

Profile in Israeli/Hebrew Studies

Yaron Shemer, who joined UNC in 2008, was born in Jerusalem, Israel. He is an assistant professor of Israeli Culture and Modern Hebrew in the Department of Asian Studies which he joined last fall. He earned his degree of Bachelor of Fine Arts in Film & Television from Tel Aviv University in 1983 and then worked as an assistant director at the Israeli Educational Television in Tel Aviv. Yaron Shemer earned his M.A. (1991) and Ph.D. (2005) in Film Studies from the University of Texas at Austin. From 1991 to 2008 he taught at the Department of Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Texas at Austin.

Yaron Shemer has recently published several articles on contemporary Mizrahi (Arab-Jewish) cinema and is completing his book manuscript on that topic. Yaron Shemer has produced and directed films in Israel, Poland, and the United States. Among the documentary films he directed are *Dancing Braille* (1983), *Pilgrimage of Remembrance: The Jews of Poland* (1991), *The Road to Peace: Israelis and Palestinians* (1995), and *Agua for Life* (2008).

Yaron Shemer's current research interests involve "Jewish and Islamic Terrorism in Middle Eastern and North African Cinema" and "The Jew in Arab Cinema." The classes he teaches include "Jerusalem in Israeli Literature and Cinema," "Hebrew via Popular Culture," "Israeli Cinema: Nation, Gender, and Ethnicity," "The Cinemas of the Middle East and North Africa," and a First-year Seminar on "Israeli Culture and Society: Collective Memories and Fragmented Identities."

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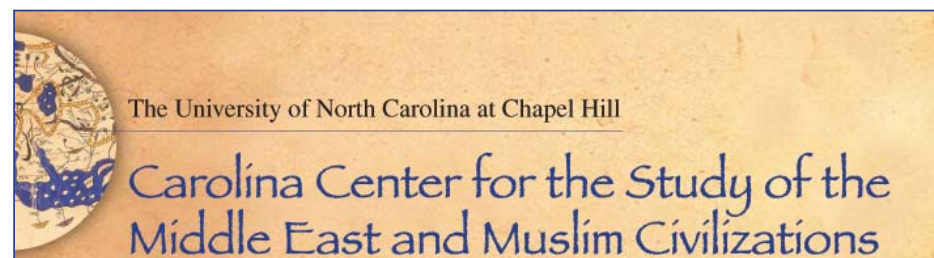
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Middle East Studies News -- Summer 2009

Director's Corner

by Carl W. Ernst

This has been a remarkable year for Middle Eastern and Islamic studies at UNC. Faculty research grants, publications, course offerings, external conference participation, and community outreach have all reached record numbers, indicating extraordinary levels of achievement. Our commitment to the core languages of the Middle East is marked by the 50th anniversary of Arabic instruction at UNC, in what is now the largest Arabic program in the Southeast; this is accompanied by solid development of Persian, Turkish, and Hebrew. We also take pride in the language offerings in the extended regions relating to the Middle East -- Swahili, Wolof, and Urdu. Student demand for cultural courses can now be met by the new undergraduate minor in Islamic and Middle Eastern studies. Our Center has hosted distinguished visiting scholars and numerous lectures and programs. Study abroad programs offer our students opportunities for rich experiences overseas, and we have developed promising linkages with foreign universities and cultural organizations in multiple locations. See the annual report on our website for details. What is especially rewarding is that the name of UNC has become increasingly well-known as an outstanding and innovative center for Middle Eastern and Islamic studies. We now look forward to further development, in collaboration with partners at Duke University, and the quality of all these ideas makes our future look bright indeed.



50 Years of Arab Studies at UNC (1959-2009)

by Sahar Amer

This year marks the 50th anniversary of Arabic teaching at UNC-CH. This year marks also the passing of my former colleague and mentor, Professor Julio Cortés, who taught 40 of the 50 years of Arabic instruction at UNC (1960-2000). We will always be grateful to him for firmly establishing Arabic at this University, and for showing us that it is possible to be a skilled teacher (he received a Tanner Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching in 1995), a fine researcher, and a superb human being. To his wonderful memory, his gracious mentoring, and his continued inspiration, I dedicate this column.

The growth of Arabic on this campus over the past fifty years is nothing short of breathtaking. When I first began teaching Arabic part-time in 1997, it was only as a temporary measure to help the Department of Romance Languages (where Arabic was housed then) as it faced Professor Cortés's phased retirement, and in an effort to continue offering the existing two years of Arabic language instruction. In the late 1990s, the Arabic program consisted of only two half-time faculty members and 35-40 students. In 2009, the Arabic program is made up of two tenure-track faculty members (myself and Nadia Yaqub), one full-time lecturer (Nasser Isseem) and two additional full-time lecturers joining us in Fall 2009 (Doria el Kerdany and Charles Joukhadar). We offer four years of Arabic language instruction, and currently we have 289 students enrolled in them. In addition, we offer a host of content courses (taught in English) on Arab cultures, literatures, film, (cont. p. 3)

عراق و پارس گرفتې بشعر خوش حافظ

بيا كه وقت چاپل هل و روز UNC يست

“You’ve captured Persia and Iraq
with your sweet verse, Hafez!
Come, now’s the time of Chapel Hill
and the day of UNC!”
[with apologies to Hafez]

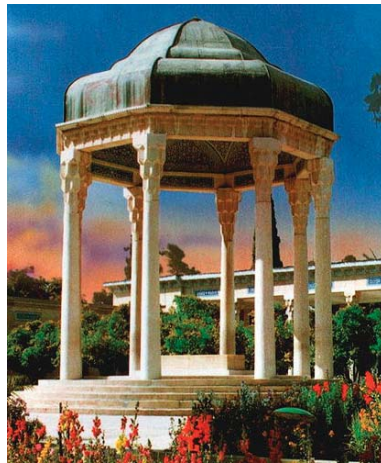
Tarheel Persian by Omid Safi

The study of Persian language and culture, as well as Iranian culture, history, arts, and religion, are continuing to evolve at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Persian language has been taught since 2000, in response to strong and continuing student demand.

Visiting scholars from Iran have enriched our curriculum. During Spring 2009, with the support of the American Institute of Iranian Studies, we were fortunate to have Dr. Nasrollah Pourjavady (of the Department of Philosophy at Tehran University) teaching at UNC. He is among the leading scholars of Iran, with a vast array of publications that cover philosophy, literature, and mysticism. He taught two courses, including a Ph.D. seminar on medieval Persian allegories, from noted sages such as Avicenna and Suhrawardi.

Also in spring 2009, Carl Ernst, Kenan Distinguished Professor of Religious Studies, offered a seminar on the noted Iranian mystic, Mansur-e Hallaj, which marks one of the first times in the American academy that this important figure has been the sole subject of a doctoral seminar. He also went to Iran twice during 2008, the second time to receive the Farabi Award for the Humanities, given to international scholars whose scholarship has made the greatest contribution to the understanding of Iranian civilizations worldwide. On those visits, he was invited to meet with the Academy of Persian Language and Literature, the Academy of Arts, and the Iranian Research Institute in Philosophy, to discuss future scholarly and cultural collaborations.

UNC continues to offer other courses related to Iran. In fall 2008, Professor of Religious Studies Omid Safi offered his course on Iranian culture and history, which enrolled over 30 students. The students studied classic aspects of Iranian literature from Attar’s *Manteq al-Tayr* and Sa’di’s *Golestan*, up to contemporary debates



The tomb of the poet Hafez in Shiraz
(or is it really UNC’s Old Well?)

in Iran in the 20th and 21st centuries. He also taught a Ph.D. seminar on debates on religion, human rights, and women’s rights in contemporary Iran. In spring 2009, Dr. Safi offered a literature course in which the students studied masterpieces such as Molavi (Rumi)’s *Masnavi* and Hafez’s *Divan* (see adjoining picture).

UNC hopes to find the financial resources from donors and grants that would allow us to hire a professor of Persian literature and language here at UNC. It is our goal to develop the study of Persian language and culture so that UNC may be known as one of the premier locations in the US for the study of these important subjects. We invite all those who share this vital goal to consider supporting UNC’s programs in Persian studies. (*Omid Safi is Professor of Religious Studies*)



Turkish at Carolina by Sarah Shields

UNC has been participating in a growing number of student exchanges and courses in Turkey. Summer 2008 saw four UNC faculty members accompanying students to Turkey. Sarah Shields (History) took a group of ten honors students to Turkey for seven weeks as part of a Burch Field Seminar interrogating the meaning of Turkishness. Omid Safi (Religious Studies) accompanied a group of students from a number of different universities to Istanbul to study religion and secularism. Mustafa Gültekin (Business Administration) brought a number of business students to Turkey to study real estate. At the same time, Kenneth Sams (Classics) was conducting research with undergraduate and graduate students at the archaeological exploration he heads at Gordion. UNC is now in its sixth year of an exchange program with Boğaziçi University in Istanbul. During the fall semester of 2008, three Turkish exchange students were at UNC, and we have been sending undergraduates to Istanbul each fall. In addition, Dr. Recep Alpyagil of the Faculty of Divinity at Istanbul University was a visiting scholar at UNC in March 2009. Dr. Aziz Sancar and Dr. Gwen Sancar (Epidemiology) have established a foundation to support a cultural center and residence at Turkish House (“Türk Evi”) at 743 East Franklin Street in Chapel Hill.



These varied experiences in Turkey have inspired a core of students to demand Turkish language instruction. We have begun Turkish instruction in spring 2009 with the support of the Center for Global Initiatives at UNC, with a Languages Across the Cur-

riculum (LAC) course in Turkish linked to two large lecture courses on Middle East and Islamic studies. As an indication of the level of Turkish interest on UNC’s campus, there were over 20 students in this initial one-credit course. Many of these students participated in the summer 2009 Study Abroad program in Turkey led by Professor Safi. Clayton Thomas, a UNC undergraduate, received a Critical Languages Fellowship from the US State Department for Turkish study in summer 2009. And now UNC has received a \$60,000 three-year grant from the Institute of Turkish Studies to fund Turkish language instruction in the Department of Asian Studies, to be taught in 2009-10 by Center Associate Director Cangüzel Zülfiakar.

This extensive interest in Turkish studies at UNC is largely a result of engaged scholars on this campus. Research interest in Turkish language and culture is extensive, and has led to several important institutional connections. First, UNC has been engaging in an undergraduate student exchange with Boğaziçi University. Second, we are part of a new ACC Interinstitutional Academic Consortium based at Koç University in Istanbul. Third, UNC’s deep connection to Turkey and Turkish studies is also evidenced through the university’s agreement with the Turkish Women’s Cultural Association, an Istanbul-based NGO, which has begun a campaign to fund an endowed distinguished professorship in the Department of Religious Studies at UNC. (*Sarah Shields is Associate Professor of History at UNC*)

50 Years of Arab Studies at UNC (cont’d from p. 1)

diasporas, etc. In the academic year 2006-2007, we introduced a new concentration in Arab Cultures (within the Department of Asian Studies where the Arabic program has been housed since 2001), which has since graduated a dozen students. Today, we have eighteen declared Arab Cultures majors in our program (and dozens of minors). Many of our undergraduates move onto graduate work in Arabic and Middle East Studies in some of the most prominent universities in the country (Georgetown, Chicago, Harvard, etc.) and two have been accepted in the prestigious CASA intensive language program in Cairo. Others are working in the Peace Corps in the Arab world and Africa, and still others hold leadership positions in nonprofit fair trade retail organizations that help promote the production of artisans in developing countries.

(*Sabar Amer is Professor of Asian and International Studies at UNC*)