4.616

OUT OF ANTIQUITY:
ON THE ORIGINS OF ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE

Instructors:	**Nasser Rabbat**
Schedule:	**T 3-6 VIA ZOOM**
Units:	**3-0-9**
TA:	**Chantal El Hayek**

Stellar Site: https://stellar.mit.edu/S/course/4/sp21/4.616

PERMISSION OF INSTRUCTOR NEEDED. OPEN TO ADVANCED UNDERGRADUATES.

*'Islam resembles what was later to be called "the Western tradition" in so many ways—
the intellectual efforts to fuse Judeo-Christian scripture with the categories of Greek philosophy,
the literary emphasis on courtly love, the scientific rationalism, the legalism, puritanical monotheism,
missionary impulse, the expansionist mercantile capitalism—even the periodic waves of fascination
with "Eastern mysticism"—that only the deepest historical prejudice could have blinded European
historians to the conclusion that, in fact, this is the Western tradition.'*

David Graeber, "There Never Was a West. Or, Democracy Emerges From the Spaces In Between," 2007

Garth Fowden wrote in Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity, "There are roads out of Antiquity that do not lead to the Renaissance." This powerful statement challenges the dominant historical narrative, which posits the West as the only heir to the classical tradition, and opens the door for other cultures that share the heritage of Antiquity—like the Islamic culture— to reclaim it.

This seminar studies Early Islamic artistic culture and its relationship to Late Antiquity in depth. It examines the sequence of well-known Umayyad and early Abbasid monuments, which appear to have engaged in a vibrant process that treated the Late Antiquity of the Levant as a heritage to build upon, copy, or, sometimes, modify or deconstruct. These patterns of appropriation, modification, transposition, scaling, and distortion of classical elements in Early Islamic architecture are interpreted as a conscious attempt to chart a novel, or, perhaps more accurately, a Post-Classical architecture. In other words, the seminar challenges the exclusive historiography that posits the Western Renaissance as the sole heir of Antiquity and proposes another scenario with a more hybrid genealogy. This conclusion can be corroborated by examining other fields of knowledge in the early Islamic period that stemmed from the Classical heritage, such as philosophy or jurisprudence, which developed in the Islamic milieu before being passed on to the nascent European Renaissance.

Class Requirements: Each session includes a lecture and a discussion of the reading material. One student will lead the discussion every meeting. The requirements are two papers to be first presented in class, and then submitted in writing. The first paper (10-15 pp) will respond to historical and theoretical issues and can be in the form of a book review. The second paper (15-20 pp) will analyze one (or more) Late Antique, early Islamic, or medieval Western or Islamic artifact or architectural site from the perspective of cross-cultural genealogy. The final paper can be substituted by an architectural analysis and reconstruction exercise of the chosen example to be selected in consultation with the instructor. Readings and active class participation are meant to form the basis of the seminar and ensure its liveliness.