MESAS 270/HISTORY 285

From Pearls to Petroleum:

Global Trade Goods and Indian Ocean History

Spring 2017

According to old Red Sea lore, pearls are born from pure raindrops falling on the sea on moonlit nights and carrying the reflection of lunar light into the heart of oysters. Adam’s expulsion from paradise, an Indian Muslim story recounts, happened with a temporary rift in the heavens through which not only the first humans but also a number of fragrant paradisial plants drifted down to earth, where they were subsequently to become the sought-after commodities we know as spices. In the biblical account of the birth of Jesus, magi “from the east” presented the newborn holy child with gold, frankincense, and myrrh, expectations of all of which had historically driven Rome to turn eastward and tap into networks of Indian Ocean trade around the turn of the eras. Legend has it that goatherds in the highlands of Ethiopia noticed their animals bursting with energy after chewing on colorful berries of the coffee plant that was subsequently to become a valuable crop across the global south and the boon of our caffeine-fueled culture. And speaking about fuel: bitumen, a naturally occurring compound of petroleum, today used in road construction, was seeping from the ground in ancient Mesopotamia and serving as an adhesive and coating agent long before black gold changed world economic and political networks and history in the 20th century. This course explores the development of transregional economies and cultures through the study of commodities originating in the Indian Ocean region. By examining environmental, historical and economic data and concepts, the course offers factual knowledge and analytical tools for understanding the trading networks, institutions, political circumstances and shifting cultural values implicated in the rise and transformation of these commodities into global goods. In that sense, our inquiry attempts to trace the logic of the “social life of things” as outlined by social theorist Arjun Appadurai. We will also come to appreciate the notion that the Indian Ocean is “the most ancient of oceans” in the sense of an interconnected maritime arena of human history and economy, and we will debate the Ocean’s characterization as the “cradle of globalization.”

Particulars

Class day&time: Tuesdays: 2:30-5:15pm
Classroom: TBA
Instructor: Dr. Roxani E. Margariti
Office: Callaway South 308
Phone: 404-712-2284
E-mail: rmargar@emory.edu
Office hours: Wednesdays 10-12noon, and by appointment
Evaluation
Participation & Discussion Prep  40%
Final Presentation  20%
Final Paper  40%

Participation and Discussions: This is a once-a-week seminar, which means that your presence at every session and active participation in every discussion are crucial. Sessions will typically consist of a general introduction to the topic provided by me, followed by discussion of the general theme, with questions on the readings and further discussion of subtopics prepared by you. We will assign topics for “discussion prep” to each of you individually a week in advance of each session. In preparing for the discussion topic assigned to you, you must consult the main texts of the class and identify additional sources. These sources should be evidence-based and scholarly in nature; they can also be primary sources distinctly presented as such. In addition to typical sessions we will have two excursions and a library session.

Final Project and Presentation: The final project is a research-based paper that should utilize the knowledge about commodities, theories about economy and lines of inquiry pursued throughout the course. This means that you can choose to focus on a particular commodity and its evolution, a commercial network carrying it, or a particular cultural aspect associated with that commodity. It may be one of the items covered in our sessions or one that we did not get to. You will work on your choice of topic and your line of inquiry with me, and we will finalize the topics by March 31st. You will then present your topic, a preliminary outline of your research and a preliminary list of sources on April 11. The final paper should be 12- to 15-pages long including bibliography, and is due on the exam date for the class.

Honor Code: By taking this class, you agree to abide by every article of the Emory Honor Code and to consult its requirements here, http://catalog.college.emory.edu/academic/policies-regulations/honor-code.html.

Access, Equity and Inclusion: If you are in need of accommodations related to the format or requirements of this course, I encourage you to contact the Office of Accessibility Services (OAS) to learn more about the registration process and steps for requesting accommodations. If you are a student currently registered with OAS and have not received a copy of your accommodation notification letter within the first week of class, please notify OAS immediately. Students who have accommodations in place are encouraged to communicate your specific needs for the course so that we may coordinate as soon as possible. All discussions with OAS and faculty concerning the nature of your disability and accommodation needs remain confidential. For additional information regarding OAS, please visit the website at equityandinclusion.emory.edu/access.
Selected Texts (all readings available in course reserves or in electronic form)


COURSE SCHEDULE

Tuesday January 10: First Day of Class

Syllabus and Introduction to the main themes of the course: Environment and economy, commodity circulation and society, trade and politics

Week 1 (January 17)—The Indian Ocean, Treasures, Branding and Networks

Reading: Edward Alpers, *The Indian Ocean in World History*, Introduction and chapters 3&4 (pp. 1–18, 40–97).

Discussion prep: Working with a fellow member of the seminar, present the geography and environment of an Indian Ocean port and its immediate hinterland (pick from the list provided).

Film screening and discussion: *The Jewel of Muscat*
Week 2 (January 24)—Research methods, resources and library session

Discussion prep: Working with a fellow member of the seminar, pick a book on economy, commerce or merchants from the list provided, find two scholarly book reviews using JSTOR, and present a short summary of the book (focus on its topic, chapter breakdown, and the kind of evidence the author uses) and discuss its assessment by the specialist authors of the reviews in class.

Week 3 (January 31)—Pearls

Reading: Donkin, Beyond Price, chapters 1&2 (pp. 1–40); and chapter 5 (pp. 105–151)

Discussion prep: Choose a pearl-studded object from a major museum website (list of museums will be provided) and present it and its context in class.

Week 4 (February 7)—Spices: The Aromatics

Reading: Jung, An Ethnography of Fragrance, chapters 1&2 (pp. 1–58); Peacock and Williams, Food for the Gods, pp. 1–27.

Discussion prep: Choose a perfume on the market today and discuss its ingredients and the messages in its advertising. Try also using the Michael Edwards “Fragrances of the World” online fragrance finder.

Week 5 (February 14)—Spices: Pepper and Spice


Discussion prep: Bring a recipe containing spices to class and discuss its historical background and cultural context.

Week 6 (February 21)—Paper (field trip)

Week 7 (February 28)—Textiles (and Fashions!)


Discussion prep: Choose a clothing or home furnishing textile item exhibited in a major museum and present it and its context in class.

Week 8 (March 6-8)—Spring Break: No Classes

Week 9 (March 14)—Coffee


Discussion prep TBA

Week 10 (March 21)—Coffee (field trip)


Week 11 (March 28)—Opium


Discussion prep TBA

Week 12 (April 4)—Petroleum

Reading: Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf*, chapter 1 (“Oil and State Formation”); Munif, *Cities of Salt*, pp. 1–51.

Discussion prep: With a fellow member of the seminar, research and present the transformation of an Persian/Arabian Gulf city in the past century.
Week 13 (April 11)—Presentations

**Discussion prep:** present your final project-in-progress in class. Produce a handout with main points, a preliminary bibliography, and a visual presentation

Week 14 (April 18)—Final Class: Foodways!

HAVE A PRODUCTIVE AND FUN SEMESTER!
Economic exchange creates value. Value is embodied in commodities that are exchanged. Focusing on the things that are exchanged, rather than simply on the forms or functions of exchange, makes it possible to argue that what creates the link between exchange and value is politics, construed broadly. This argument...justifies the conceit that commodities, like persons, have social lives.