

Of Monsters and Marvels:
Wonder in Islamic Traditions
Relg. 307B

Professor Travis Zadeh
Class: Th 1:30-4:00
Location: Gest 102
Office Hours: Wed 3-5pm
or by appointment
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Course Description:

From acts of devotion to encounters with the strange and the monstrous, this course examines the place of wonder in Islamic traditions through readings from the Qur'an, exegesis, and prophetic traditions; literary encounters with the *Arabian Nights* and the *Shah-nameh*; travel narratives, descriptive geography, and cosmography; philosophy and theology. In addition to literary sources, we will draw on visual media through examples from the use of calligraphy, illuminated manuscripts, cartographical projections, and architectural monuments. Topics include the role of the sublime in wonder traditions (*ajā'ib*); conceptions of natural/unnatural orders; the discourses of alterity; the theodicy of divine design; projections of space in realms of the sacred and the profane.

Course Design:

This seminar serves as a forum to discuss issues raised by the material and is designed to strengthen analytical skills through critical reading, expository writing, and oral presentations. Participation consists not only of attendance and completing the required readings, but also of active involvement in discussion. In addition to participation, there weekly written responses (1-2 paragraphs) to the readings are to be posted on Blackboard every Wednesday by 5pm. Each student will be asked to contribute brief presentations to the class throughout the semester. There are two short papers (5-7 pages), the first on the topic of 'natural design,' as covered in the seminar and the readings and the second on one of the travel narratives/geographies. Finally, each student will undertake a research project, which will culminate in a final paper (12-15 pages). Topics for the final paper are to be chosen by the student in consultation with the professor.

Grading:

Class participation		10%
Blackboard responses		10%
Presentations		15%
First Short Paper	(Due: 3/7)	15%
Second Short Paper	(Due: 4/7)	15%
Research Paper	(Due: 5/18)	35%

Texts for Purchase:

Muqaddasī, *Best Divisions for Knowledge*.
Annemarie Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs of God*.
Ibn Fadlan, *Journey to Russia*.
The Arabian Nights I & The Arabian Nights II.

Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings.

Course Outline:

Readings marked with an asterisk (*) are found on Blackboard.

Week One: Introduction (1/24)

Alterity and other such topics

Unit One: Creation and Destruction

Week Two: Scripture (1/31)

Readings:

Qur'ān (selections), Q. 27, 55, 68, 96.*

Ghazālī, *Faḍā'il al-Qur'ān* (Excellent Qualities of the Qur'ān), pp. 18-33, 56-85.*

Annemarie Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs of God*, pp. 114-76.

Week Three: Prophets (2/7)

Readings:

Qur'ān (selections), Q. 17-18, 34.*

Kisā'ī, *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'* (Tales of the Prophets), pp. 19-81, 244-50, 300-20.*

Wheeler, *Prophets in the Quran*, 222-37, 266-79, 320-33.*

Week Four: End of Time (2/14)

Readings:

Ghazālī, *Kitāb dhikr al-mawt* (Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife), pp. 171-261.*

Annemarie Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs of God*, pp. 220-41.

Unit Two: Metaphysics, Cosmography, and the Divine Order

Week Five: Phenomenology (2/21)

Readings:

Eric Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought*, pp. 3-91.*

Annemarie Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs of God*, pp. 1-46.

Week Six: Cosmography (2/28)

Readings:

Ṭūsī, *'Ajā'ib-nāmeḥ* (Book of Marvels), pp. 1-44.*

Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh al-Rusul* (Universal History), pp. 187-205.*

Annemarie Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs of God*, pp. 47-88.

Week Seven: "Natural Orders" (3/6)

Readings:

The Case of the Animals versus Man before the King of the Jinn, pp. 51-202.*

Foltz, *Animals in Islamic Tradition*, pp. 47-84.*

Short Paper Due: 3/7

****Spring Break****

Unit Three: Cartography, Geography, and Cannibals

Week Eight: Mapping out the World (3/20)

Readings:

- Yāqūt, *Mu‘jam al-Buldān* (Geographical Dictionary), pp. 1-51.*
al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsān al-Taqāsīm* (The Best Divisions of Knowledge), pp. 1-8.
Karamustafa, “Introduction to Islamic Maps,” pp. 3-11.*
Tibbets, “The Beginnings of a Cartographic Tradition,” pp. 90-107.*
King, “Qibla Charts,” pp. 189-204.*

Week Nine: Journeys (3/27)

Readings:

- al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsān al-Taqāsīm* (The Best Divisions of Knowledge), pp. 34-45, 53-62, 214-300.
Ibn Faḍlān, *al-Riḥla* (Journey to Russia), pp. 25-77.
Ahmad, “The Cartography of al-Sharīf al-Idrīsī,” pp. 156-175.*

Week Ten: The New World (4/3)

Readings:

- Tarih-i Hind-i Garbī* (The History of West India), pp. 71-122, 149-85.*
Zadeh, “Wonder and its Place in the New World,” pp. 1-29.*

Second Short Paper Due: 4/7

Unit Four: Wonder Narratives

Week Eleven: Persian Epic Tradition I (4/10)

Readings:

- Shāh-nāmeḥ* (The Book of Kings), pp. 1-69; 104-73; 299-439.
Meisami, *Persian Historiography*, pp. 15-46.*

Paper Topics Due: 4/11

Week Twelve: Persian Epic Tradition II (4/17)

Readings:

- Shāh-nāmeḥ* (The Book of Kings), pp. 456-528; 622-84; 810-831.
Todorov, *The Fantastic*, pp. 24-57.*

Week Thirteen: A Thousand and One Tales I (4/24)

Readings:

- Arabian Nights I*, pp. 2-150, 206-95.
Roy Mottahedeh, “‘Ajā’ib in The Thousand and One Nights,” pp. 29-39.*
Nabia Abbot, “A Ninth-Century Fragment,” pp. 129-64.*

Week Fourteen: A Thousand and One Tales II (5/1)

Readings:

- Arabian Nights II*, pp. 3-163.
Muhsin Mahdi, “The Sources of Galland’s Nuits,” pp. 122-36.*
Michael Cooperson, “The Monstrous Births of ‘Aladdin’,” pp. 265-282.*

Final Paper Due: 5/15