

Building bridges through culture: Al-Babtain Leiden University Centre for Arabic Culture
Annual Report 2022-2023
By Petra Sijpesteijn (15 March 2023)

The Al-Babtain Leiden University Centre for Arabic Culture was founded in 2018 to develop a programme that brings together the Abdulaziz Saud Al-Babtain Cultural Foundation's interest in supporting the study of Arabic literature and culture in institutions of higher education and the university's long and rich tradition in the study of these fields.

At the end of the 16th century representatives of the young Dutch republic, the city of Leiden, recently liberated from Habsburg rule, and the university founded in 1574 to commemorate that event, decided together that the study of Arabic was dearly needed. In 1613 the first Leiden professor of Arabic, Thomas Erpenius was appointed. The chair of Arabic at Leiden University has existed ever since with many illustrious scholars who have greatly contributed to the study of Arabic language, literature and culture. It is the oldest continuing chair of Arabic outside the Arabic-speaking world!



Thomas Erpenius (1584-1624), Professor of Arabic at Leiden University.
Engraving dating from 1688 now at the Austrian National Library © public domain

Today the faculty of the Department of Middle East Studies at Leiden University studies the Middle East and North African region from the time of the rise of Islam up to the present day and through disciplines that extend from linguistics and language acquisition to history, literature, anthropology, law, political studies and economy. The University Library houses a world-renowned collection of Oriental manuscripts including some unique works.

The Department welcomes every year some 50 new Bachelor and 30 Master's students.

Activities

In 2022 and 2023 the Al-Babtain Leiden University Centre for Arabic Culture organised again a number of very successful events: an international conference and scholarly workshop, an Arabic-Dutch poetry event open to the public, public lectures, visiting fellows and a summer school in Oriental manuscripts. The events created significant outreach and exposure, attracting a mix of students, researchers, journalists, diplomats, policymakers and interested members of the general public. Publicity was created via social media, but there were also articles published in newspapers and on the University and the Center's websites. For its events the Center co-operated with the University Library and the National Museum of Antiquities.

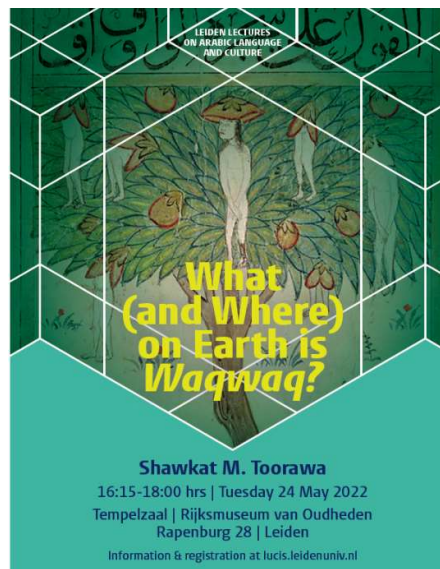
The partnership with the Abdulaziz Saud Al-Babtain Cultural Foundation has enabled Leiden University to highlight its expertise in the field of Arabic studies, reinforce and invigorate international scholarly networks and engage the general public in innovative and effective moments of aesthetic, academic and social exchange, allowing for better understanding between people of different backgrounds through the medium of Arabic literature and culture.

Leiden Lectures in Arabic Language and Culture

On 24 May 2022 Professor **Shawkat Toorawa** (Yale University) gave a lecture entitled 'What (and where) on earth is Waqwaq.' Professor Toorawa took us from the Abbasid court to China, from India to the Philippines, from Japan to the Mascarenes, from Istanbul to Yemen and the New World in

Poster used to advertise the lecture. See also:

<https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/ev-ents/2022/05/what-and-where-on-earth-is-waqwaq>



search of the Waqwaq tree. Tracing scholars, travellers, merchants, poets and adventurers who all used Waqwaq for different purposes. The lecture was advertised on the University website and via social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram). An audience of some eighty students, scholars, journalists, diplomats from Arabic-speaking countries and the general public attended the lecture that took place in the National Museum of Antiquities. An interview with Professor Toorawa appeared in five Dutch newspapers with a total print run of ca. 200,000.

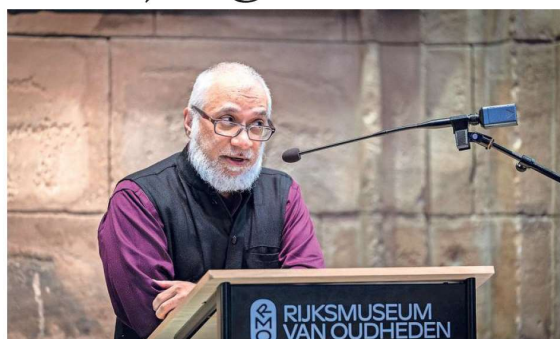
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LITERATUUR Arabisch sprookje van het waqwaq-eiland was obsessie voor generaties onderzoekers

Boom vol jonge vrouwen

Van veel sprookjes in de Arabische wereld bestaat een Europese versie, maar niet van het verhaal van de waqwaq-boom, 'de boom waaraan vrouwen groeien'. Aan deze vreemde boom wijdde hoogleraar Arabische Literatuur van Yale Shawkat Toorawa dinsdag de 'Jaarlijkse Lezing' van het Leids Universitair Centrum voor de studie van Islam en Samenleving (LUCIS), in het Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden.

De waqwaqboom is in de Arabische en Perzische wereld een heilig. Hij komt voor in sprookjes, woorden en gezegden, die te vergelijken zijn met onze uitdrukkingen 'als Paas en Pinksteren op één dag vallen', 'met zijn juweelen' of met



Article by Wilfred Simons about the lecture that appeared in five Dutch newspapers on Friday 27 May 2022 with a total print-run of 200,000.

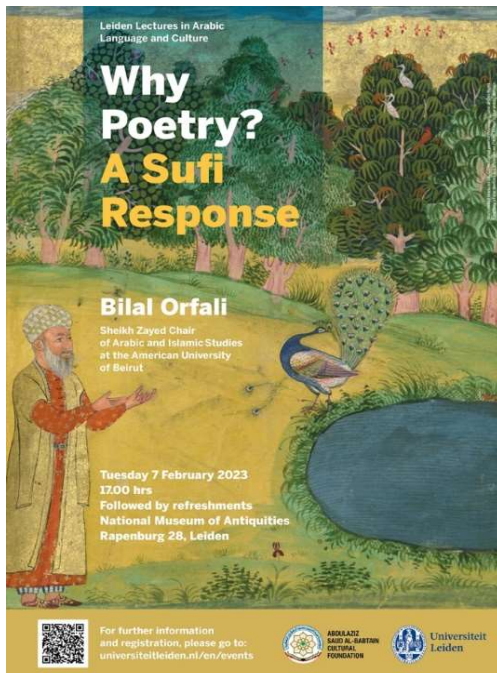
During his stay Professor Toorawa also gave a workshop on Qur'ān translations – his other field of expertise – and worked with Leiden faculty and students in expert meetings.

This year's Leiden Lecture on Arabic Language and Culture was given on February 6 by Professor **Bilal Orfali**, Sheikh Zayed Chair of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the American University of Beirut.



Professor Bilal Orfali in the Taffeh Temple hall of the National Museum of Antiquities. Photographs by Fons Hooft.

The lecture concerned the importance of poetry as a necessary practice and a site of Sufi thought and experience. It looked at reports and reflections from Sufi works from the 10th and 11th centuries to explain why and how Sufis evoked past poets and their poetic heritage, employed courtly poetic motifs often rejected by other religious scholars and the lay public, and actively defended the use of poetry as a form of expression and a means for meditation.



As last year, the lecture was held in the main hall of the national museum for antiquities in front of the temple of Taffeh, which provided a beautiful backdrop. Attendance was high with an audience of around 100 people, including students, faculty, government officials and members of the general public. Several ambassadors were also present, such as the ambassadors of Kuwait, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Yemen, Oman and Tunisia. The lecture was followed by a lively discussion and a reception.

The event was advertised [via the University website](#) and on social media.

Professor Orfali also participated in the workshop Wisdom Literature from the Islamicate Middle Ages.

On 8-10 June 2022 twelve international scholars presented papers in a workshop entitled 'Expectations of justice in the medieval Muslim world'. The papers discussed the general theme of how just rule was defined and what actions and reactions it precipitated in specific

historical, geographical and cultural contexts (local, regional and imperial).



From the *Maqāmāt* of al-Ḥāriri, by Yahyā ibn Maḥmūd al-Wāsitī completed in 1237, now in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Image from public domain.

How was just rule or, conversely, the abuse of political power understood and defined? What solutions were at hand to redress unjust rule or to institute just rule? Case studies discussed instances initiated by individuals (petitions, speeches, literary works) or groups (utopian settlements, revolts) and long-term initiatives (organised, large-scale, revolutionary movements, institutions, and structures to implement just rule). The papers will be published in a book scheduled to appear with a major international publisher in 2023.

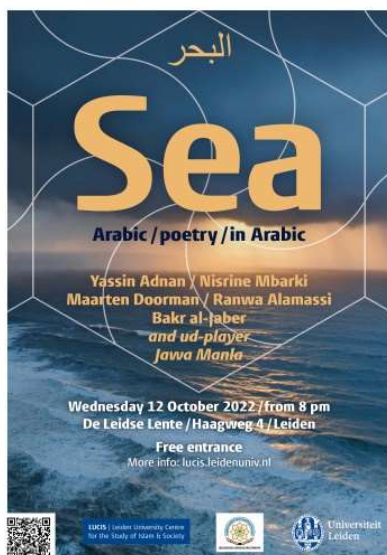


Petra Sijpesteijn speaks about papyri. Photograph by Fons Hooft.

A scholarly workshop entitled ‘**How to ask? Linguistic strategies in written requests**’ will take place on 25 and 26 May 2023. Ten international scholars will present case studies – from ninth-century Greek models of letters from the Byzantine world and Arabic papyri from Islamic Egypt to letters ascribed to the Shi’a imams preserved in works of literature, Italian petitions from prisoners and Dutch letters captured from ships in the seventeenth century – showing great variation in their different linguistic, geographical and historical contexts. The workshop is organised by Professors Gijsbert Rutten, a social linguist, and Petra Sijpesteijn, a historian of medieval Islam from Leiden University. The workshop will

result in a thematic issue of an international journal where all papers will be published. This volume should appear in 2024.

Arabic-Dutch poets encounter



بحر, *Zee, Sea* was the theme of the poetry event the al Babtain-Leiden University Centre for Arabic Culture organised on 12 October 2022. The evening was reported in the regional newspaper *Leidsch Dagblad*, in the University's journal *Mare* and advertised on the University [website](#). More than sixty people – an exceptionally large crowd for poetry in the Netherlands! – came to listen to recitations by Arabic and Dutch poets reading recent work related to this theme. Many in the audience came from outside Leiden University or the Department of Middle Eastern Studies. Some of them were Dutch and had never heard Arabic poetry before, others came from an Arabic background and enjoyed an evening of celebration of their language in their new home country.

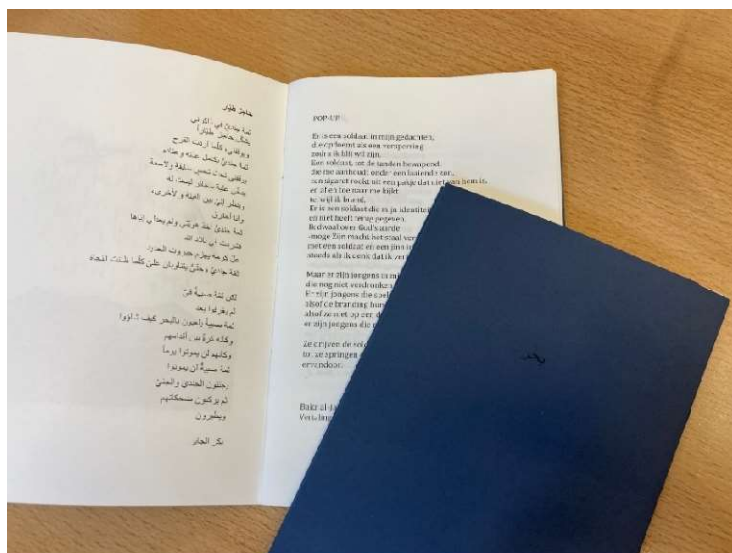
Performing poets were Yassin Adnan (Morocco), whose novel *Hot Maroc* (هوت ماروك) was longlisted for the 2017 International Prize for Arabic Fiction; Palestinian Ranwa Alamsi (Bahrein), who

studies at Leiden University and has published already four volumes of poetry in Arabic; Bakr Aljaber (Syria), a El Hizjra's literature prize laureate; and Nisrine Mbarki and Maarten Doorman, both award-winning poets from the Netherlands. Each poet read one or two of their own poems. But before their reading, one of their colleagues read a translation (in Dutch for Arabic poems and in Arabic for Dutch poems) of that poem, so that those in the audience who were not used to listening to poetry in the other language, could submit to its music, knowing what the poem said. The theme *Sea* enabled poets and audience to draw parallels between deeply human experiences, for instance regarding the relationship between parents and children.



An exceptionally large turn-out enjoy poetry readings in meeting place 'Leidse Lente'. Photographs by Dorrit van Dalen.

The audience was very enthusiastic. Many commented how wonderful and surprising it was to hear the Arabic language this way, so musical and different from radio or television news bulletins. The programme was enriched by the contributions of ud-player Jawa Manla, who also performed together with Bakr Aljaber in the reading of his touching poem *حاجز طيار*



A selection of the performed poems, in Arabic and Dutch, were collected in a small bibliophile volume, including a woodcut made especially for the occasion. Here the original Arabic of the poem *حاجز طيار* by Bakr Aljaber and the facing Dutch translation is visible.

On 13 October Yassin Adnan taught two seminars to BA and MA students discussing his novel *Hot Maroc* and his poem *صيادون*

بقمصان الحصاد.

Babtain visiting professors

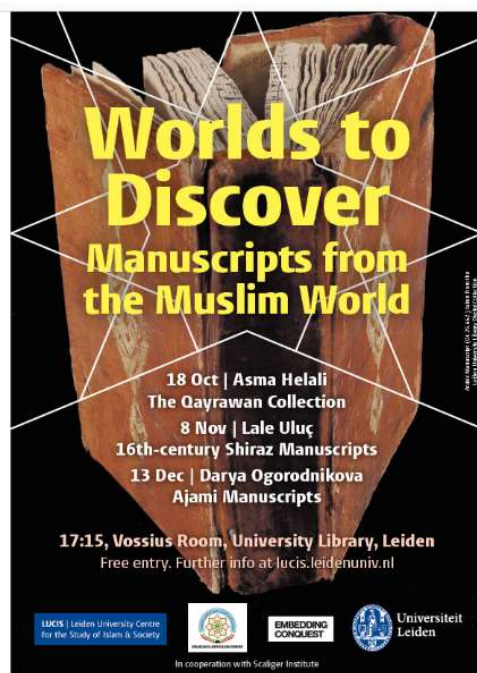
Five visiting professors gave public lectures and seminars in the fall of 2022, three of which in a special programme devoted to Oriental Manuscripts. During their visits the visiting professors give public lectures, workshops on specialized topics, speak at expert meetings and participate in BA, MA and PhD teaching. These activities attract a good number of students and colleagues from Middle Eastern Studies, Religious Studies, Book and Manuscript Studies, Philosophy, Art History, Heritage Studies and History. The public lectures are also visited by members of the general public. One further visiting professor will come to Leiden in the fall of 2023.

[Franziska Fay](#) (Gutenberg University, Mainz), a specialist of youth culture in North Africa, gave a guest lecture at Leiden during her visit 16-19 October 2022 entitled “*Kuishi Ughaibuni*”: Thinking with Diaspora and Dialogue, Belonging and Absence about the Swahili-speaking Gulf.’

Our second Babtain visiting professor last fall was [Salwa al-Awa](#), senior lecturer in Arabic and Islamic Studies at Swansea University). She specialises in Quranic translation and literature and visited Leiden University from 32 October-3 November 2022. She taught a BA class on literary approaches to the Qur’ān and gave a public lecture entitled: God’s Meanings or Interpreter’s meaning? A Case Against Disambiguation. Her lecture was advertised on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

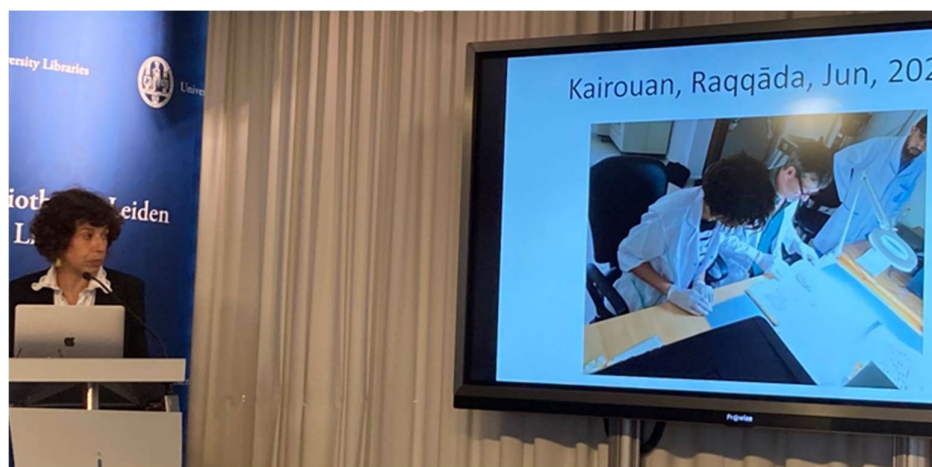
From 9-13 October 2023 [Christian Junge](#), senior lecturer and researcher at the Center for Near and Middle Eastern Studies at Marburg University (CNMS) and member of the Arab German Young Academy of Sciences (AGYA) will visit Leiden as Babtain visiting professor. He is a specialist of literature and philology during the Nahda, postcolonial criticism, and modern Arabic literature. His latest research project studies the connections between emotion, society, representation, and reception in

contemporary Egyptian literature. Dr Junge will give a lecture for our BA students in an Arabic literature class, participate in a faculty roundtable with other researchers from the university, and give a public lecture.



In the fall of 2022 three Babbitt visiting professors visited Leiden for a special programme on Oriental manuscripts studies which we organised together with the [Scaliger Institute](#). The speakers also made use of examples from our own manuscript collection in relation to their own research and presentations. All visiting professors presented in our lecture series *Worlds to Discover: Manuscripts from the Muslim World*. In addition they spent time in expert meetings with Leiden staff and students and/or taught classes for BA, MA and PhD students.

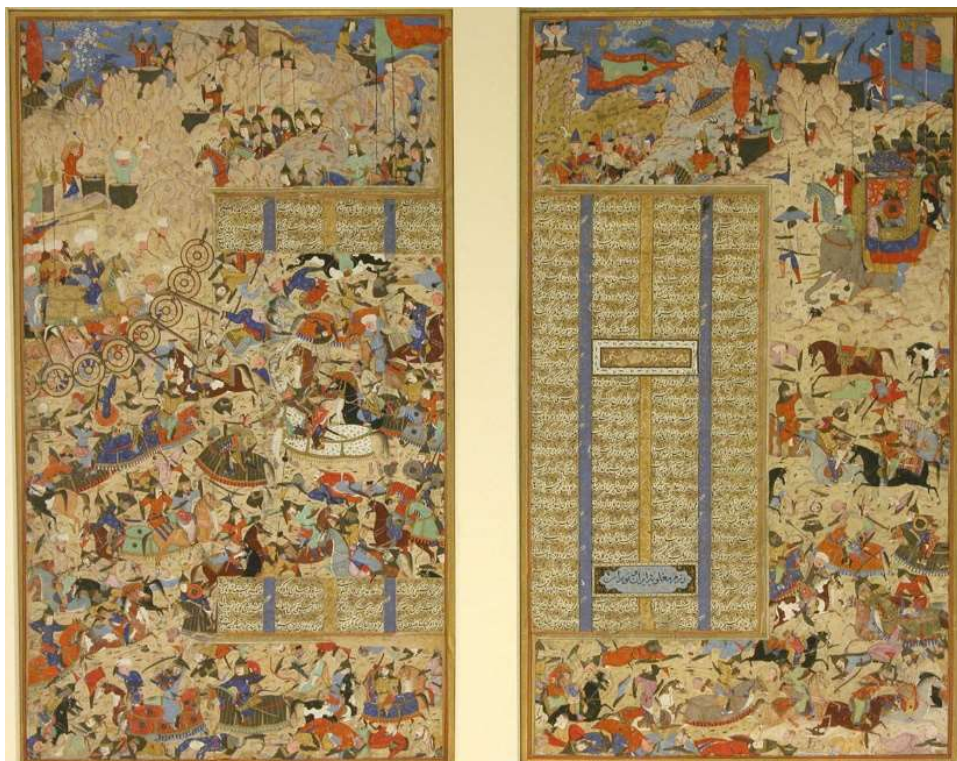
Our first participant in this programme was Asma Hilali, director of the [Kairouan Manuscript Project](#) and associate professor of Islamic studies at Lille University. She spoke about the Arabic manuscripts kept at the Raqqa museum in Qayrawan. Her talk was advertised on the [University web-site](#), [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).



Professor Asma Hilali speaking at Leiden University Library on October 18. Photograph by Petra Sijpesteijn.

During her visit (on 18-20 October 2022) Professor Hilali also gave an expert meeting about the history of the Qur'ānic text, especially the manuscripts found at the great mosque in San'a in Yemen for students and faculty.

The next fellow was [Lale Uluç](#) from Boğaziçi University. On 8 November she discussed 16th-century illustrated manuscripts produced in Shiraz. Her talk was advertised on the [University website](#), [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) (see also [here](#)). During her visit (on 7-10 November 2022) professor Uluç also participated in an expert meeting on manuscripts as a form of cultural production strategically employed by Turko-Persian dynasties.



Battle Between
Iranians and
Turanians from a
Shahnama (Book of
Kings) dating to
1562-1583. Now at
the [Metropolitan
Museum of Art in
New York](#). Image
available via
Creative Commons.

Our final visiting professor in this programme was [Darya Ogorodnikova](#) (Hamburg University) who visited Leiden from 11 to 14 December 2022. She spoke about her field of specialisation, namely [Ajami Manuscripts from West Africa](#). Discussions on social media, such as [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) showed how much interest there was for this topic, which is not often presented on. Dr Ogorodnikova also met with faculty from the Leiden African Studies Center during her visit.

Summer school on Philology and Manuscripts from the Muslim World

This summer school which takes place for the fifth time this year consists of lectures by experts, hands-on classes and much practice with manuscripts from the university's world-famous collection of Oriental manuscripts. The course brings together a dozen graduate students (MA and PhD) and junior researchers from all over the world. The summer school takes place from 21 August to 1 September 2023 at the University Library. Lecturers will include Dr Dorrit van Dalen, Prof. Petra Sijpesteijn, Dr Peter Webb (all from Leiden University), Prof. Gabrielle van den Berg, Dr Reza Huseini (Cambridge University), and Dr Olly Akkermans (Free University, Berlin).