

## In Memoriam



### REMEMBERING MICHAEL BONNER (1952–2019)

#### Reminiscences by:

Steven Judd, *Southern Connecticut State University*

Alison Vacca, *University of Tennessee, Knoxville*

Robert Haug, *University of Cincinnati*

Noah Gardiner, *University of South Carolina*

Antoine Borrut, *University of Maryland*

**I**t is hard to fathom the impact that Michael Bonner had on my life and hard to accept that he is no longer with us. I first met Michael in December of 1990. We had an hourlong meeting in his Spartan yet disorderly office in the now defunct Frieze Building at the Univer-

sity of Michigan. Somehow, after this nervous, unstructured encounter, I came away convinced that I should pursue my graduate studies at Michigan, and he came away persuaded that I should be his first incoming PhD student. Despite his cautious nature, Michael took a tremen-

(Photo of Michael Bonner by Daniela Gobetti)

*Al-Uşūr al-Wuṣṭā* 27 (2019): 354-362



dous risk with me. My Arabic was less than adequate (some might say it still is) and my research agenda was vague, idealistic, and unrealistic. Had I been more attuned to the dynamics of academia, I would have realized that I also took a risk on him. I abandoned a successful career track to tie my academic future to an untenured assistant professor who had yet to prove himself to his colleagues. It was ultimately one of my best decisions. Despite his precarious position, Michael was always able to secure funding for my work and insulate me from the peculiarities of academic politics, despite my occasional urge to enter the fray. He encouraged me and enabled me to finish my studies in a timely manner and never exploited my labor to advance his own research agenda.

As a mentor, Michael's guidance was always understated. He allowed and encouraged his students to pursue their own research passions. In retrospect, I nonetheless somehow ended up exploring topics that were compatible with his own interests. The exception to his subtle approach to mentoring came when I briefly but actively entertained the possibility of shifting my focus to modern Middle Eastern politics. At that point, Michael organized a multifaceted intervention. I suspect that his efforts were far more extensive than my knowledge of them. I regret that I never found the opportunity to thank him for saving me from modernist follies.

While Michael's approach to mentorship was gentle, when it came to actual academic work he was rigorous and exacting, particularly in regard to language. As native Francophones will attest, his French was impeccable. He was always reticent to acknowledge that his

German, which was sufficiently agile to produce publishable translations of Heinz Halm and Albrecht Noth, was essentially self-taught. Michael had little patience for linguistic sloppiness and expected grammatical precision from himself and his students. In Arabic text classes, we quickly learned never to skip a final vowel or to try to mumble past an uncertain diphthong. One memorable encounter with Michael's meticulousness occurred when several of us were reading a complicated Arabic prose text that I've long since forgotten. Midway through my recitation of the text, Michael stopped me abruptly, tossed his reading glasses on the table, and challenged me to "defend that *kasra*!" After I stumblingly explained my thinking, his scowl turned to puzzlement and he begrudgingly concluded that I *might* be correct and we moved on. A few minutes later, he stopped the next student midway through the subsequent passage to point out that "Steve's *kasra*" would make the next sentence utterly incoherent. I stood belatedly corrected, and we learned a valuable lesson about paying attention to minute detail while also remembering the broader picture.

During my time at Michigan, Michael was less outgoing with his students than he would become later in his career when he was relieved from the pressures of the tenure clock. On occasion, though, his sense of humor and his *élan* would surface. I recall one autumn lunch together when we were sharing news of our summer travels. After attentively listening to details of my dissertation progress, it was Michael's turn to report. He began to describe in great detail and with increasing animation the Italian TV game show he had watched daily while visiting

Daniela's family. When he noticed my bewilderment, he quickly explained that he was watching the show to improve his colloquial Italian and to master regional accents. However, he admitted that the show was also surprisingly entertaining. Coming from anyone else, this would have sounded like a dubious excuse to justify the diversion of vapid television, but from Michael, I knew it was the truth. Every moment was an opportunity to learn, and learning languages was especially exciting for him.

Michael was an urbane yet down-to-earth man, a brilliant yet humble scholar, and an excellent teacher and mentor. His infectious thirst for knowledge, the high standards he set for himself and others, and his unfailing kindness made him an exemplar both as a scholar and as a friend. He greatly enriched the lives of those who knew him and were privileged to work with him. He will be sorely missed.

— Steven Judd

It seems like I should have a clearer memory of the first time that I met Michael. I vaguely remember that we talked about my background in learning Arabic, what classes I should take, and the research interests of some of the other students in the program. But I do not remember the details. Instead, when I think about my time studying with Michael, the smaller moments predominate. I think of my memories of Michael as a geniza of sorts: unorganized and unrelated snapshots of the past in a variety of languages, some more comprehensible than others, each preserving moments that may or may not have deserved to be saved

for posterity. I remember him looking at our seminar with some exasperation once when we did not match his enthusiasm for the topic of the day. I remember a departmental reception at which Michael played his violin and paused to remind us that we should try the wine. He once told me that I could just learn Russian over a summer, as if I could walk out of the classroom in April only to return in September knowing Russian (I've tried this, but remain unsuccessful). I remember that in 2007, nearly anytime we entered into a tangent—regardless of topic—we would somehow end up talking about *Ibn Khaldun et les sept vies de l'Islam*. I remember when a classmate pitched an idea for a MESA panel on frontiers in early Islam and Michael responded, wholly unexpectedly, "Hot diggedy dog!" He once paused in a lecture in front an undergraduate class, turned to me, asked a question about Caucasian history, and segued neatly into his discussion on the Mamluk slave trade. I remember his feedback as he read through my book proposal at MESA over several glasses of wine and a surprisingly good Thai pizza. He was overjoyed to learn I was pregnant with my first child and celebrated instead of talking about how to survive graduate school with offspring. He emailed me back immediately when I had a suggestion about the correct vocalization of a Caucasian Albanian toponym in Ibn Ḥawqal. I remember that he once spoke of his interest in learning an ancient language, leaving me concerned because I had never even heard of it. I remember my French exam, when he turned to his bookshelf and had me read from a book chosen at random. Come to think of it, I think he chose Martinez-Gros, so perhaps it wasn't quite random.

When I think through these disjointed snippets in light of conversations I have had with others since Michael passed in May, a few common threads emerge to force cohesion on the rambling and unpredictable memories. He was enthusiastic, supportive, and frequently surprising. Every single one of his students and colleagues has a story of Michael's polyglotism. Yet he paired a mastery of languages with unparalleled humility. I once brought Michael a particularly torturous text. I do not remember which one it was, but I assume it was something in Arabic or the *Sectarian Milieu*. I told Michael that I simply did not understand a certain passage. He looked it over and nodded: "Huh, yes, that's difficult, isn't it? Let's muddle through it together." That stands out to me as the most important anecdote I could recount to explain my appreciation for Michael. He made me read the passage aloud and then signaled where I needed to rethink the topic. He did not tell me the answer, but helped me get there on my own. I recognized then, and perhaps even more now, that Michael never found that particular passage difficult. He would not have had to "muddle through" it alone. He created an opportunity for me by framing learning as a collaborative space between student and teacher. It was never about proving knowledge or ability and it was never about figuring things out at first glance. Michael taught me that research is about muddling until things make sense, about conversations that we generate together when we read texts closely and bring ideas to the table. For that lesson, I remain grateful.

Michael taught courses on historiography, geography, and biography in early Islam. I still have hard copies of the

syllabi, even though they are more than a decade old now. Over the years, I have come to appreciate how Michael's teaching has created a community. In my first year as an assistant professor, I submitted an abstract to MESA independently. When I received the notification that the paper was accepted, I checked who else was on the panel. I was placed with Michael himself and another one of his recently finished advisees. The apples did not far fall from the tree. In the time since, I have had the opportunity to exchange papers and present on panels with other members of the Banū Bonner, and we do not struggle to find common interests. In part, this community was formed through conversations in Ann Arbor, spread over years. But I like to think that it emerged because we all inherited some small portion of Michael's enthusiasm, bringing us all back to the table around topics that he introduced to us over a glass of wine or in seminars.

— Alison Vacca

When I remember my time in Ann Arbor, one image that always comes to mind is Michael Bonner laughing, leaning back in his chair, hands raised as he directs his point like an orchestral conductor, his entire face enmeshed in a smile. This is an image I can place in his office during one-on-one meetings to discuss dissertation chapters, in a seminar room while we unraveled some particularly stubborn classical Arabic text, or over a drink following a day spent attending panels at a meeting of the American Oriental Society or MESA. I think many of us can even picture him taking on this pose while presenting a conference paper.

While people who knew Michael only from his work might think first of the scholar with such exacting standards for his own work as well as the work of his students—I can also remember how quickly that laugh turned back toward the business at hand—and a polyglot’s linguistic mastery, those of us who had the advantage of studying under and working alongside Michael knew him as a warm and funny man whose enthusiasm for his work and learning in general drew many of us away from other pursuits to study the history of the medieval Islamic world with him.

I first met Michael in the fall of 1999, freshly landed in Ann Arbor in pursuit of an MA from the Center for Middle Eastern Studies. Michael was director of the center at that time, and therefore one of my first appointments upon arriving was with him to discuss my plans and ambitions and plot out the next couple years of my life. At that time, I had only the haziest of ideas about my academic interests—a trip to Morocco a few years earlier had left me enthusiastic for early modern North Africa, and it was my intention to use the MA program to explore the field a bit and, at the very least, learn Arabic. Michael sussed out the situation and got me enrolled in the survey of early Islamic history he co-taught with Rudi Lindner. Once my Arabic was ready for classical texts, he had me in a seminar reading geographic and economic texts. When he learned of my background in Geographic Information Systems, he got me involved in a project to map pilgrimage and trading routes that eventually fed into his work on the markets of the Arabs. Along the way, Michael’s enthusiasm for the field drew me earlier and earlier until I decided to pursue a PhD with him in early Islamic history.

In the classroom, I often felt like Michael was another student—albeit an exceptionally advanced student who was far, far better prepared than the rest of us. While reading Arabic texts, Michael would sit at the head of the seminar table, surrounded by his legal pads filled with detailed notes, and when one of us would get stuck on a particularly tricky passage, he would just smile and wag his finger to notify us of the mistake. Instead of simply telling us what was wrong or what was right, he was always excited at the possibility we could figure it out ourselves. He never told us the answer directly, even though sometimes I was left guessing until I thought I had run out of possibilities; there aren’t *that* many case endings in Arabic, after all. Instead, he pointed us toward the necessary tools to discover the solution for ourselves. Everyone is rightfully impressed with Michael’s command of languages—he claimed working knowledge of ten on his CV, but I’m certain that was a modest underestimate—but his talents always felt encouraging, a model, rather than intimidating. If he can know ten, why I can’t I learn a fourth and then a fifth? He made it seem possible. Michael would fondly tell tales of his own graduate student days, often phrased in terms of jealousy for those of us who, in his words, could still get together in a colleague’s apartment and pull an all-nighter reading for our seminars. From experience, I know he and his seminars could bring students together like this . . . though I don’t know whether any of us enjoyed staying late in the department library and shifting through *ṭabaqāt* in quite the same way he did.

Then again, I don’t know whether many of us can enjoy research, learning, and

exploring the way Michael did. I remember times when he would get a mischievous look in his eye, lower his voice, and act like he was about to confess a terrible sin, only to reveal that his greatest transgression was staying up late reading Icelandic sagas or attempting to learn Egyptian hieroglyphs. Exploring something new for the sake of it.

Thinking back on the decade I spent working closely with Michael in Ann Arbor—as an MA student and office assistant in CMENAS, as a research assistant on the Mapping Arabia project, and as his PhD advisee—one thing that keeps coming back to me is how easy it was to get lost in a conversation with him. I would head to his office with plans to talk about a dissertation chapter, but first we had to chat about whatever was on his mind. Sometimes it was Mozart’s birthday. More often it was baseball (his dislike for the Big Red Machine of the 1970s was made abundantly clear when I accepted a job in Cincinnati). There were very few topics, it seemed, that he couldn’t engage in conversation on or, at the least, wasn’t willing to ask questions and learn something about. Eventually our talk would turn back toward work, but first we had to have a laugh.

Michael’s passing was too sudden for many of us to believe, but I am happy about the many memories and the lessons he taught me over the years. I am also happy about the opportunity to share these stories with others who knew him and were likewise influenced by his passion.

— Robert Haug

I first met Michael Bonner when I was a new graduate student at Michigan’s Department of Near Eastern Studies, and I lived largely in fear of him for the next two years. After a mediocre training in Modern Standard Arabic at my previous institution (taught with a “communicative” approach that dismissed the importance of such archaisms as *i‘rāb*), I was almost entirely unprepared for the series of classical Arabic reading courses that I was to take with him. I was certainly unaccustomed to being stopped at every erroneous semi-vowel or failure to properly elide the *alif*, each instance being met with Michael’s implacably wagging finger and grunts of displeasure. Semester after semester, these classes were a boot camp in learning to read with precision and something approaching complete comprehension. However strict, Michael was a model of joyful philological inquiry, of the drive to comprehend something written a thousand years ago as if it were the most pressing problem the world faced. Class meetings were occasionally derailed by the need to discern the meaning of a single phrase, a whole shelf of dictionaries being pulled down in the process. After one lengthy discussion of some obscure point of grammar, Michael said cheerfully, “It’s sheer pedantry, of course, but that’s what we’re here for, isn’t it?”

These weren’t just language classes, of course; they were also focused on the content of the histories, geographies, biographical dictionaries, and other texts that we read. One had to understand the genre in order to understand the text, Michael insisted, whatever labors that entailed. Working with biographical dictionaries, for instance, we were

forbidden from using the conveniently searchable online copies that were beginning to appear, and were instead consigned to hours in the stacks, leafing through the physical texts so as to grasp the logic of their arrangement. The classes were often grueling, but they were also replete with moments of levity, and with awe at the scope of Michael's knowledge. Class time was peppered with anecdotes about his own professors, corny polyglot jokes that were often lost on those of us who were merely tri- or quadrilingual, and impromptu lectures of stunning depth—not necessarily on medieval Islamdom. Something in al-Idrīsī about the Italian city-states was the occasion for a disquisition on medieval Italian politics that occupied most of a class session, Michael protesting that he was really a dilettante on the topic while producing from memory the names of countless minor rulers and their ministers and mistresses, the precise dates of coronations and deaths. Reading al-Mas'ūdī (or someone similar), some detail of a battle in Central Asia in the ninth century reminded him of a similar situation in Canada in the nineteenth, also recounted in minute detail. Canada! Any reference to music could occasion lessons on the lives and works of European composers, Michael being a concert violinist in addition to his other accomplishments. For a while he threatened to put together a course on poetry for us. "Threatened," I say, because I was sure that meeting his standards of understanding prosody would be the death of me. At the time, I was relieved that the course never materialized, though I now count it among my great regrets. As recently as last year I daydreamed about convincing him to

let me come back to Ann Arbor for a few weeks one summer to do an informal version of such a class. Entirely selfishly, the closure of that fanciful possibility was one of my first thoughts when I learned of his death. I have regularly caught myself in imagined conversations with him since, accompanied each time by the pang of loss. There is something deeply sobering about such a wealth of knowledge blinking suddenly out of our world, even despite the monumental efforts he made to share it.

**"I need some advice  
on how to conduct  
a *fitna*."**

"You're a Mamlukist," Michael said to me once, shortly after becoming chair during a difficult period in the department's life; "I need some advice on how to conduct a *fitna*." His tenure as chair wasn't easy, but it was in those years that I grew past my initial intimidation, becoming much closer with him. That my research interests veered off into Sufism and the postclassical era did nothing to diminish our relationship, as I was now becoming versed in subjects that he (ostensibly) knew less about and thus was all the more eager to discuss. As a mutual friend once pointed out, one of the wonderful things about Michael was that he always treated us as if we were his intellectual equals. He wasn't teasing, she insisted, when he'd offhandedly suggest that we "pick up" some language or another, even if he made it sound like something one does over a weekend. Indeed, he took us seriously and sought out our advice in matters great and small—about the department, about something he was writing or thinking of

teaching. Through his generosity of mind and attention, he made it clear that a field like ours is a communal endeavor rather than the purview of lone geniuses, a running conversation that stretches back centuries and is sometimes best conducted over martinis.

I dreamed of Michael in September, a couple of months after his death. In the dream, I was back in Ann Arbor for something called a “post-defense defense”—an apparently mandatory interrogation of my scholarly contributions since finishing my degree—over which he was presiding. I’ll admit this suggests that I’ve never completely overcome my anxieties about him or about my ability to ever meet the standards he set for us. Nevertheless, I was immensely pleased to see him again, and I hope such visitations never cease.

— Noah Gardiner

Michael spent the month of May 2001 in Paris as an invited professor at the *École des hautes études en sciences sociales* (EHESS). On May 18, he gave a talk on the “economy of poverty” in early Islam in his impeccable French (“*L’économie de la pauvreté dans l’islam des premiers siècles*”). At the end of the paper, the chairperson congratulated him for “une présentation très riche,” to which Michael immediately objected: “Non, on ne peut pas dire ça!” I would discover that this response was quite typical of Michael’s wit and sense of humor.

It was my very first encounter with Michael, at a time when I was a beginning PhD student working on early Islamic Syria with only a vague sense of what I was

actually doing. After his talk, he kindly agreed to chat over a drink, and I vividly remember spending a couple of hours discussing the pitfalls of early Islamic history, medieval Syria, and caliphal frontiers, among other things. Michael gave me invaluable advice on how to navigate the meanders of graduate school and provided me with a full panorama of the US academic landscape. He notably mentioned the then unpublished dissertation of one of his first doctoral students, Steven Judd, as a work that would be helpful to my own project. Michael was back in Paris in May and June of 2007 (again as an invited professor at the EHESS), only a few months after my defense, and he proved particularly supportive at a time when job prospects were grim.

After my move to the University of Maryland in the summer of 2008, I regularly met Michael at various conferences in Europe and in the United States. I had many occasions, therefore, to enjoy his friendship and good company. Discussions with Michael were never restricted to scholarship and would always stray into modern-day politics, literature, or food. I fondly remember an animated discussion about Italian wines at a conference near Milan while seated on the terrace of the spectacular Villa Cagnola, overlooking Lago di Varese.

I also invited Michael to the Washington, DC, area to one of our “First Millennium” workshops in February 2016. He was delighted to be paired with Chris Wickham to discuss the economy of the First Millennium. When I picked him up at the airport he immediately told me that I should not have wasted my precious time driving him around since university professors are so busy. He added that



he was glad I had done it, though, as the period was particularly difficult for him on a personal level. Indeed, we had intensely moving discussions during his brief stay in DC, as his father was then dying. At the end of the workshop, Michael drove straight to New York for what would be his father's last days. Michael's humanity, profound kindness, and generosity was more evident than ever during these challenging times.

Everyone who knew Michael had to be amazed by his linguistic skills. Our conversations regularly revolved around the vexing issue of non-Anglophone scholarship being increasingly ignored on this side of the Atlantic. Michael was particularly concerned about this trend, and we often lamented the situation while trying to imagine strategies for translating more foreign scholarship into English. Michael had himself contributed tremendously to such an effort by translating German, French, and Russian scholarship, on top of Arabic texts (including a yet to be published translation of Ibn Ḥawqal's *Kitāb ṣūrat al-ard*). He was particularly keen on the prospect of translating Gabriel Martinez-Gros's book *Ibn Khaldūn et les sept vies de l'islam* (2006), not only because of the significance of the work but also as a necessary corrective to the existing Anglophone scholarship on Ibn Khaldūn.

Much to my surprise, Michael, who had regularly written letters on my behalf

as one of my referees, once asked me to reciprocate, as he was applying for a fellowship in Europe. I happily (but also anxiously) agreed and penned the strongest letter (or, more aptly, hagiography) I had ever written. It is not every day that you get to recommend Michael Bonner, after all! Much to my dismay, Michael ended up not getting the fellowship (and I still blame myself for that). I thought for a minute that I should have written my little hagiography in Syriac, as one does. I am confident that Michael would have laughed and concurred.

We exchanged several emails on May 23, 2019, as he was working on the final revisions of his article "In Search of the Early Islamic Economy," published in this issue of *Al-'Uṣūr al-Wuṣṭā*. The following day, he was gone. I never was a student of Michael's, but I benefited tremendously from his insights and support over the years. At the 2010 MESA meeting in San Diego, I recall walking into a restaurant and finding Michael laughing at a table with his former students who had attended the conference that year. He had taken them all out for dinner and immediately invited me or, in fact, summoned me to crash the party. I never was a member of the Banū Bonner, but I was happy to have become a *mawlā*. Michael was an exceptional scholar, a wonderful mentor, and a great friend. His passing is a tremendous loss for the field. He will be sorely missed.

— Antoine Borrut