

## The Royal Society of Edinburgh

### ***PERSPECTIVES OF THE ARAB WORD LECTURE SERIES***

November 2008 – March 2009

Between November 2008 and March 2009 the Royal Society of Edinburgh, in partnership with the Centre for the Advanced Study of the Arab World, hosted a series of five lectures aimed at providing both academics and members of the public with a greater perspective and insight into various aspects of the Arab World.

The series drew on the expertise of both leading academics and influential public figures in presenting on areas of the Arab World as diverse as culture, history, politics and religion. As a measure of the series' success, each lecture was fully booked, with over 600 people attending in total. After each lecture, a question and answer session followed, which gave members of the audience the opportunity to ask the speaker to elaborate on various aspects of the lecture as well as opening up new lines of enquiry.

The following report provides a brief overview of each lecture in the series. Each lecture can be heard in its entirety at: [www.rse.org.uk/events/arab\\_world.htm](http://www.rse.org.uk/events/arab_world.htm)

For more information concerning the Centre for the Advanced Study of the Arab World, please consult: [www.casaw.ac.uk](http://www.casaw.ac.uk)

Both the Centre for the Advanced Study of the Arab World and the Royal Society of Edinburgh would like to thank warmly both the speakers and the audience for their participation in this exciting lecture series.

## ***Jihad and the Surge in Iraq***

**Major General Simon Mayall**

*Friday 7 November 2008*

Major General Simon Mayall, the current Assistant Chief of the General Staff, opened the series with an insightful examination of the war in Iraq, taken from the perspective of both a scholar and an experienced military commander.

General Mayall began his presentation with a critical analysis of the concept of Jihad, assessing its philosophy and development since the shattering of the Ottoman Empire and creation of nation states within the Middle East. He discussed how the interpretation of Jihad has been altered over time, and more recently how it has been manipulated at the hands of militants and extremists. Closely connected to this problem, General Mayall assessed the political and historical situation of Iraq, noting the confluence of religious, ethnic, and cultural 'fault lines' within the country, and how the Coalition's invasion unleashed many of these latent tensions.

General Mayall then proceeded to give a strategic view of the war, noting the many mistakes made by the Coalition: a brilliant military campaign, but a woefully ineffective occupation. General Mayall noted the comparative strengths of the insurgency at this time, among them a sense of general opposition to the invaders, a sense of paranoia, and influx of foreign fighters, observing that this combination brought the country to the brink of civil war.

General Mayall moved on to compare the admittedly dire situation of the first years of the occupation to the recent past, focusing on the positive effects of the 'Surge' – a much misunderstood strategy which has included not only a rise in troop numbers, but also a coordinated increase in economic development, reconstruction, reconciliation, and transferal of responsibility to the Iraqis themselves. General Mayall concluded that, despite many initial mistakes, much progress has been made, and the future for Iraq looks promising.

Major General Mayall's presentation exhibited both a deep understanding of the history and politics of the Middle East, as well as a wealth of first-hand knowledge and experience of the region.

## ***Images of Saladin: Past and Present***

**Professor Carole Hillenbrand OBE FRSA FRSE**

*Wednesday 10 December 2008*

The first non-Muslim to be awarded the King Faisal Prize for Islamic Studies, Vice-President of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies, and Islamic Advisory Editor at Edinburgh University Press, Professor Carole Hillenbrand shared some of her broad knowledge and experience about the image and reputation of Saladin throughout history.

Professor Hillenbrand began by attempting to separate the 'myth' from the 'reality' concerning the great military leader who, having united the Arabs behind him, recaptured Jerusalem from the Crusaders. A young noble of Kurdish origin, Saladin was the protégé of the successful commander Nur ad-Din. He built on his master's success, and proceeded to construct a strong powerbase through conflict and intrigue against his fellow Muslims. Professor Hillenbrand then discussed the darker sides to this charismatic and passionate figure, whose sense and awareness of image extended to the employment of two 'spin-doctors'.

Saladin's reputation in the West, both during and after the Crusades, was discussed at length. Professor Hillenbrand noted the adoration and esteem with which authors such as Dante and Scott regarded Saladin: portraying him as the paradigm of heroism and Christian chivalry. Contrasted to this was the disdain and fear which was shown towards Islam and the Arabs, concurrent and seemingly contradictory to such adulation of their leader.

The image of Saladin in the Middle East was then discussed, and it was noted how his reputation was rekindled remarkably recently by Christian Arabs translating texts for their Muslim neighbours. From there, Professor Hillenbrand exhibited a number of intriguing examples of the image of Saladin being usurped for the attainment of modern political currency: stamps from Jordan, films from Egypt, bank-notes from Iraq, all using the resonance of Saladin's image to glorify the current regime.

Professor Hillenbrand concluded that Saladin's role in recapturing Jerusalem, an emotive city for Christians and Muslims alike, was the definitive act which secured both his fame and his mystery, and ensured that his name would live on through the ages.

## ***Reflections of Islamic Art***

**Professor Robert Hillenbrand FRSE**

*Wednesday 14 January 2009*

Having lectured on Islamic art for over 30 years at some of the world's most prestigious institutions, serving as the editor of leading journals in the field, and widely regarded as the world expert on Islamic art, Professor Robert Hillenbrand was ideally placed to deliver an introduction to this diverse, fascinating, and much misunderstood subject.

Professor Hillenbrand began by calling for the audience to 'leave their baggage behind' when contemplating Islamic art, and to jettison all preconceptions that medieval art must be figural and religious, and that it privileged easel painting and sculpture. He went on to demonstrate, through a richly illustrated presentation, that Islamic art, by contrast, found its most apt expression in more practical manifestations: textiles and carpets, bowls and candlesticks, buildings and book painting.

Moreover, Professor Hillenbrand discussed the roles of architecture as a means of conveying complex power-relationships within society: from shared features in mosques from Spain to India, to megalomaniacal city plans employing concepts from astrology and geometry to produce impressive displays of wealth and control. Allied to these architectural statements were commissioned paintings and illustrations which depicted the rulers and their courts living in considerable luxury and decadence.

Professor Hillenbrand proceeded to consider the commonest forms of expression in Islamic art – geometry, vegetal themes, and calligraphy – in their many manifestations. These achieved an unusual intensity in the hands of medieval Islamic craftsmen, well-versed in mathematics and studies of the natural world, using contrasts of colour and texture, light and dark, solid and void, as well as employing devices of rhythm, repetition, echo and symmetry to secure effects of abstraction and concentration.

Throughout his lecture, Professor Hillenbrand used the artwork which he was discussing to analyse medieval Islamic society, providing penetrating insights on its conception of religion, politics, and the cosmos.

Professor Hillenbrand's presentation provided both a uniquely entertaining and accessible introduction to such a specialised subject.

## ***Islam and the Day of Judgement***

**Professor Mona Siddiqui FRSA FRSE**

*Thursday 12 February, 2009*

Professor Siddiqui is currently the Professor of Islamic Studies and Public Understanding, as well as the Director and founder of the Centre for the Study of Islam, at the University of Glasgow. She also provides numerous consultancy services to Government, and publishes and broadcasts extensively in the national media. An expert on Islamic theology and thought, Professor Siddiqui delivered her thoughts on the Day of Judgement, as envisaged within Islam.

Professor Siddiqui's lecture drew on descriptions of the Day of Judgement as presented in the Qur'an, as well as on the works of medieval theologians and modern scholarly commentators, in an exceptionally well-researched address. Simultaneous to this was a close reading and deep analysis of the Qur'an, combined with an evident spirituality which also, on occasion, served as a powerful and personal interpretive tool.

The lecture was concerned not only with the Day of Judgement itself, but also dealt with such philosophical issues as divine agency, free will, the nature of God, and the position and role of man within God's world. Professor Siddiqui's thorough knowledge of Islamic, Christian, and Judaic theologies was exceptional, with many comparisons between the basic tenets of the three monotheistic religions being made at various junctures throughout the lecture.

A particularly lively question and answer session expanded on Professor Siddiqui's understanding of the precise nature of the after-life, and questions of 'salvation', 'sin', and 'forgiveness', as explored within the Qur'an, were abundant.

Professor Siddiqui, in characteristic fashion, managed to distil a considerable amount of expertise and knowledge into a clear and comprehensible lecture.

## ***Writing the First Qur'ans: Running the Early Islamic State***

**Professor Robert Hoyland**

*Thursday 12 March 2009*

Professor Hoyland, Professor of Arabic and Middle East Studies at the University of St. Andrews, discussed his latest research into the use of Arabic both before and during the early Islamic conquests.

Beginning with the Islamic conquests and early empire, Professor Hoyland examined and challenged assumptions that the Arabs, in their first period of expansion, did not implement their language within the machinations of empire. Professor Hoyland discussed the initial private usage of Arabic, confined to supplicatory and funerary inscriptions, as well as in numerous copies of the Qur'an, which begin to appear from the latter half of the seventh century. Soon, however, Arabic began to be seen on coinage and in bilingual administrative documents: with such sophistication as to indicate a long tradition of writing, influenced by the Graeco-Roman World in style and content. A bilingual administration began to be deployed at this time, coupled with an increasing involvement of Arab officials in the everyday lives of their subjects.

In the second half of his address, Professor Hoyland considered the pre-Islamic use of Arabic, beginning in its oral form around the middle of the first millennium BC. Professor Hoyland discussed numerous examples of Arabic being written in local scripts as early as the first century AD, before noting the emergence of a recognisably Arabic script only one hundred years or so before the advent of Islam, in a number of bilingual documents, alongside Greek.

Professor Hoyland accounted for the emergence of a distinctive Arabic script with the development of incipient state structures among the Arab peoples, which were created by an increasing interaction with the Roman and Persian empires. The effect of regular contact with Christian missionaries was also noted as a potential stimulus for the development of an Arabic script. Professor Hoyland concluded with a discussion of the importance of Arabic in the Qur'an, noting the many references in the Qur'an not only to itself, but to parchments, scriptures, and tablets, as well as the self-conscious nature of the Book as being written in Arabic, for Arabic speakers, as the language of the Arab people.

Professor Hoyland's lecture, richly illustrated with inscriptions, parchments, and papyri, coupled with an evidently deep knowledge of the Arabic language, provided a stimulating insight into a topic on which still very little is known.