary Tudor. His new posting promised to be far less sanguine: Ferdinand had invaded the Ottoman protectorate of Transylvania in 1551, breaking a four-year truce that had stanched almost three decades of intermittent war between Hungary and Turkey. Suleiman was angry.

Indeed, upon hearing the news of Ferdinand’s incursion, Suleiman had thrown the previous Hapsburg ambassador into jail, where he remained for two years before being allowed to return home, only to die soon afterward. It was now up to Busbecq to repair deeply frayed relations and conclude a new treaty acceptable to both Suleiman and Ferdinand. The task would prove slow and exceedingly tedious. But Busbecq was a patient man, and during the seven years he spent in Turkey (they were not consecutive years: He served from 1554-1555 and again from 1556-1562), he grew to understand and appreciate the qualities that had brought the Ottomans to the apex of their power.

When Suleiman came to the throne in 1520, his empire included Anatolia, most of Egypt, Syria and the Balkan states. By the time of his death in 1566, he had extended Ottoman control from Budapest on the Danube to Aswan on the Nile, and from the Euphrates River through North Africa almost to Gibraltar.

Suleiman also took sides in struggles within Europe: In 1536, he allied with France against the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, and Suleiman received help from the French king in his ongoing confrontation with the Hapsburg confederation. More direct help came from the legendary admiral of his fleet, Hayreddin Barbarossa, who won the critical victories at sea that secured Suleiman’s control of the Mediterranean.

Yet, as successful as his military campaigns were, Suleiman’s interests extended beyond conquest. Known as Suleiman Kanuni (Lawgiver) in his domains, he reorganized Ottoman canon law and greatly expanded the rights of the empire’s non-Muslim populations, including Christians and Jews. Nor did he neglect the arts: During his reign, Ottoman architecture reached its zenith and Ottoman silk, glass and Iznik ceramics were coveted throughout Europe for their beautiful patterns and fine workmanship.

Ottoman education, though largely limited to those who would later administer the empire, was also of a high standard. The curriculum included poetry, literature, history, law and

Ferdinand I, Hapsburg archduke of Austria, dispatched Busbecq to make a peace agreement with Suleiman the Magnificent. The Hapsburgs and the Ottomans were contesting Transylvania, then on the border between East and West.
religion, and students were taught to read and write in Turkish, Arabic and Persian.

By contrast, western Europe was a conglomeration of often-hostile states whose anchor, the Catholic faith, had been shaken by the Reformation. Yet Europe, too, had its glories, not least the unrivaled arts of the Renaissance. The Venetian painters Bellini and Titian were well known to the Ottoman sultans, as were the Renaissance monarchs: Henry VIII of England and his daughter Elizabeth I; Francis I of France; Charles V and his son Philip II; and—especially well known to Suleiman—Charles's younger brother, Ferdinand I, himself Holy Roman Emperor from 1558 to 1564.

As in Turkey, education in Europe was reserved for the few. Busbecq was awarded a degree in advanced Latin studies at the University of Louvain in Belgium and continued scholarly pursuits in Paris, Venice, Bologna and Padua, keeping remarkably complete notes of all he saw and learned. These notes provided the foundation for the letters he wrote to Michault.

Busbecq and Michault had attended school together and, as diplomats, they understood the difficulties inherent in maintaining a pleasant and persuasive presence no matter how difficult the negotiations at hand. However, Busbecq's letters extended well beyond the confines of his workday.

His first letter dates to September 1, 1555, shortly after he had returned to Vienna from his initial audience with the sultan, which took place in Amasya, in north-central Turkey, a city so far from the Hapsburg capital—some 1,850 kilometers—that he may have been the first European to visit that area since the Seljuk Turks conquered it late in the ninth century.

The trip began well. Barely had Busbecq crossed into Turkish territories near Gran (today's Esztergom) in Hungary than he found himself in the midst of an escort of 150 splendidly arrayed cavalrymen and their officers, whom he found surprisingly gracious.

I suddenly found myself surrounded by a troop of some 150 horsemen. They formed a charming spectacle to my unaccustomed eyes, with their brightly painted shields and spears, their jeweled scimitars, their many-colored plumes, their turbans of the purest white, their garments mostly of purple or bluish green, their splendid horses and fine trappings. Their officers rode up and welcomed me with courtesy and congratulated me on my safe arrival.

—THE FIRST LETTER, SEPTEMBER 1, 1555

Busbecq journeyed with this handsome escort to the capital at Buda, a city once renowned for its decorative palaces and glittering lifestyle, but more recently known as the home of Hungary’s naïve young King Louis II, who ruled from 1516 to 1526. Perhaps overvaluing his country’s defenses, Louis had neglected to renew a long-standing peace treaty with the Turks. It was a catastrophic oversight: In 1526, Suleiman all but annihilated the Hungarian army at the Battle of Mohacs, where Louis, only 20 and childless, lost his life.

By treaty, his brother-in-law, Ferdinand of...
Hapsburg, should have ascended the throne. But Hungarian electors, wishing to remain independent of Hapsburg influence, selected instead John Zápolya of Transylvania to wear the crown. In 1529, Zápolya allied with Suleiman to protect himself and his realm from Ferdinand. In that, Suleiman shared an interest: The last thing he wanted was to have his archrivals, the Hapsburgs, as next-door neighbors.

All remained quiet for a decade or so, until 1540, when Zápolya died. Ferdinand then attacked and quickly captured Buda. Zápolya’s widow, the queen dowager for her infant son, turned to Suleiman, who marched on the city in 1541 and easily took it, making eastern Hungary an Ottoman protectorate. This was a state of affairs Ferdinand could not abide.

Incursion after incursion followed until a series of defeats at Ottoman hands forced Ferdinand and his powerful brother, Charles v, to sign a peace treaty with Suleiman. That was in 1547. But the prize of a united Hungary was too great a dream for Ferdinand to relinquish so easily: In 1551 he marched into Transylvania again, and it was the repercussions of this that Busbecq was sent to sort out.

That particular task lay in the future, however. In 1554, as Busbecq undertook his assignment, he meant to enjoy his journey, taking care to note all he saw and learned. He was particularly taken by the flowers, which he found in profusion in Adrianople (today’s Edirne, on Turkey’s border with Greece and Bulgaria). But even Adrianople was overshadowed by Constantinople, which delighted Busbecq with its wealth of ancient monuments and marvelous views of the surrounding seas and magnificent countryside.

[Constantinople] ... seems to have been created by nature for the capital of the world. It stands in Europe, but looks out over Asia, and has Egypt and Africa on its right. Although these latter are not near, yet they are linked to the city owing to ease of communication by sea. On the left lie the Black Sea and the sea of Azof, round which many nations dwell and into which many rivers flow on all sides, so that nothing useful to man is produced through the length and breadth of these countries which cannot be transported by sea to Constantinople with the utmost ease. On one side the city is washed by the Sea of Marmora; on another side a harbor is formed by a river which Strabo calls, from its shape, the Golden Horn. On the third side it is joined to the mainland, and thus resembles a peninsula or promontory running out with the sea on one side, on the other the bay formed by the sea and the above-mentioned river. From the center of Constantinople there is a charming view over the sea and the Asiatic Olympus white with eternal snow.

—THE FIRST LETTER
Had Suleiman been in residence, Busbecq’s journey would have ended here. But the Sultan was negotiating a peace treaty with the Safavid ruler of Persia in Amasya, some 565 kilometers away, and he asked the diplomat to join him there. For Busbecq, the 13-day journey was filled with pleasures. Here was the chance to view the classical ruins he dearly loved, and to collect ancient coins, manuscripts and inscriptions.

It also gave him the chance to see the local sheep whose “very fat and weighty tails,” he wrote, could “grow so big in some old sheep, that they are forced to lay them upon a plank, running on two little wheels, so they may draw them after them, not being otherwise able to trail them along.”

We found everywhere a great abundance of ancient coins, especially of the later Emperors... In many places the Turks use them as weights, especially for drachms and half-drachms, and call them giaumanguni, or “infidel’s money.” There were also many coins of the neighbouring towns of Asia ... and also of Amasia, the goal of our journey. A coppersmith, from whom I inquired for coins, greatly aroused my wrath by telling me that, a few days before, he had a whole jarful of them and had made some bronze vessels out of them, thinking they were of no use or value. I was very much grieved at the loss of all these relics of antiquity.

—THE FIRST LETTER

Busbecq arrived in Amasya on April 7, 1555. Following the customary interview with the attendant pashas, he met the sultan, who was not pleased by what he heard. Suleiman “listened to the recital of my message,” Busbecq wrote, “but, as it did not correspond with his expectations (for the demands of my master were full of dignity and independence, and, therefore, far from acceptable to one who thought that his slightest wishes ought to be obeyed), he assumed an expression of disdain, and merely answered, ‘Giusel, giusel,’ that is, ‘well, well.’ We were then dismissed to our lodging.”

You will probably wish me to describe the impression which Soleiman made upon me. He is beginning to feel the weight of his years [at age 60], but his dignity of demeanour and his general physical appearance are worthy of the ruler of so vast an empire. He has always been frugal and temperate, and was so even in his youth, when he might have erred without incurring blame in the eyes of the Turks ... Even his bitterest critics can find nothing more serious to allege against him than his undue submission to his wife.

—THE FIRST LETTER

In Amasya, Busbecq witnessed a large gathering of the Ottoman military for the first time. Greatly impressed by the troops’ discipline and colorful dress, he was more impressed still by their leaders who, he concluded, had the ability and
training to perform their duties with such skill and efficiency that “the Turks succeed in all that they attempt and are a dominating race and daily extend the bounds of their rule.”

The most remarkable body of men were several thousand Janissaries, who stood in a long line apart from the rest and so motionless that, as they were some distance from me, I was for a while doubtful whether they were living men or statues, until, being advised to follow the usual custom of saluting them, I saw them all bow their heads in answer to my salutation. On our departure from that part of the field, we saw another very pleasing sight, namely, the Sultan’s bodyguard returning home mounted on horses, which were not only very fine and tall but splendidly groomed and caparisoned.

—THE FIRST LETTER

On June 2, Busbecq and his delegation paid a farewell visit to Suleiman. He presented them with a “dispatch wrapped up in cloth of gold and sealed,” but rather than the peace treaty Busbecq hoped for, he wrote, it offered only a six-month truce with the request that “a further reply [be] brought back.”

Busbecq arrived in Vienna in August 1555, exhausted by the journey. In November, he set out again with Ferdinand’s reply, arriving to a reception far less cordial than the previous year. After learning that Ferdinand continued to assert his right to the Hungarian throne, the pashas refused to grant Busbecq an audience with the sultan, cautioning that “we should keep quiet and not arouse the sleeping lion nor hasten on the troubles which were sure to come upon us soon enough,” he wrote.

In fact, as Busbecq reported in his letter of July 14, 1556, barely had he and his staff reached their embassy than they were confined and treated “in every way almost as prisoners instead of ambassadors. This has continued now for six months, and we have no idea what the future has in store for us.”

Busbecq’s third letter is dated June 1, 1560. He noted that his colleagues had been allowed to leave Constantinople at the end of August 1557 and that he might have joined them had he wished. But he stayed on, believing that if he departed it might suggest that peace negotiations had come to an end, an impression to be avoided at all costs as it might make “a terrible war inevitable.”

In response to a query from Michault, Busbecq reported that the only time he left the embassy was when he had dispatches from Ferdinand to present to the sultan. This occurred only two or three times a year, “So I stay at home and hold communion with those old friends, my books; they are my companions and the joy of my life,” he wrote. He noted, however, that he had other companions in the form of a large menagerie that included everything from well-bred horses to a variety of weasels.

—THE THIRD LETTER, JUNE 1, 1560
This quiet life soon changed, however, as Busbecq told Michault in his fourth letter, written after he had returned to Vienna in 1562.

The changes began with a distressing event. For more than 30 years Suleiman and Charles v had vied for control of the Mediterranean, a rivalry pursued by Charles’s son, Philip ii, when he succeeded his father to the Spanish throne in 1556. In 1559, Philip concluded a plan to take the port of Tripoli (in present-day Libya) and sent a fleet of 50 galleys with some 6,000 soldiers to the proposed staging point, the island of Djerba, off the coast of Tunisia.

But things did not go well. Barely had the Spanish captured Djerba and erected a fort than they were taken unawares by the Turks, who destroyed their galleys and cut off their water supply. Only the commanders survived, to be sent as trophies to Suleiman. On October 1, 1660, the victorious Ottoman fleet rounded Seraglio Point below the sultan’s palace and sailed into the Golden Horn. It was a sight Busbecq would never forget.

The half-starved Spanish officers were displayed on the poop deck of the brightly colored Turkish flagship while their captured galleys were “towed along, stripped of their oars and bulwarks and reduced to mere hulks, so that in this condition they might seem small, shapeless and contemptible in comparison with the Turkish vessels,” Busbecq wrote.

Busbecq felt it his duty to help the prisoners as best he could. In addition to supplying them with boiled mutton, he fulfilled their requests for blankets, shoes, cloaks and even wine. A more expensive request came from those “who wished me to act as surety for their ransom,” he noted. Busbecq loaned money to them all, confiding to Michaut that even if he were not repaid, “I must not mind; a good action performed for a good man is never wholly lost. Most of them will certainly keep their word.”

Busbecq’s first objective, however, was to negotiate the long-sought peace treaty with Suleiman’s grand vizier, Rustem Pasha, whom he described as a man who “wished his words to be looked upon as orders” and who “never deviated from his customary rudeness.” Busbecq became particularly annoyed with Rustem Pasha when plague struck Constantinople and the vizier would not allow Busbecq and his household staff to retire to a safer place.

Then, quite unexpectedly, Rustem Pasha died of dropsy. He was replaced by Ali Pasha, whom Busbecq found to be “a delightfully intelligent person, and by no means lacking in humanity.”

Ali Pasha immediately allowed Busbecq to retire to a suitable place until the plague abated. The diplomat chose the little island of Prinkipo, where he delighted in fishing, hiking and simply breathing the fresh air.

As Ali Pasha had also retired to the island, the two became friends and, once they returned to Constantinople, soon negotiated a truce, under which the current borders would stand and Ferdinand would pay a small tribute. Peace—for a time at least—had been secured.

By August 1562, Busbecq was ready to return to Vienna. As a parting gift, Ali Pasha gave him three thoroughbred horses of far higher quality than those he could have obtained on his own. In return, Busbecq gave Ali Pasha a coat of mail ample enough “to fit his tall and stout frame” and a charger sturdy enough “to carry his great weight.”

Following his return to Vienna, Busbecq continued to serve as a diplomat for Ferdinand, and later for Ferdinand’s son Maximillian ii and grandson Rudolf ii. In 1592, at the age of 71, he set out from an assignment in Paris to visit his beloved home in Busbecq. His route took him through Normandy where soldiers engaged in the region’s civil war ignored Busbecq’s diplomatic status and seized him. The fracas was
too much for the aging Busbecq, and he died 11 days later, on October 28. Busbecq was buried in the church in St. Germain, Normandy, but his heart was enclosed in a leaden casket and placed in the family tomb at Busbecq.

Busbecq left an impressive legacy. His pursuit of antiquities generated a wealth of knowledge for western Europe about classical Greece and Rome. He collected 240 classical manuscripts, which he donated to the Vienna Imperial Library (now the Austrian National Library), together with a valuable coin collection. He also discovered in Constantinople a spectacular 500-year-old copy of De Materia Medica, the remarkable compendium of medicinal herbs by the first-century CE Greek physician Dioscorides that was the cornerstone of herbal therapeutic knowledge for centuries. Acquired by Maximilian II on Busbecq’s recommendation, it remains one of the finest known examples of a late-antique scientific text.

Busbecq is also credited with introducing the lilac to the West, and some say the tulip as well. He even brought back part of his menagerie, including six she-camels, his beautiful horses and a large tame mongoose called an ichneumon. Yet, as precious as these gifts were, the name Busbecq is most closely associated with his extraordinary letters.

The first letter was published in the original Latin as Itinera Constantinopolitanum et Amasianum (Travels to Constantinople and Amasya) in 1581, and all four letters appeared in 1589. They went through several printings and were translated into French, German, Dutch, Spanish and English as The Turkish Letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, which remains in print today.

For many years, they were among the most popular books in Europe. Even now, those who wish to know about the 16th-century Ottoman world turn to Busbecq to see, as he did, the impressive parades, the colorful costumes, the gaily caparisoned horses and the ubiquitous camels who “kneel in a circle with their heads close together, eating and drinking with the utmost good will out of the same manger or basin, content with the scantiest fare.”

In his time, no one described Ottoman Turkey better.
One of the oldest of these neighborhoods lies not far from where the ruling Maktoum family settled in 1833 with some 800 members of the Bani Yas tribe, west of the natural harbor known as “The Creek” and north of the Dubai World Trade Center, along a kilometer and a half of Al Diyafah Street. Officially renamed 2nd of December Street in 2011, Al Diyafah drifts along the northern edge of the Satwa neighborhood, where it is home to an unassuming treasure-trove of global cuisine.

Quiet by day, the storefronts offer discount electronics and knock-off perfumes; one-man grocery stores advertise in Tagalog, and takeout stands overflow with cheap, fried Indian snack mixes called chivda. Pakistani men in well-worn, tunic-length shirts and baggy trousers called kurta shelwars tarry over Styrofoam cups of Lipton tea sweetened with condensed milk. Down the alleyways between storefronts, laundered kurtas and towels flap from windows and clotheslines, their colors a contrast to the chipped plaster and cracks that run along the concrete walls of row after row of aging, rectangular houses.

A generation ago, Satwa was Dubai’s first posh suburb. Beginning in 1966, Shaykh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum, who ruled Dubai from 1958 to 1990, began pouring some of the emirate’s first petroleum income into infrastructure development, which included rows of identical villas in Satwa for Emirati nationals. The original inhabitants have long since moved to finer homes.

With skyscrapers as its backdrop, 2nd of December Street is better known by its former name, Al Diyafah, a kilometer and a half of restaurants and shops in Satwa, one of Dubai’s most concentrated neighborhoods of foreign workers and families.
and now the aging Satwa villas are rented out to foreign laborers.

It is at night that Al Diyafah comes alive with expatriates and workers from around the world—but especially from across Asia—who flocked to Dubai over the last four decades, some alone, some with their families. Now a city of more than two million, Dubai claims the fifth-largest non-native population in the world—some 90 percent of its residents. Nowhere is this reflected more clearly than in the restaurants and their patrons along Al Diyafah, where 30- and 40-year-old establishments are among the oldest in town.

To explore Al Diyafah, I made a three-evening culinary sojourn, during which I ate my way from South and Southeast Asia to the Near East, all in the few hundred meters between the Satwa roundabout and the Union House at Jumeirah Road (where, incidentally, the formation of the United Arab Emirates was finalized in 1971). Throughout, I was surprised again and again to find that, unlike many of Dubai’s fleetingly transient residents, many employees of these restaurants had chosen to stay for years—some for decades—and often regarded Dubai as home.

My first stop, Ravi Restaurant, was tucked back from the main road on the southeast side of the Satwa roundabout. Founded in the mid-’70s, it is the oldest restaurant on the strip. In the barebones dining room, at a long communal table, I savor ed warm naan (bread), which I used to scoop up tadkha dhal fry, which consisted of creamy yellow lentils refried in ghee (clarified butter) and redolent of cumin and hot chilies. Next up was a plate of chicken karahi bathed in an oily masala (spice blend) that tasted floral—whole cardamom and black pepper—coriander bursting against the sweet background of meltingly soft onions and tomatoes. Finally, I turned my attention to a platter of fresh-charred kebabs whose caramelized crusts gave way to tender, fatty ground lamb loaded with onions and cilantro.

Ravi opened its doors amid the first wave of South Asian migration, three years before the completion of the 39-story World Trade Center at the far end of the street, which was the first and tallest skyscraper in the city when it was topped out in 1979. It is quite likely that the men who constructed it came to Ravi for a taste of home between shifts.

After my meal, I walked out front where my server, Damodara, leaned against the concrete wall smoking a cigarette and watching the kebab man work ground meat onto flat metal skewers in front of a smoking grill. He offered me a cigarette. I leaned against the wall next to him and asked how long he’d worked at Ravi.

“I moved to Dubai from Kerala [in southwest India] in 1984 to come work at Ravi,” he answered. “Back then [Ravi] was only a place for working people—Indian and Pakistani construction workers—but now everybody comes.” After nearly 40 years, Ravi has become an institution, attracting the middle class, tourists and even the wealthy of Dubai while the laboring class moved on to cheaper shops for their daily meals.

Damodara pointed inside toward the owner, Abdul Hameed, who sat atop his regular perch behind the register. “Abdul moved to Dubai from Lahore, Pakistan, in 1976 and opened Ravi. His son was born here and grew up here.”

I asked Damodara why he had stayed for over three decades. He paused, taking a long drag. Then he shrugged.

“Here, I have a life and, after so many years, I find myself comfortable,” he said, flicking his cigarette and hurrying back inside to the tables of men who looked up from their plates to call out in Urdu for more bread.

As my eyes followed him into the restaurant, they stopped at the doorway where a young man, no more than 18 or 19 years old, dressed in a blue laborer’s jumpsuit, stood awkwardly just outside. Abdul Hameed looked up and warmly waved him in while calling to the servers in Punjabi. Shortly, Damodara ran over with a takeaway bag as Abdul Hameed ignored the boy’s attempt to pay. The laborer put his hand to his chest and nodded gratefully before disappearing into the Satwa night.

I departed Ravi, making my way across 2nd Street’s grassy, manicured median to find Pars Iranian Bakery and Kitchen behind a fenced-in basketball court where groups of Filipino teenagers played. Outside, under the restaurant’s bright sign, I watched a slight man with a shock of white hair and a soft, grandfatherly face deftly rub a wooden paddle with the dough over the hot rocks.

Ravi for a taste of home between shifts.

At that point, the manager walked over and introduced himself as Mohammed Abdul Ali. He then he pointed to the old man. “I started with Hamid Aziz 10 years ago. Before that I worked in hotels back home in Egypt, but I was ready for a change.”

From him I learned how four Persian business partners opened the restaurant in 1989. Since then, the place has garnered a citywide reputation for exquisite rosewater profiteroles, generous Iranian mixed grill and the authentic Iranian bread Aziz spent his evenings baking.
“One of the owners knew Hamid back in Shiraz, where he baked bread for over 35 years, and 10 years ago, they convinced him to come bake here,” Abdul Ali explained. The quiet, almost somber air about the grand Persian eatery was reflected in Aziz's dignified, singular focus.

Abdul Ali broke into a river of Farsi, and Aziz's raspy laugh rippled through the sultry night air. Surprised, I asked him where he, an Egyptian, learned Farsi. He grinned. “Here! I started talking to Hamid and the owners. How else can you really make new connections?”

Aziz grabbed a metal hook and flipped the thin bread with a swift yank, tossing the long, flat loaf onto the stainless steel table in front of us to cool. Abdul Ali disappeared into the main building. He returned with a plate of herbs and cheese, and Aziz motioned for me to eat.

I tore off a piece of the chewy bread, smeared it with cheese, folded it over a handful of purslane and mint, and took a bite. The combination of toasty sesame seeds, bitter herbs, salty cheese and warm bread could be, I worried, downright addictive.

I asked Abdul Ali what was next for him and Aziz. He smiled and ran a hand over his short-cut black hair. “Well, I don’t know about Hamid, but I only planned to stay here for two years, five years maximum, but here I am. I’m happy and I don’t have any plans to go.”

The next evening, I walked from Union House toward the Satwa roundabout, stopping at the intersection of Al Diyafah and 6b Street under the manic green-and-white lightshow of Al Mallah restaurant. Nearly every sidewalk table was full. Young Lebanese men heckled each other cheerfully in the open kitchen overlooking the dining area as they cooked round after round of crisp manoushe, circular Lebanese flatbreads garnished with any number of toppings from simple olive oil to spiced mincemeat. The employees’ green shirts were embroidered with Phoenician boats and the Arabic letters for Al-Mallah—seafarer or navigator in Arabic.

Opened 28 years ago, Al Mallah has been managed by 78-year-old Abu Faisal for the last 22. “Sit, sit, please,” Abu Faisal said to me as his smile sent an explosion of creases from the sides of his eyes. “What do you like? Some hummus? Babaghanoush? Tabouleh? Manoushe? Shawarma?” Without waiting for my answer, he leaned and grabbed a passing server, murmured into his ear and sent him off with a firm slap on the back.

Moments later, a platter of fresh vegetables was almost as firmly slapped down on our table, along with bowls of fatoush salad, hummus, babaganoush, falafel and a tray piled high with manoushe topped with olive oil and za’atar, a Levantine blend of thyme, sumac, sesame seeds and salt.

“I love to eat good things, and I love to feed people good things. That’s why I became a chef at the age of 12,” Abu Faisal confessed, winking as he sat down to join me. We began to eat, passing the salads, dragging vegetables through the tahini-rich hummus and smoky babaganoush, and cutting wedges of the oily flatbread. I licked some za’atar from my fingers and asked Abu Faisal if he missed his homeland.

“I left Beirut at age 55 to come teach the staff here traditional Lebanese cooking. My wife, my nine adult children, my grandchildren, all still live there, and I visit them every month or so,” he said, pausing to scan the packed picnic tables before continuing. “Here, life doesn’t stop. Everyone is busy. But you keep what you earn, no taxes. And there is security, no one checking my ID card, no fears, and people are respectful. Here, I can live my life.
Dubai, it gave me everything. This is my home now.”

He took a sip of his tea and got up, sauntering into the kitchen to check on the grill chefs before walking back outside to join the bread bakers’ banter, wagging his finger at them and grinning. Of his staff of 40, he said, 15 are Lebanese, and the rest hail from others parts of the Middle East and South Asia.

As the lights of the Al Mallah sign flashed and danced, a joyful roar emanated from the tables. A smiling Pakistani family passed plates of kebabs, a group of Emirati men picked at their platter of roast chicken, and a Filipino couple sat whispering to each other over a heaping plate of shawarma and hummus. All the while, men in Al Mallah polo shirts rushed among the tables and couriered takeaway orders to idling cars along 2nd of December Street.

Abu Faisal returned, smiling and shaking his head. “They call me abu, ‘daddy,’ not boss!” he chuckled. “Yes, I have a good life here.”

I said goodnight to Abu Faisal and set off to find some dessert. Ambling northwest to the next block, I stopped in front of the Jordanian dessert shop. From there, I watched a young Egyptian couple and a glamorous, abaya-clad woman enter the shop, I inhaled the aromas of sugar and rosewater that drifted out. I followed behind them and ordered a slice of knafe, a specialty of the Palestinian city of Nablus. I found a table facing the large window and enjoyed not only the savory-sweet dessert of soft white cheese topped with sugary, crisp-fried vermicelli, but also the parade of Satwa residents and visitors passing by.

On my last night, I ended up just west of the round-about amid a cheerful hum in a Filipino franchise diner called Tipanan, one of the newest restaurants on the strip. It opened in 2012, supported since by the growing Filipino community in the area.

I nibbled on the so-called khaep mu, traditional Filipino pork cracklings adapted here for the Muslim host country by swapping crisp-fried chicken skin for the pork rind. I dipped the crunchy bits in tart, rose-colored vinegar—a perfect foil for the greasy, salty snack. Above me, a Tagalog singing competition flashed on the two flat-screen TVs. Some of the customers watched intently while others murmured over plates of fried rice and deep bowls of steaming soup. The buzz was punctuated by eruptions of laughter from a table of Filipino boys in baseball hats sporting tattoos on their biceps.

Michael Pangilinan, the young manager in his mid-20s, walked over with a sizzling platter of stuffed squid and a steaming bowl of his most popular dish, bulalo, a simple beef broth soup. Two women joined us, bringing platters of chicken adobo and fried rice. “This is Sarah Gonzales and Mildred Pangilinan. They both started working here this year,” Pangilinan said, dishing food onto our plates. “I graduated from hospitality school and moved to Dubai four and a half years ago to manage another branch of Tipanan. Then I open this branch.”

I took a sip of the bulalo. It was like a gentle hug in a bowl: The brightness of cilantro balanced the richness of the marrow-infused broth. I could see why it was the most popular item on offer.

“It’s like I get to bring the Philippines to Dubai, for Filipinos and for other people too. Like my regular there,” he continued, pointing at a stocky Indian man eating with a middle-aged Filipino woman. “He’s tried everything on the menu and loves everything just the way we make it, but I can adapt the food to suit any taste my customers have—more spicy, less spicy, whatever. It’s all a fusion anyways. The rice is Chinese from pre-Hispanic times, and there are a lot of Spanish-style dishes left over from 300 years of colonization—all with our own Filipino twist, of course!”

Gonzales got up to start her shift and hugged him. “This guy—he is a good boss,” she said. “This place is my family here.”

I asked Pangilinan if he had plans to move back home. He laughed. “Dubai is a jungle and we are like tigers, competing,” he said. “I came here for opportunities, and I found them. Life is happening here.”

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Muhammad ibn Abd al-Rahman ibn Suleiman ibn Rabi al-Qaysi, known more conveniently to posterity as Abu Hamid Al-Garnati and so named after his hometown of Granada (“Garnata”), sailed, caravanned, traded and trekked from the Arab West to the northern- and eastern-most reaches of the Islamic world and beyond. Born in the year 1080 under the last of the Zirid kings, he was a merchant and a scholar who, in a 90-year lifetime, wrote on a variety of subjects in two works following the literary tradition called kutub al-‘aja’ib in Arabic, or “books of wonder”—a genre that he helped to define.

As one might expect from the name, a “book of wonders” is not only what one sees and hears on one’s travels, but also what one could not have possibly seen because it did not then nor did it ever exist. At the same time, these “wonders”—of legendary places, mythical people and wholly imagined events—make for good reading. Fusing the world of the impossible with the world of the merely strange-but-true, the style might best be filed under the words of one of his prologues: “Marvels are found in the most remote part of the sky and the earth. Our Lord has ordered us to contemplate the wonders of the world.”

His best-known book, al-Mu‘rib ‘an ba‘d ‘aja‘ib al-Maghreb, (Praise of Some of the Wonders of North Africa), actually covers all of the lands he visited, and it seems only to skim the surface of an oeuvre rivaling the most outlandish of all the Ripley’s “Believe It or Not” stories ever told. His recent translator into Spanish, César Dubler, found it comprised of “casual data about the extraordinary.”

Travel began early in Al-Garnati’s life, and not by choice. When he was 10, his family probably fled Granada at the approach of the Almoravid king Yusuf ibn Tashfin. They took refuge near Cuenca, which at the time belonged to the Christian king of Castile Alfonso VI. Although it was not uncommon for such territorial switching in times of peril, it may have set the boy on his lifelong journey of expecting the unexpected—as in the year 1108 when, at the Battle of Uclés, the Almoravids conquered his land of refuge, and he had to flee a second time.

He was one to look for what lurked under the surface of the factual, the visible. For instance, Chapter 1 of his second book described the “world and its inhabitants—men and jinns”; Chapter 2, “its wonders and monuments”; Chapter 3, its “seas and fantastic animals”; and Chapter 4, “its caves, tombs, and ossuaries—with the purpose of inviting contemplation, to escape hell and enter heaven.”

When verbally mapping his home country, he began his tour at the Cave of the Seven Sleepers, a legend shared by both Christians and Muslims. He located it just outside Granada, not at its traditional location near Ephesus in Turkey; nearby he also found a magic olive tree that budded, flowered and matured its fruit in a single day.

Also beside Granada, he claimed to have found the walled “City of Copper,” whose ramparts were such that if a daring man managed to climb them, he would be overcome by fits of hysterical laughter and plunge inside never to be heard from again. Authors of the Arab East said that the city was located at the world’s outer limits, and they attributed
its building to Alexander the Great, who was often conflated with King Solomon in other “books of wonders.”

According to Al-Garnati, it was Solomon’s followers who also built the Iberian cities of Toledo and Zaragoza. Al-Garnati described a magnificent bridge from the first city rising to the sky “like a rainbow,” and of the second, he wrote of its magical powers held by talismans placed in the city gates to prevent scorpions from entering. The city of Sintra, he said, was famous for its apples, and whoever ate of them would receive the power to discern the possible from the impossible.

Although it is likely that during the early stages of what became his lifelong trip to the East he remained for a time in Morocco, it is unknown if he reached the Saharan trade city of Sijilmasa at that country’s edge of the desert, where some of the world’s strangest things really are seen. (For a taste of this still today, visit the day-and-night funfair in Marrakech’s Djema’a al-Fna.)

At the Strait of Gibraltar, in the city of Ceuta, he paused his journey to relate the legendary stories of the Roc, the huge bird of prey depicted in A Thousand and One Nights and in other magical accounts of the East, as well as the Sole, a flat fish that looks like it is sliced down the middle from tip to tail and often called the “sole of Moses” after the Biblical story that in the parting of the Red Sea, the fish too was parted and thus became two live halves.

Al-Garnati here also related the story of the “Idol of Cádiz,” also reputedly built by Alexander, which was a huge statue, not unlike the Colossus of Rhodes, whose right hand reached into the Atlantic in order to push back the waves and other dangers.

In the year 1115, when he was 34, Al-Garnati reached Alexandria via Sardinia and Sicily. Of this latter land, he wrote: And in the Green Sea [the Mediterranean] there is a group of islands, where one of them is very big and is called Sicily. It has cities, fortresses and manors; it is one of the richest of God’s countries. By the sea, there is a huge mountain. It is the mountain of fire. From its summit, a blue smoke pours out during the day and by night a fire burns that illuminates as far as ten parasangs [about 6 km].

This reference to Mt. Etna described it fairly accurately. He later mentioned Alexandria’s famous and entirely real lighthouse, and he gave its measurements. After describing and sketching its architecture, he added the detail of its enormous mirror for reflecting the fire so that those arriving by sea could see it at a distance of even several days offshore. Next, he described “Solomon’s Audience Chamber,” a room famous for the beauty of its columns, particularly one magical one that tilted to follow the sun across the sky like a sunflower.

According to Al-Garnati, visitors put pebbles under this column’s base, which remained suspended in the air, and then were ground to dust as the column rotated its position. (Legends of magically moving columns were common:}
Marco Polo spoke of such a column in the church of Saint John the Baptist in Samarkand, and today Jordanian tour guides at the Temple of Artemis in Jerash point out a column that is said to have had a similar property.

In Cairo Al-Garnati studied with the city’s leading scholars of hadith, and he mused over the same questions that have puzzled visitors since the time of Herodotus: Who built the pyramids? Why does the Nile flood? What kind of animal is the crocodile—fish or snake?

In the year 1124, Al-Garnati reached Baghdad via Damascus, quite probably seeing the ruins of Baalbek and Palmyra (then called Tadmur) en route. In Baghdad he was hosted by a scholar and vizier who later became minister under the Abbasid caliphs al-Muqtafi and al-Mustanjid.

Leaving Baghdad after some seven years of residence, Al-Garnati moved to the Persian city of Abhar, just south of the Caspian Sea, and later he reached Saysin, a village near the sea’s northern shore in the Volga River estuary and an important commercial crossroads upstream as far as Kazan, now in Russia. It was during the journey up the sea’s western coast that he visited the city of Derbent at the eastern end of the Caucasus range whose Persian etymology means “locked gate” and is known to the Arabs as Bab al-Abwab, or Gate of Gates.

In Tuhfat al-albab wa nukhbat al-‘aja’ib (Gift of Secrets and Selection of Wonders), the second of his two complete works, he described one of the wonders of the Caucasus:

**Near Derbent, he wrote, was a mighty mountain, and at its foot two villages inhabited by a tribe of weapon-makers. When a kinsman died, he was told, they separated the body’s bones from its flesh. If the person was a man, they fed the flesh to crows, and if a woman, they fed it to vultures. In both cases, they put the remaining bones in “bags of gilded Byzantine brocade,” wrote the deceased’s name on it and left it hanging in their home. “This is a wonder indeed,” he ended.**

That he embellished what he saw and related clearly false and impossible tales in the same breath as perfunctory lists of his itinerary’s stages should not count against him.
Al-Garnati next followed the Volga upstream to the land of “Bulgar” (far north and east of modern Bulgaria) where he found it so cold that in winter the ground was too frozen to allow for burials. Ever a businessman, he told how Bulgar traders obtained beaver skins, and in exchange they obtained Azeri sword blades that in turn they traded for sable pelts—a shrewd upgrade of animal fur via beaten steel. But mostly he marveled over the beaver dam, a structure he called “miraculous.”

Fifteen years later, around 1150, now aged 70, he arrived in the land of Basgird, modern Hungary. His descriptions here were surprisingly brief, yet they remain important given the paucity of information known about this region at the time. Still, he found space to mention no fewer than 78 of its cities and towns.

Here, he seemed to take on a role of a religious missionary more than a collector of tall tales, and he worked hard to serve a large Muslim population descended from North Africans—magrebis he called them—who had settled in the area years ago. But some modern scholars suspect that this is not so much wonder or fact but merely a manuscript抄ist’s mistake—perhaps Al-Garnati’s own—because elsewhere he wrote about a certain Turkic people living nearby whom he called “Magharebi.”

Whoever they were, he taught them proper Arabic prayer, because he found them suffering from a “deep ignorance.” It seems that his work was successful, because at the end of his stay he was able to write, “Today amongst them, the Friday sermon is preached in more than ten thousand places, since their territory is very wide.”

In Hungary, it appears that Al-Garnati finally put down some family roots when his eldest son, Hamid, married a local woman and remained there in the service of the Christian king of Hungary, Geza II. King Geza battled the Byzantine empire in alliance with Roger II of Sicily, who, like Geza, brought into his court many prominent Muslim scholars such as Al-Garnati’s contemporary, the geographer Muhammad al-Idrisi, whose famous world atlas The Book of Roger and travelogue The Book of Pleasant Journeys to Faraway Lands inspired countless later generations of traveling confabulists.

In 1153 Al-Garnati returned to Saysin, where his own wife and other sons had remained. But no place, it seemed, could keep him forever: Soon again he crossed the Caspian to the land of Khwarezm, an oasis in the Amu Darya river delta south of the Aral Sea, where he had visited before and made friends.

He left Khwarezm on a pilgrimage to Makkah the following year, probably via Merv, Isfahan and Basra. In 1155, he returned again to Baghdad, where finally he sat down to put his mental notes in order after long years of traveling and collecting stories. He dedicated his first book to his Abbasid patron.

But still he had miles to go and pages to turn before he unlaced his shoes and put away his pen. In 1162 he arrived in Mosul to write his second book, which he finished in three years. The first word of the title, *tubfa*, is most appropriate, as it stems from the same root as the Arabic word for museum, *mathaf*, a place to store wondrous things. Al-Garnati died in Damascus in 1169 at nearly 90 years old, but his scant historical record does not state whether he had settled down there or was, as usual, just passing through.

The value of Al-Garnati’s writing lies less in his “wonders” than in his witness of some far, cold, out-of-the-way Muslim lands rarely visited by others in his day. Despite an apparent simplicity of manner, his descriptions have a pleasant style displaying keen erudition. Observations are adorned with both objective fact and impossible legend. The reason behind his journeying was not, as far as is known, political duress or economic necessity, but rather the mere love of adventure.

That he embellished what he saw and related clearly false and impossible tales in the same breath as perfunctory lists of his itinerary’s stages should not count against him. He was writing about ‘*aja’ib*—wonders—after all. Because of this, he became one of Arabic literature’s greatest authors of medieval cosmography, a world view that maintains that truth is found not in the literalist eye of a human beholder, but in the fuller and ultimately unknowable creations of God. ☀

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Developing an Ancient City: “Sea Change Comes to Bagamoyo”

Places change. You’ve probably read about such changes in history books, and maybe you’ve seen them in your own community. Cities grow in places that were once farmland. Highways cut through long-established neighborhoods. Old buildings are torn down to make way for more modern ones. Look at the verbs in those sentences: cities grow, highways cut, buildings are torn down. Someone makes those things happen, but who? It can be difficult to tell, which makes it all the more important to find out. There is a lot to be learned by answering questions such as: Who makes places change? How do they do it? Who benefits—and who suffers—when places change?

The article “Sea Change Comes to Bagamoyo” shows how changes are coming to an 800-year-old city—particularly in the form of a large new seaport. You’ll find that it’s a complex process that involves a lot of people who have different—and sometimes conflicting—wants and needs. In this lesson, you’ll look closely at what and who is involved in transforming this city in Tanzania.

In this lesson, you will:
- recognize that different people have different points of view about change
- articulate those points of view
- negotiate differences among groups
- evaluate which groups are most likely to benefit from the proposed changes

Start by reading the article. (If class time is short, you can read it for homework.) As you read, use your comprehension skills—note-taking, underlining and/or making notes in the margins—to improve your understanding. Be sure you’ve got a good grasp of the content so that you’re prepared to work with it. For these activities, focus on the part of the article that starts on page 18 with “Now” and ends at the end of the article on page 23.

As you fill in your chart, think about how writer Amanda Leigh Lichtenstein chose to describe each of the people she quoted. What details about them did she include? Based on what you’ve read, why do you think they are important details? When you’re finished, compare your chart with that of another pair. Revise your chart if necessary, checking with the article to get any clarification you need.

FOR STUDENTS
We hope this guide will help sharpen your reading skills and deepen your understanding of this issue’s articles.

FOR TEACHERS
We encourage reproduction and adaptation of these ideas, freely and without further permission from AramcoWorld by teachers at any level, whether working in a classroom or through home study.

—THE EDITORS

Julie Weiss (julieweiss14@gmail.com) is an education consultant based in Eliot, Maine. She holds a Ph.D. in American studies. Her company, Unlimited Horizons, develops social studies, media literacy, and English as a Second Language curricula, and produces textbook materials.
Now divide the class into groups, with each group representing one of the people on your chart. (Depending on your class’s size, you might have one or two team-mates, or maybe you’ll be working solo.) With your group, write a short statement of your position about the development of Bagamoyo’s “mega-port.” Then look over the others in the chart. Who is most likely to share your point of view? What makes you think so? To see similarities visually, color-code your chart, using one color to identify a specific point of view, and another color to identify a different one.

Find a team that you think could be your ally. Explain to them what your position on development is, and tell them why you think you could work with them. Have that team respond. Are your perspectives similar enough to merit an alliance? Or are there differences that are too important for you to become one team? Use the color coding to help you evaluate whether or not someone would be interested in visiting with you.

When you’ve finished, sit down with your enlarged group and write what your group wants regarding the development of the port in Bagamoyo, and what you do not want. Have each group present this information. Have a discussion among the groups. What, if anything, can you agree about? Do the “wants” and “don’t wants” conflict?

Look at these final comparisons. As a class, answer these questions: Given that change is fairly certain to come, who do you think is most likely to benefit from the redevelopment of Bagamoyo? Why do you think so? Who do you think is most likely to suffer? Why?

The Art of Diplomacy: “The Busbecq Letters”

The news sometimes has stories of heads of state holding “high-level meetings,” often showing leaders shaking hands or standing side by side. But, photo ops aside, what exactly did they say in those meetings? We don’t usually know. An article in this AramcoWorld uses historical documents to see what went on during “high-level meetings” more than 400 years ago. Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq’s letters offer an insider’s view of how a diplomatic solution was reached between two nations who were at war, on and off, for many years. In this lesson, you will take a close-up look at the process of reaching an accord. In this lesson, you will:

- see the two competing empires as Busbecq saw them, and explain why he continued to mediate between them
- chart the process by which Busbecq was finally able to broker a peace treaty
- identify, based on the experience of Busbecq, some qualities and skills that are useful for diplomats
- create a job description for a diplomat

Start by reading “The Busbecq Letters.” (You can read it in class or at home.) According to the article, because Busbecq, who was born in part of what is now Belgium, spent a great deal of time in Turkey, he was able to provide his fellow Europeans with a more realistic view of the Turks than they got otherwise. Like any good diplomat, he was able to see and admire aspects of the society his country was opposing. And like any good diplomat, he was able to see his own society with a critical eye. Find the parts of the article that describe what Busbecq admired about the Turks, and what European society was like.

Make a two-column chart. Label the first column “Ottoman Empire” and the second “Hapsburg Empire.” In each column, write what Busbecq says about each of the two societies. When you’re done, look at the two lists. Which of the two empires did Busbecq think would win a military confrontation? How do you think his answer to that question affected his commitment to working out a peace deal?

A good diplomat must also be familiar with the situation into which he or she is stepping. The situation Busbecq faced was complicated by the recurring strife that had gone on for decades. (If you aren’t familiar with that chapter of history, get more help by going to the online edition’s timeline at www.aramcoworld.com.)

Now imagine that you are Busbecq, and you are meeting for the first time with Sultan Suleiman in Amasya in April 1555. What was the situation? (Check your timeline.) With a partner, act out what happened at the meeting. Fill in any gaps with what you imagine the two men said. Above the timeline, fill in what happened in the negotiations from April 1555 until August 1557. Then add what transpired between that time and the time Busbecq left Turkey in 1562. What is most striking to you about the process? In the end, how was an accord finally reached? What does that suggest to you about diplomacy?

Busbecq was a successful diplomat: He brokered a peace treaty between two warring empires. You’ve read about how he did that. Now step back from his experience and think about the skills he used, and the qualities he possessed, in order to succeed. Write a job description for a diplomat, using Busbecq’s success to guide you. Your job description should take the following format:

- A statement of what the employer is looking for. Complete this prompt: “Seeking a diplomat who will:”
- A list of skills the successful candidate will have. Complete this prompt: “The successful candidate will have the following qualities:”
- A list of qualities that the individual should have. Complete this prompt: “The successful candidate will have the following qualities:”
- A list of skills the successful candidate will have. Complete this prompt: “The successful candidate will be able to:”

Looking at the job description, would you apply for a job as a diplomat? Why or why not?

(Note: For each exercise above, there is a completed chart at www.aramcoworld.com.)
“I was born into a Muslim family from Somalia, an arid country in East Africa with more camels than people. Somalis are historically nomadic, known for their poetry and proverbs, but in more recent years they came to be known as refugees…. Someday, God willing, I hope to go back to Mogadishu … and hopefully clarify the image of where I came from. But I know I will never fit in Somalia … I’ll stick out like a foreigner.”

Readers of AramcoWorld who want to range more widely or delve more deeply than a bimonthly magazine can do will find interesting material, most of it recently published, in this list. Without endorsing the views of any of the authors, the editors encourage varied and omnivorous reading as a path to greater understanding. The books listed here are available online, in libraries, from bookstores—we urge our readers to patronize independent bookstores—or from their respective publishers; International Standard Book Numbers (isbn) are given to facilitate ordering. Please do not order books from AramcoWorld. The full-text electronic archive of “Suggestions for Reading” from 1993 to the present can be found at www.aramcoworld.com.


This book focuses on the struggles of 14 Dartmouth College students of the Muslim faith to understand and practice their religious and cultural traditions in an American context. The editors worked for a number of years with the students—eight men and six women who are immigrants or children of immigrants—who expressed themselves in autobiographical essays. They began their personal searches within families with mostly conservative roots in Africa, the Middle East or Southwest Asia, and most sought a balance between spiritual values and ritualized customs. Sharing the trials of other US teenagers as they strove for independence and self-esteem, their efforts were sometimes complicated by anti-Muslim sentiment after 9/11. In addition, some of the women had to weigh education and careers against pressures for early or arranged marriages. The essays suggest that amid the diversity of American faiths and cultures, many of the students came to see their own faith as simply a different path toward similar destinations—most importantly the blessings of a loving and supportive community. The book is timely in light of the recent tragic events in Paris, and it suggests there may be major differences between the capabilities of host and immigrant to blend and bind in Europe and the US.

—WILLIAM TRACY


This book is part of the University of Leiden’s recent celebration of 400 years of Arabic studies in the Netherlands—a wide-ranging cultural program supported in part by Saudi Aramco. Odd as it might seem, Arabic is the only living language to have been taught in Dutch universities for a period of more than four centuries. Latin was the original language of Dutch scholars; ancient Greek and Biblical Hebrew were also taught from earliest times. Dutch and other modern tongues were introduced in the early 19th century. Arabic studies were originally meant to support research into Hebrew and the Bible, but in time this scholarship became much wider ranging and was recognized as among the best in Europe. This book features a series of informative portraits of the academic luminaries in Arabic studies, from early pioneers like Franciscus Raphelengius and Josephus Justus Scaliger to Leiden’s first professor of Arabic, Thomas Erpenius, to later legends like al-Andalus scholar Reinhart Dozy, Makkah pilgrim Snouck Hurgronje, and Arent Jan Wensink, editor-in-chief of the Encyclopaedia of Islam from 1924 to 1939. The work is lavishly illustrated with museum treasures including rare Arabic manuscript pages, stunning engravings and pages from the earliest printed Arabic works.

—ROBERT W. LEBLING


While the “study of the Bible in Arabic is in its infancy,” scholar Sidney H. Griffith writes, Arabic-language Christian texts date back to the earliest centuries of Islam. Though long overlooked, these texts should come as no surprise. Even as Greek scientific, mathematical and philosophical
works were being translated into Arabic during the Abbasid period (750–1050 CE), so too were Christianity’s and Judaism’s holy texts being rendered into what became the lingua franca of the medieval Islamic world: Arabic. The earliest translations were by Jews and Christians both in response to Qur’anic versions of Biblical narratives and as an effort to preserve their holy texts in an increasingly Islamic milieu. Muslim scholars, meanwhile, translated Judeo-Christian scripture into Arabic, finding in earlier revelation echoes of the Prophet Muhammad’s mission and highlighting his status as the last in a long chain of prophetic messengers. This is a long overdue contribution from a noted scholar of Christian-Muslim relations.

—TOM VERDE

Desert Road Archaeology in Ancient Egypt and Beyond.
Frank Förster and Heiko Riemer, eds. 2013, Heinrich-Barth-Institut, 978-3-92768-841-4, €78 hb.
From earliest times, humans followed natural passages such as animal trails, and many grew into heavily trafficked routes. This volume contains 23 prolifically illustrated essays on the ancient roads crossing the Sahara Desert and the Arabian and Sinai peninsulas. Research suggests that in the Neolithic wet periods from the ninth to the fifth millennium BCE, routes originated in settled regions located in what is now hyper-arid territory in Egypt. With increasing aridity and the coalescence of population along the Nile, and with the rise of the dynastic period around 3500 BCE, an extensive network of roads developed in the Nile Valley that reached into the African interior, the Red Sea coast and farther afield. One essay focuses on a road to the Arabian Peninsula built during the reign of the 12th-century BCE pharaoh Ramses III to connect with the incense route from the south—all the more interesting in light of the find in 2012 of two Egyptian cartouches near Tayma, Saudi Arabia, a key northern trading post. This book, coupled with ongoing research by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), will do much to help understand and link ancient world heritage sites.

—PETER HARRIBAN

Thomas Jefferson’s library. Zarghami goes far beyond the Cyropaedia, tracking down just about everything known about Cyrus and shaping it into a well-written narrative of his life. Cyrus’s military achievements were indisputable: He built a standing army out of the Persian tribes and conquered foes including the Babylonians, creating the Achaemenid Persian empire. But he was more than a general. Cyrus showed great tolerance of other peoples and faiths. He allowed the exiled Jews of Babylon to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple. His life is worth studying, as Zarghami ably shows.

—ROBERT W. LEHRING

Three accomplished western historians seek to demonstrate that Islam and the West are part of an essentially similar culture, and that there has never been a “clash of civilizations” (an influential and controversial theory propounded in 1993 by Samuel Huntington). They lean toward Richard Bulliet’s theory of the “Islamo-Christian civilization,” drawing on the religious, cultural and intellectual heritage of the ancient Mediterranean and the Middle East and fostered by centuries of migration and trade. They do not posit a grand theory, instead concentrating on, for example, dealings between the Genoese and Tunisians, the Catalans and Maghrebis, and the cultural capitals of Constantinople and Alexandria. Tolan focuses on the medieval period, Veinstein on the 17th-18th centuries and Laurens on the contemporary era: All show the Mediterranean and the Middle East in near-constant states of cross-fertilization. The classical Greeks learned science and art from ancient Babylon and Egypt. A millennium and a half later, the Abbasid empire, based in the religious, cultural and intellectual heritage of the ancient Mediterranean and the Middle East and fostered by centuries of migration and trade. They do not posit a grand theory, instead concentrating on, for example, dealings between the Genoese and Tunisians, the Catalans and Maghrebis, and the cultural capitals of Constantinople and Alexandria. Tolan focuses on the medieval period, Veinstein on the 17th-18th centuries and Laurens on the contemporary era: All show the Mediterranean and the Middle East in near-constant states of cross-fertilization. The classical Greeks learned science and art from ancient Babylon and Egypt. A millennium and a half later, the Abbasid empire, based in

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This book offers a vivid, multidimensional window on the Hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Makkah whose roots go back to the Prophet Abraham, through the medium of nearly 300 historic postcards dating from the 1870s to the 1950s. Kargılı is an independent scholar. His work documents in English and Turkish the Hajj’s spiritual, cultural, socioeconomic and political aspects as he takes the reader on a visual journey through annotated postcards that collectively reveal the pilgrimage’s impact on the diverse range of communities from which the participants originate, highlighting the routes they took to Makkah and the holy sites they visited. Despite the ever-evolving methods of travel—by land, sea and air—afflicting the duration and the difficulty of the journey, these postcards remind us of pilgrims’ will to answer the most precious invitation of their lives, portraying a very human need to preserve and share a memory.

—ELIF M. GÖRGÜDEM

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This volume provides in-depth information on a number of aspects of the Hajj, the subject of a major exhibition at the British Museum in 2012. The 29 essays touch on many of the geographical areas involved in the pilgrimage to Makkah, from sub-Saharan Africa to the lands along the Trans-Siberian Railway, among a wide range of topics. The first section explains the Hajj for those unfamiliar with it and contains chapters on the early Hajj, while the next part discusses the archeology of the traditional land and sea routes. The third part deals with travelers, especially the colonial impact on the Hajj, and includes an interesting article describing the western converts who performed it. This is followed by essays on various aesthetic aspects—notably textiles, where there is a very informative article on the kiswa, the calligraphic textile draping the Ka’bah. The final two contributions cover the organization of the Hajj from the UK today and the rising popularity of modern souvenirs. The book is particularly valuable as a work of reference, or for the specialist, with excellent illustrations and good maps.

—CAROLINE STONE

The title of this engaging memoir suggests the unfamiliar culture in which the author found himself when he began five years of teaching English in a remote town in north-central Saudi Arabia in the mid-1960s. Aneiza (also ‘Unayzah) had no electricity or running water in its mud houses and was linked to Riyadh and Buraydah only by a desert track. Most of Budd’s detailed and insightful narrative recounts his interactions with secondary-school colleagues, students and their male relatives. In Arabic he recreates the events and context of the time. Eventually, Budd made a disappointing transfer to Riyadh, and later he left the country. He also recounts his embrace of Islam and, in evocative detail, his pilgrimage to Makkah. In the final chapter, he warmly describes his return after 46 years to ‘Unayzah and an enthusiastic welcome from old students and friends—all less changed than the physical and economic environment there.

—COLBERT HEID

It is startling to realize that when the oldest Giza pyramid was completed some 5,000 years ago, Egyptian civilization was already more than 25 centuries old. Put another way, we are today as chronologically far removed from the founding of Rome in 753 BCE as were Egypt’s first-century BCE Roman conquerors from the establishment of the first Pharaonic dynasty, which itself emerged from a culture that was already 2,000 years old. The antiquity of Egyptian civilization as well as the lasting impact of decisive events during its long history are the subjects of these two fresh surveys. Romer’s work—the first of two planned volumes—takes readers back to the first Egyptian farmers who settled in the Faiyum Oasis in the northern lower Nile around 5000 BCE. Within 1,500 years, he writes, their descendants “were building pyramids for pharaoh.” The steady development of Egyptian culture from settled farmers to herding pot-makers, copper-smelters and traders, to tomb-builders, hieroglyph-makers, mathematicians, engineers and imperial rulers unfolds in this narrative, which ends with the building of the Great Pyramid of Khufu in the third century BCE. While Romer takes the broad view, Clines zeroes in on 1177 BCE, when the mysterious “Sea People” launched their unsuccessful invasion of Egypt as a critical moment in not only Egypt’s history but also that of neighboring Bronze Age civilizations including Minoa, Mycenae, Troy and Babylon. A volume in Princeton’s “Turning Points in Ancient History” series, Clines’s study credits these civilizations’ sudden decline to circumstances beyond the “convenient scapegoat” of marauding Sea Peoples to consider earthquakes, drought, revolts and trade disruptions. The result was a “Perfect Storm of Calamities” that brought the Bronze Age to a cataclysmic end, opening the way for civilizations to “begin completely anew in areas from Greece to the Levant and beyond.”

—TOM VERDE

The Last Storytellers: Tales from the Heart of Morocco. Richard Hamilton. 2013, I. B. Tauris, 978-1-78076-534-1, £19.99/$31.74 hb; £12.99 pb. This is a charming book with a double claim on our attention. First, it provides a fresh and lively collection of traditional folk tales from Morocco, many of which are part of the international repertoire rags to riches, the rescued princess, magic, monsters and lessons in morality. The second and perhaps more important aspect of the book is that, in the words of Mohammed VI, the king of Morocco, it “brilliantly illustrates an ancient oral tradition” that is part of the cultural heritage of the Mediterranean world. Sadly, that tradition is dying as Morocco’s storytellers, or hlaykia, pass away. Hamilton, although himself not an Arabist, has made a heroic rescue effort. His introduction traces the history of the hlaykia and describes his efforts to track down the last, mostly very elderly, survivors in Marrakesh, where they were once an intrinsic part of the famous square, Djema‘a al-Fna. In his foreword, publisher Barnaby Rogerson quotes a proverb, “When an old storyteller dies, a whole library burns.” The Last Storytellers ensures the survival of at least a few important volumes.

—CAROLINE STONE

Lawrence in Arabia: War, Deceit, Imperial Folly and the Making of the Modern Middle East. Scott Anderson. 2013, Doubleday, 978-0-385-52922-1, $28.95 hb. War correspondent Scott Anderson’s Lawrence in Arabia is anything but a light read. Based on research from more than 20 government archives and private collections, his book casts unexpected new light on T. E. Lawrence’s remarkable transition from young Oxford scholar and archeologist to legendary leader of the Arab revolt against the Turks in World War I. Anderson documents the intertwined roles of three key players during the war—Standard Oil employee and US intelligence agent William Yale, German spymaster Curt Pruefer and Zionist Aaron Aaronson—who, along with Lawrence, did not lose influence the making of the modern Middle East. Lawrence, whom Winston Churchill called “one of the greatest beings alive in our time,” struggled to curb the colonial ambitions of Britain and France and maintain his promises to Arab allies of an independent state in former Ottoman lands. But he lost that battle with the signing of the 1919 Paris peace accords, which Yale described as “the prologue of the 20th-century tragedy.” Anderson’s exposure of secret European plots, as well as the hidden objectives of the Zionist movement in the early 1900s, challenges readers to reconsider the roots of the modern Middle East.

—PENNY KESTING


Seven continents. Seven seas. Five ages of man from settled farmers to herding pot-makers, copper-smelters and traders, to tomb-builders, hieroglyph-makers, mathematicians, engineers and imperial rulers unfolds in this narrative, which ends with the building of the Great Pyramid of Khufu in the third century BCE. While Romer takes the broad view, Cline zeroes in on 1177 BCE, when the mysterious “Sea People” launched their unsuccessful invasion of Egypt as a critical moment in not only Egypt’s history but also that of neighboring Bronze Age civilizations including Minoa, Mycenae, Troy and Babylon. A volume in Princeton’s “Turning Points in Ancient History” series, Cline’s study credits these civilizations’ sudden decline to circumstances beyond the “convenient scapegoat” of marauding Sea Peoples to consider earthquakes, drought, revolts and trade disruptions. The result was a “Perfect Storm of Calamities” that brought the Bronze Age to a cataclysmic end, opening the way for civilizations to “begin completely anew in areas from Greece to the Levant and beyond.”

—TOM VERDE


Moroccan novelist Lalami has written a fictionalized, first-person account by Mustafa ibn Muhammad ibn Abdussalam al-Zamori, the historically documented Moorish attendant slave of a Spanish nobleman aboard an expedition to Florida in 1528 that after eight years had only four survivors. The sole factual record of the ill-fated journey through what would become the southwestern US and northern Mexico was set down by Cabeza de Vaca, one of the surviving Spaniards, and he largely wrote the other three out of his story. This historical novel tells that same tale from the perspective of a dark-skinned Muslim from Morocco, one of the first in the New World, who—as Lalami would have it—saw Native Americans very differently than did his Spanish masters who, not 40 years earlier, had forced themselves on the digital map, by tying in their home address before anywhere else, and zooming into see that location.”
the Moors’ departure en masse from Iberia. Her reimagining of what might have really happened in the explorers’ quest to survive turns some things from the single historical account upside down: al-Zamori became a leader, not a mere slave or attendant; he became the Spaniards’ equal and, in Indian eyes, he was neither an “African” nor a “Moor,” but a linguist and doctor. Cabeza de Vaca’s narrative ended with a few sideways words about him: “The fourth [survivor] is called Estanbacano; he is a black Moor, a native of Azamor [Morocco].”

Lalami’s book puts him squarely in the story’s middle, with fidelity to fact and a keenly realistic historical imagination, that makes the New World new, yet again.

—LOUIS WEINER


The rich and varied music and folk-dance traditions of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar are little known outside the eastern peninsular region itself. This pioneering and detailed guidebook to those arts is appropriate for both general readers and specialists. It covers the song and dance traditions of Bedouin tribes and villagers, the sophisticated music of the cities, and the songs of seafarers and pearl divers. Included are several accounts of women’s wedding traditions, as well as a CD with 37 excellent audio examples. The culmination of many years of research, the work also clarifies the often-confusing regional terms for rhythms, instruments, music genres and dance forms. Urkevich is a professor of Arabic at the American University of Kuwait who lived earlier in Saudi Arabia. For anyone seeking a greater understanding of the traditional folk arts of the Arabian Peninsula, including those performed by relatives who have migrated abroad, this will also be a useful guide to visitors.

—KAI HARDY CAMPBELL


The appalling conflict in Syria over the past few years has mostly been made known to us through the increasingly rare breed of journalists who access the country and occasional blogs by Syrians. My House in Damascus is therefore an important testimonial to what the civil war—and the issues that spawned it—have felt like for ordinary people. The author, an Oxford Arabist with more than 30 years’ experience in the region and a master’s degree in Islamic art, fell in love with the idea of buying and rehabilitating one of the beautiful traditional houses in the old city of Damascus around 2005—a time of increasing prosperity and apparent stability.

She weaves together the story of the house with those of the many people she met and friends she made in the course of its restoration. She provides historical and political background to shed light on the complexities of Syria, and the causes of what is happening today. My House in Damascus is not an academic analysis—the author’s passion for Syria and its people, and her heartbreak at what is happening to them, is too strong for that. Rather, it is a story told from the inside, very different from the perspective of a temporary observer.

—CAROLINE STONE


In her introduction, the Palestinian author and poet recalls how her first writings as a child were poems in Arabic. However, she writes, “long after my exile brought me to foreignness in English, I woke up one day and understood that Arabic had been stolen from my tongue.” But, this book shows, clearly not from her heart. Abulhawa’s first collection of poetry is an evocative, haunting and often painful expression of lost memories, longings and proud resistance. “This nectar of tragedy is ours to consume, ours to bury and bring back to life,” she says in a poem entitled The Gift of Olive Oil. Written over the course of five years, the poems selected for this slender volume demonstrate the same honesty, raw emotions and penetrating insight that distinguished her best-selling first novel, Mornings in Jenin, published in 2010. Abulhawa offers a compelling and intimate glimpse into the lives and longings of the Palestinian diaspora.

—FANEY KEATING


After Lebanon gained its independence from France in 1943, Beirut enjoyed several decades as the eastern Mediterranean’s most cosmopolitan city. This coffee-table book about the work of Lebanese hairstylist Naim Abboud offers some unexpected insights into 60 years of community and cultural history from the unique perspective of a talented artist. Here are stories of entertainers, business families, fashionable hotels and shops—not the picture of a chaotic, fractured Middle East that the western public has now grown accustomed to seeing on TV screens. Abboud started as an apprentice hairdresser in 1955, at age 15. After studying in Paris, he opened shops in prestigious Beirut hotels and Lebanese mountain resorts, Kuwait, Cairo and later in Europe, serving prosperous Arab tourists. Today, among the social elite in Lebanon and the broader Middle East, he has the name-recognition of Dior or Cardin. The book’s brief text is illustrated with pages of photographs of elegant, glamorous women and Naim’s own colorful sketches.

—WILLIAM TRACY


Western Christianity’s battle with Darwinism, enjoined even before On the Origins of Species went to press in 1859, is well known and well documented. But what of the reaction in Muslim lands? Could Islam and Darwinism find common ground? Even as Christian apologists combed scripture for Biblical refutations of Darwin, Islamic scholars as high up the intellectual ladder as Egypt’s grand mufri, Muhammad ‘Abduh, “had little difficulty reconciling modern principles of evolution with revelation,” Elshakry observes in this thorough study of the question of the compatibility of Darwin’s ideas with Islamic thinking. While ‘Abduh and others were certainly criticized in their communities for their beliefs, their advocacy of Darwinian thought, Elshakry explains, was in line with the medieval Islamic world’s rational, scientific inquiries into the nature of the universe—“necessary for the formation of an educated society.”

—TOM VERDE

When All the Lands Were Sea: A Photographic Journey into the Lives of the Marsh Arabs of Iraq, Tor Eigeland. 2015, Interlink, 978-1-56656-982-8, $30 hb.

During the 1990s, the Iraqi government drained the marshes between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, destroying the millennia-old heritage and homeland of its residents, the Marsh Arabs. Decades before, in 1967, photojournalist Tor Eigeland visited and recorded their way of life. This book is that precious record and it stands as a valuable complement to the scarce books on these people, including explorer Willrif Thesiger’s classic The Marsh Arabs and Edward Ochsenschlager’s ethnographical study Iraq’s Marsh Arabs in the Garden of Eden. Eigeland entertains with his adventures and captures the atmosphere with his prose, but his photographs are this volume’s strength. Most are candid; where they’re posed, the people’s warmth and character shines. He records all aspects of their lives such as building with reeds, cooking, fishing, hunting and playing. This book suits home coffee tables as well as the bookshelves of anyone interested in the human history of Iraq.

—GRAHAM CHANDLER


In the mid-16th century, Timbuktu established its reputation as a center of Islamic learning, hosting more than 150 schools for science, literature and religious studies. Large collections of books and manuscripts existed, some gathered into central collections, but even more carefully tended by local families intent on preserving this heritage. American photographer Alexandra Huddleston, supported by a Fulbright fellowship, spent 10 months in Timbuktu in 2006-2007 photographing contemporary life and documenting scholarly and religious culture. This book features 36 of her best images, with commentaries. The fact that a young American woman could be accepted into the local culture and allowed to make these photographs is striking evidence of the openness, tolerance and moderation that has long characterized Islam in West Africa, despite the more recent actions of a small, militant minority.

—CHARLES O. CECIL
El Hadji Sy: Painting, Performance, Politics. In 1985, the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt commissioned the artist and curator El Hadji Sy (born 1954 in Dakar, Senegal) to assemble a new group of works of contemporary art from from his homeland, to initiate a long-term relationship between the two cities. Thirty years later, as part of a programmatic investigation into its collection, the museum presents a retrospective of Sy’s career as a painter and cultural activist. The exhibition combines Sy’s installations and paintings—sometimes executed with his bare feet or produced on such unusual surfaces as industrial rice sacking or synthetic kite silk—with his selection of ethnographic objects and artworks by colleagues from Senegal. It includes loans from international private collections in addition to works from the museum’s own collections. As a founder of the collective Laboratoire AGIT’ART, and a curator of numerous artist-led workshops and studio spaces in Dakar, Sy is known for an interdisciplinary practice that continues to break new ground. Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt, through October 18.

Current March
Mshatta in Focus: The Jordanian Desert Palace in Historical Photographs. The richly decorated façade of the early Islamic desert palace of Mshatta was presented as a gift from the Ottoman sultan to the German emperor in 1903, when it was transported from the Jordanian desert to Berlin, where it now forms the centerpiece of the Museum für Islamische Kunst’s collection, on show in the Pergamonmuseum. Its accession history began with a series of photographs of the façade, which circulated among European archeologists and art historians around the turn of the century and eventually landed in the hands of Kaiser Wilhelm II. The façade was photographed at several key moments in its recent history: before and during its dismantling, after the bombing of the structure during World War II and during its subsequent restoration in the 1950s. Pergamonmuseum, Berlin, through March 15.

The Lost Dhow: A Discovery from the Maritime Silk Route. In 1998 an Arab ship carrying goods from China was discovered at the bottom of the Indian Ocean off Belitung Island, Indonesia. Dating from the ninth century (China’s Tang dynasty), the Belitung shipwreck is the earliest Arab vessel of this period to be found with a complete cargo, including silver ingots, bronze mirrors, spice-filled jars, intricately worked vessels of silver and gold, and thousands of ceramic bowls, ewers and other vessels. Uncovering its mysterious origins reveals the interconnections between two great powers, the Tang and Abbasid empires. The exhibition provides the earliest evidence of a maritime silk route—and speaks to the vibrant exchange of ideas and technologies between peoples that occurred centuries before the Portuguese entered the region in the late 15th century. Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, through March 15.

Maps of Persia 1477-1925: A Graphical Journey through the History of Iran presents a selection of urban plans, topographic maps and sea charts from “Dr. Cyrus Ala’i’s Map Collection of Persia,” more than 250 maps that were given to the Centre for Iranian Studies at the School of African and Oriental Studies (soas) in 2013. The collection includes important printed general maps of Persia and specialist items from Ptolemaic editions at the end of the 16th century up until the end of the Qajar dynasty in 1925. Brunei Gallery, soas, University of London, through March 21.

Grand Parade: A Unique Art Installation by Jompet Kuswidananto. The Indonesian artist Jompet Kuswidananto makes a unique presentation of his famous groups of parade figures. Rather than being retrospective of individual works, it serves as a new art installation, conceived as a dynamic whole. The assembly of life-size mechanical figures within the installation is modelled on the groups found in the Indonesian public domain during festive, ceremonial or political parades—each figure wearing a costume, carrying a musical instrument and coming into action through movement of hands, clapping and instrument playing. Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, through March 22.

Nasta’liq: The Genius of Persian Calligraphy is the first exhibition to focus on the calligraphic script developed in 14th-century Iran that remains one of the most expressive forms of esthetic refinement in Persian culture. More than 20 works ranging from 1400 to 1600, the height of nasta’liq’s development, tell the story of the script’s transformation from a simple conveyer of the written word into an artistic form on its own. The narrative thread emphasizes the achievements of four of the great-
est master calligraphers, whose manuscripts and individual folios were and still are appreciated not only for their content, but also for their technical virtuosity and visual quality. Baccelli Gallery, Washington, D.C., through March 22.

Southeast Asia: 800 ce—Present enables students to explore the arts and material culture of Burma, Thailand, Vietnam and Laos and the island nations of Indonesia, Philippines and Malaysia, all part of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which represents a broad and complex sweep of landscapes, cultures and religions. Temple architecture, sacred scripts and individual folios were and remain master calligraphers, whose manuscripts and individual folios were and still are appreciated not only for their content, but also for their technical virtuosity and visual quality. Baccelli Gallery, Washington, D.C., through March 22.

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Witness at a Crossroads: Photographer Marc Riboud in Asia chronicles the French photographer’s journeys across Asia during the mid-1960s and 1970s, a period of great cultural and political transition in the region. More than 100 black-and-white photographs offer glimpse into everyday life in Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, China and Japan, illuminating tensions between tradition and postwar modernity. From a carnival in Rajasthan to music and dance in Tokyo to an extraordinary meeting by the Dalai Lama, Zhou Enlai, Indira Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, Riboud’s photographs capture moments of humanity, humor and intimacy. Also on display are correspondence between Riboud and his mentor Henri Cartier-Bresson, press cards, contact sheets, maps and personal items such as the photographer’s passport and camera. The Rubin Museum of Art, New York, through March 23.

Poetry and Exile: Works by Abdallah Benanteur, Ipek Duben, Mireille Kassar, Mona Saudi and Canan Tolon, drawn from recent acquisitions, explore themes of exile as expressed here. For Canan Tolon, it is exile from her home in Istanbul as a result of contracting polio as a child, the story of which she captures in “Fahrettin,” the title of her first collection. For Ipek Duben, it is exile from her residence in Fautur Imparfarat.” Ipek Duben’s book Refugee, with its delicate gauze pages, belies the terror and helplessness of people forced to flee their homeland. Mona Saudi and Abdallah Benanteur combine the powerful verses of Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish with drawings, while Mireille Kassar conjures a story of exile from her own family history and the Persian poem “The Conference of the Birds.” The British Museum, London, through March 29.

Emperor Charles v Captures Tunis: Documenting a Campaign. In June 1535 Emperor Charles v set sail from Sardinia at the head of a fleet of 10 ships carrying more than 30,000 soldiers to reconquer the Kingdom of Tunis from the Ottomans. To document the campaign and his hoped-for victory, he brought with him not only historians and poets but also his court painter, Jan Cornelis Vermeyen. In 1543 the Flemish artist was commissioned to paint the cartoons for 12 monumental tapestries celebrating the campaign from the countless drawings and sketches he had carried back from North Africa. These unique cartoons are the focus of this exhibition, highlighting different aspects of the dramatic events of 1535. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, through March 31.

The Rainbow Behind the Black: 100 Years of Saudi Arabian Dress and Accessories. In 1854 the French couturier Charles Frederick Worth traveled to Mecca to dress Saudi princes in the latest European fashion. Since then, Saudi Arabia has been a source of inspiration for many of the world’s most prestigious fashion designers. The influence of the Middle East on the European fashion industry is highlighted in this exhibition, which presents more than 100 items, including haute couture dresses from the 1920s to the present day, along with photographs, paintings and drawings by artists such as Jean Paul Gaultier, Yves Saint Laurent and Elisee Meissonnier. Freer in China, through April 26.

Current April

Dara. It is 1659 in Mughal India. The imperial court is a place of opulence and excess. Two brothers, whose mother's death inspires, are heirs to this Muslim empire. Now they fight ferociously for succession. Dara, the crown prince, has the love of the people—and of his emperor father—but younger brother Aurangzeb holds a different vision for India's future. Islam inspires poetry in Dara, puritanical rigor in Aurangzeb. Can Jahannara, their beloved sister, assuage Aurangzeb’s resolve to seize the Peacock Throne and purge the empire? National Theatre, London, through April 4.

Egypt’s Mysterious Book of the Fayum is an exquisitely illustrated papyrus from Greco-Roman Egypt, one of the most intriguing ancient representations of a place and time. The papyrus depicts the Fayum Oasis, located west of the Nile, as a center of prosperity and ritual. For the first time in more than 150 years, many of the scrolls owned by the Walters Art Museum and the Morgan Library & Museum, separated since the manuscript was divided, have been reunited. Egyptian jewelry, papyri, statues, reliefs and ritual objects illuminate the religious context that gave rise to the Fayum tradition. It celebrates the crocodile god, Sobek, and his special relationship with the Fayum. Reiss-Engelhorn-Museen, Mannheim, Germany, through April 15.

Ancient Lives, New Discoveries introduces eight people from ancient Egypt and Sudan whose bodies have been preserved, either naturally or by deliberate embalming. Using the latest technology, the exhibition unlocks hidden secrets to build up a picture of their lives in the pharaonic era. 4,000 years—from prehistoric Egypt to Christian Sudan. From a priest’s daughter to a temple singer, a middle-aged man to a young child, a female doorkeeper to a woman with a Christian tattoo, the exhibit explores how they lived and what happened to them after they died. Using interactive technology, new visitors can replay scenes of their lives in the pharaonic era. Philarmon, through April 19.

Bazm and Razm: Feast and Fight in Persian Art. For centuries, Persian kingship was epitomized by two complementary pursuits: bazm (feast) and razm (fight). The ruler’s success as both a reveler and hunter/warrior distinguished him as a worthy and legitimate sovereign. The pairing of bazm and razm as the ultimate royal activity is an ancient concept with roots in India and China. It is a recurring theme in the Shahnama (Book of Kings)—the Persian national epic—as well as other poetic and historical texts. This exhibition features some three dozen works of art that explore these themes, created between the 15th century and the present day. Works from the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Department of Islamic Art that illustrate the linked nature of bazm and razm are displayed alongside corresponding works—primarily Persian—from the departments of Asian Art, Arms and Armor, and Musical Instruments. The exhibition charts the gradual shift in meaning and use of this pairing as it emerged from a strictly royal, or princely, context and became more widespread. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, through May 31.

Connecting Continents: Indian Ocean Trade and Exchange is a small display featuring objects that show the long and complex history of Indian Ocean trade and exchange from ancient times. For thousands of years, the Indian Ocean was a region in which people, objects and ideas have circulated. The monsoon winds enabled merchants to travel among Africa, the Middle East and Asia, exchanging valuable commodities such as textiles, spices and ceramics. From early coastal trade between the great ancient civilizations of the Indus Valley and Mesopotamia through to the heyday of European East India companies until now, the Indian Ocean has remained a dynamic economic maritime zone. This display presents objects from different periods and regions that tell the fascinating story of global interaction. The British Museum, London, through May 31.

Marvels and Mirages of Orientalism: Benjamin-Constant in His Time is the first major exhibition on Orientalism to be presented in Canada. Through this unique collection of prints, curators have tackled the very notion of Orientalism, focusing on three cultures that cover the dazzling color palette of an acclaimed painter of the Belle Époque, Jean Joseph Benjamin-Constant, who traveled to India, Afghanistan and the Philippines, as well as Afghanistan, India and the Morocco of the cheftains. His huge, spectacular canvases conjure up fantasies of a dreamlike Orient, viewed through the prism of folklore, ethnography, caricature and pure imagination. Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, through May 31.

The Traveler’s Eye: Scenes of Asia features more than 100 works created over the past five centuries, providing glimpses of travels across Asia, and the unique perspectives of artists on expeditions to Europe. The exhibition juxtaposes East Asian scrolls, Japanese woodblock prints and contemporary photography with maps, archeological drawings and souvenirs, concluding with three vignettes on western travelers who recorded and remembered Asia during the last century. Curator and archaeologist Ernst Herfeld in Central Asia, American collector and museum-founder Charles Lang Freer in China, and the many travelers worldwide who shared memories with mass-produced, hand-colored postcards. Sackler Gallery, Washington, D.C., through May 31.

Current June

Sharjah Biennial 12: The Past, the Present, the Possible began to take shape in a private conversation between Danh Vo and curator Eungie Joo in early 2013. They discussed the relevance of contemporary art; the potential or artistic positions to imagine something beyond current states of social and political confinement; and the need for artists to play active roles in imagining the possible. Sharjah Biennial 12: The Past, the Present, the Possible, through April 19.
Marvelous Creatures: Animal Fables in Islamic Art focuses on the real and mythical animals that appear in the legends, tales and fables of the Islamic world. Divided into quadrants of earth, air, fire and water, these marvelous creatures introduce timeless stories such as the well-known and beloved classics Shahnameh and 1001 Nights. Animals feature in the artistic production of diverse cultures from far-flung times and places that are nonetheless connected by their shared celebration of traditional fables and the messages, knowledge and lessons found in these stories. The exhibition offers interactive experiences, and the majority of artworks presented are on display for the first time. A wide range of programs for adults, schools and families accompanies the exhibition. The Museum of Islamic Art, Doha, Qatar, through July 11.

Polychrome underglaze painted dish with hare motif from Iznik, Turkey, 16th century.

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Sea Change Comes to Bagamoyo

Written by Amanda Leigh Lichtenstein
Photography by Mariella Furrer

Udara Arab, Portuguese, German and English rule, commerce and the town’s strategic location on East Africa’s coast made Bagamoyo a port leading from the 1300s to the late 1800s. Now Tanzania has unveiled a 30-year plan to transform the town and environs into the largest seaport on the African coast.

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Back Cover

Outside a door frame carved in a style found from the Arabian Peninsula to the Mediterranean, stand in the old quarter of Bagamoyo, Tanzania, which became known also for its cultural traditions, these artists use iconic imagery and corporeal signs and ideas from earlier periods. The Lebanese Museum of Fine Arts, which has recently begun to acquire such work within the context of its holdings of Islamic art, understanding that the ultimate success and relevance of an exhibition comes by establishing a two-year “window” to the present and future, and does not harm the local scene. For instance, the first major installation of U.S.'s collection of contemporary Islamic art, one of the first of its kind, provided a platform for the exhibition "Beyond Words" by artists from Iran and the Arab world in 2010.

Voltaire in the Middle East

Eastern culture is currently being decentralized, often by the same forces that have driven traditional understanding of topics such as the gender-specific use of space and the convention, now holy debated, of poets and artists. The exhibition "Almost a World" from the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Alexandria, Greece and the Near East, the deep cultural traditions, these artists use iconic imagery and corporeal signs and ideas from earlier periods. The Lebanese Museum of Fine Arts, which has recently begun to acquire such work within the context of its holdings of Islamic art, understanding that the ultimate success and relevance of an exhibition comes by establishing a two-year “window” to the present and future, and does not harm the local scene. For instance, the first major installation of U.S.'s collection of contemporary Islamic art, one of the first of its kind, provided a platform for the exhibition "Beyond Words" by artists from Iran and the Arab world in 2010.

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