

IN MEMORIAM

Michael Bonner (1952–2019)

With the passing of Michael Bonner on May 25, 2019, our community of students and professors at the University of Michigan has lost its pillar. Michael joined the Department of Near Eastern Studies at the University of Michigan in 1989 shortly after he received his Ph.D. in Medieval Islamic History from Princeton University. He laid the foundation for our program in Islamic history and religious studies with the hiring of Alexander Knysh, Gottfried Hagen, and myself, thus turning a department that was world renowned for Ancient Near Eastern Studies into one similarly recognized for Islamic History/Studies. Moreover, Michael was a beloved colleague and teacher whose erudition, generosity, and humor have left us all bereaved.

Michael began his travels in the Medieval Islamic world at the Arab-Byzantine frontiers, entering the field from a rather unconventional route. While working on his MA in Classics and Comparative Literature at Berkeley University, he became interested in Islam and was drawn to the other side of the Mediterranean. It is through this Greek and Latinate journey that Michael came to discover the Islamic world. Beginning with the practice of jihad, he historicized the evolving concepts of reciprocity and reward from their Quranic representations to their juridical interpretations that came to legitimate violence and the establishment of Muslim principalities in Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. Michael's trajectory then took him to Arabia to explore the interrelated rituals of piety, charity, and trade. His intellectual pursuits were grounded in a desire to uncover the prehistory of Islamic Arabia, a world where markets and trade were central to an economy that melded politics together with religiosity. Michael not only mapped out the centers and cycles of trade, but he also confirmed the critical role Mecca and the Quraysh played in the economy of the Arabian Peninsula and the Indian Ocean. Michael brought the economy of poverty and piety to life through discursive tensions that unfolded between Muslim scholars who wrote out ideals and

those social groups who enacted change. Whether frontier warriors, merchants, or shaykhs, Michael gave voice to their experiences that shaped the practice of reciprocity and gift-giving in early Islam. During his last hours, Michael was working on an article, titled “In Search of the Early Economy,” that will be published posthumously in the journal *al-Usul al-Wusta*. This was to be Michael’s first installment of a larger project that situated the first two Muslim empires, the Umayyads and Abbasids, within the global economy of Eurasia.

Michael Bonner’s intellectual legacy lives on with his students, the Banu Bonner, and will continue to inspire generations who read his work. Many students have shared their memories of his exacting rigor, his wit, and his generosity as a teacher and mentor. I will end with one anecdote shared by Robert Haug on his time as an MA student in Center for Middle East & North African Studies (CMENAS), when Michael was the director.

When I arrived in Ann Arbor in Fall 1999, Michael was the first faculty member I met. He was the director of CMENAS and he met with all the incoming MA students to talk about the program and advise us on courses. At the time, I thought I wanted to study something more modern, but the more I worked with Michael in the CMENAS office, took his courses, and especially when we started reading Arabic texts together, his enthusiasm was contagious and I slowly became a medievalist. At the end of my MA, I started working with Michael on a project mapping pilgrimage routes and markets in the Arabian Peninsula using GIS for what would become his articles on the Markets of the Arabs. The whole thing seemed like a big puzzle or mystery we were trying to solve, even though we were talking about places well known historiographically if not geographically. Doing the research was fun. One of my favorite memories of that project came from an attempt to map the Darb Zubayda (the pilgrimage route from Baghdad to Mecca) and we were completely stumped on one stop until I simply tried Googling it. Lo and behold, I found a reference to an ATM at a highway rest stop in a town in Saudi Arabia with the same name, a town we could not find in any of the gazetteers or other reference works. The bank website was the only result that came from our search. I remember showing the results to Michael and his eyes went wide, his mouth shut tight holding in a laugh. He threw his hands up and exclaimed that it must be it. We were eventually able to find the coordinates by following up on this ATM and it fit the rest of the locations we had

uncovered. The absurdity of it all left us both in stitches, but, in my memory, it highlighted the sense of fun and excitement Michael brought to working with him and why I decided to become his Ph.D. student. ✂

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