

# EARLY ARAB AND PERSIAN EMPIRES:

## FROM THE RISE OF THE SELEUCIDS (200 BCE) TO THE ABBASID CALIPHATE – 850 CE

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This course focuses on the rise and transformation of Arab and Persian empires and city-states between 200 BCE through the founding of Baghdad (762) to the close of the second great Islamic caliphate, the Abbasids in c. 950. This period in the religious, cultural and political history of the Middle East and Persian region east to at least the Zagros Mountains, is an extremely productive and formative period, yet is largely neglected in our histories and analyses of the millennium between c. 250 BCE – 950 CE. In many respects the developments of this period have wide ranging implications for the contemporary world. So we will attempt to acquaint ourselves with this period, and the players and powers that shaped it. There is no comprehensive book on our topic so we will build a *Reader* as we go.

Our period begins with the rise of the large and diverse Seleucid Empire centered primarily along the Euphrates, Persia and Syria. This predominantly Arab and Persian power controlled and helped shape what would become the Middle East of the late Antique world. The Seleucids were succeeded by the Parthian Empire centered mostly in Iraq and Iran with their Capital in Ctesiphon 35 km from what would become Baghdad. This Arab and Persian power gave way to the Sassanid Empire in 224 CE that would fight for control of the region with the Byzantine Empire. These two powers were the “the two eyes” of the pre-Islamic world.”

Our period includes the fall of the Roman Empire and the birth of its successor state Byzantium, or *New Rome*. The Arab and Persian powers to the East controlled much of the attention of the Roman Empire and later completely monopolized the attention and energy of the Byzantine world centered in Constantinople. These Arab communities and commonwealths of the pre-8<sup>th</sup> c. world were rich in culture, literature and architecture, and helped shape not just the broad Islamic worlds of the 7<sup>th</sup> centuries and later, but impacted the world that would later be thought of as the pre-modern Middle East.

We will look in depth at biography of the prophet Muhammad and the rise and expansion of Islam the Umayyad Caliphate. We will do this with the aid of Fred Donner’s recent book *Muhammad and the Believers*. We will close with the rise of the Abbasid Caliphate centered in their new capital city, Baghdad.

In this class you will have two quizzes. You will write three short research papers. One will be an analysis of the transformation of a city or site through our period. I will supply those cities/sites. A second paper is on a pre-Islamic group or power, and the third deals with an aspect of early Islam from 622 to 950.

### OUTLINE:

9/3 Intro and aims of the course; “pre-history” of our region; *Persia* and the *West*.

9/5: The Pre History of our period (cont.); Persians, Jews, Arabs before our period; some crucial events and foundation legends; *Hellenization* and Alexander.

9/10: Egypt Before Islam: The *Ptolemies* up to Cleopatra.

9/12-19: *The Seleucid House and Empire*; Seleucids and Buddhists; in Asia Minor; the Seleucids and the Jews; Seleucid governance; Indian relations; Seleucid founding of cities; Administrative languages; analyses of Seleucid power and effectiveness.

9/24-26: *Itureans* and *Nabateans*; the word “Arab” in our sources; a combination of itinerate and settled/citied people; the Metropolis of Jerash; Petra; the expanse and influence of the Nabateans; negotiators and interlocutors; whither the Nabateans?

10/1-10/8: *The Parthian Kingdom*; the birth of the Parthians; Parthian and Roman relations; Parthian art and iconography; Parthian Cities; the power and relative neglect of the Parthians; Why? Parthian interests, appetites; traditions and succession; review for Quiz.

### **Oct. 10 – In-Class Quiz**

10/15-10/22: *The Sassanid Empire*; late Roman and Byzantine Sassanid conflict and reproachment; Shapur I and II; Khusro I and II; Sassanid imagery and iconography; Byzo-Sassanid wars; Justinian, Heraclius; the House of Khusro; Christian and Zoroastrians; The Cross; the Holy Places; the battles over Arab lands and tribes. Ghassanid and Lakhim tribes and loyalties.

### **10/24 FALL BREAK – 1<sup>st</sup> Five Page Paper Due 10/23**

10/29: *The Throne of Adulis: The Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam*

10/31 – Review of where we are and what is next.

11/5-11/7: The period of the Prophet’s youth; developments in the peninsula; the Byzantine and Sassanid worlds unawares; Arab lands on the eve of Islam.

11/12 -11/14 Civil struggles and wars; transitions and succession; the rise of the Qur’an and early Suras; The Prophet in Mecca and Medina; The Umayyad Caliphate.

Nov. 21 Review for Quiz: the First Great Caliphate (cont.); rapid expansion; shaping a new culture and authority derived from tradition Jerusalem; Aleppo; Harem Al-Sharif; the politics and administration of the first Caliphate.

### **11 26 – 2<sup>nd</sup> In-Class Quiz**

Nov. 28: Persia Returns: The Rise of the Abbasids

### **11/29 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Five Page Paper Due – On a city, site, or iconography**

12/3-12/5; The move to Baghdad; a new governance and a difference imperial culture; the literature and architecture of the Abbasids; a confluence of influences and cultures long part of the Arab and Persian worlds. The cities of the Abbasids; Art, poetry and architecture; Abbasid intellectual and cultural engagement.

Conclusions and Questions.

### **Final 5-Page Paper Due Monday Dec. 16**