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In Memory: Professor Emeritus John Holladay
First, I would like to take this opportunity to welcome the new faculty members who have joined our community and are already enriching its academic and intellectual life: Dr. Nada Mountaz in Modern Islamic Studies, Dr. Anne Porter in Near Eastern Archaeology, Dr. Yuhan Vevaina in Iranian and Persian Studies, and Fadi Ragheb who is teaching Modern Arabic. We are also currently searching for a new appointment in Modern Arabic Literature. The position is 75% in NMC and 25% in the Centre for Comparative Literature. Our efforts to develop the long-neglected field of Ethiopian Studies have been rewarded by the exceptional gift of $50,000 generously made by Mr. Abel Tesfaye, known professionally as The Weeknd. Along the same lines we are planning to launch in the spring a fund-raising campaign for Coptic Studies. All these are extremely positive developments, further positioning our Department as a leading centre for the study of the Near and Middle East in North America, and indeed in the world. On a sadder note our long-time colleague and friend Jack Holladay passed away in September. Several members of the Department joined his family for a Celebration of Life service at Kingston Road United Church in Toronto on September 26.
I received my Ph.D. in Cultural Anthropology from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. My research stands at the intersection of Islamic legal studies, the anthropology of Islam, and studies of capitalism, and spans the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries in the Levant. Throughout my work I address how, beginning in the nineteenth century, Islamic tradition has transformed while continuing to challenge and provide alternatives to dominant sensibilities, conceptions, and institutions of the modern world. I am currently finishing my book manuscript, tentatively entitled Reviving the Waqf: Property, Law, and Religion in Modern Beirut, where I examine the contemporary Islamic revival of a centuries-old charitable practice of pious endowment under global capitalism and a regime of modern nation-states.

The focus of my work is the archaeology of Syria/Mesopotamia from 4000–1500 BCE, with an emphasis on the third millennium, to which my excavations at Tell Banat dated. Once on the left bank of the Euphrates river, Syria, and now submerged by the Tishreen Dam, the unique remains at Banat accelerated my interest in mortuary practices and ceramics, although my concern with mobile pastoralism goes back to my MA thesis on Jawa (Jordan). My theoretical concerns are pretty eclectic because I believe that different ways of thinking about things pose different, and equally important, questions, but if there is one underlying concern to all my work it is that we should continually reexamine the assumptions at the base of our reconstructions.

Yuhan Vevaina joins our department as the Yarshater Assistant Professor of Avestan and Pahlavi Languages and Cultures. He received his M.A. in 2003 and his Ph.D. in 2007 from the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at Harvard University. He then served as a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Undergraduate Core Curriculum and as the Lecturer on Old Iranian at Harvard University from 2007–2009. He was a Fellow of the National Endowment for the Humanities, USA in 2010. He was a Lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies at Stanford University from 2011–2016. He is completing a book on Zoroastrian scriptural interpretation in Late Antiquity, and he is a co-editor of The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism.

I completed my undergraduate studies in (modern) History and Political Science at McGill University and pursued my graduate studies in Islamic History and Arabic Studies here at the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations at the University of Toronto. My specialization is in medieval Islamic history, in particular, in the history of the central Islamic lands during the Age of the Crusades (6th-7th/12th–13th C). My other research interests include the memory of the Crusades in Islamic history and the modern Middle East, Islamic pilgrimage, tafsīr studies, and modern Arabic literature.
Finding Home: U of T Students Carve Space for Syrian Newcomers

UofT Bulletin
By Veronica Zaretski

On an otherwise quiet Saturday afternoon, laughter erupts and carries down the hall at the department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations.

The source? A group of about 30 young Syrians, who recently came to Canada as refugees from the war-torn country.

They gather every Saturday for workshops led by U of T students to practice English, eat home-cooked Syrian food and develop the foundations to start their new lives in Canada.

“The best day is the day when I am at the workshops,” says Yazan, a 21-year-old who came to Canada in February. Like many students in the group, Yazan asked to be identified by a first name only – to protect his family back home.

The workshops are organized by the Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations-Cultural Exchange and Support Initiative (NMC-CESI), which is a volunteer effort started by a group of students and faculty at the Department Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations of the Faculty of Arts & Science. The workshops are meant to raise awareness about the ongoing issues in Syria and the Middle East, and to help Syrian newcomers settle into their new country.

Yazan moved here with his mother and brother after spending three years as a refugee in Jordan, where he says he worked gruelling, 14-hour days in a restaurant. Going to school was out of the question.

He speaks in English and sometimes in Arabic, translated by U of T PhD student Ian Costa, one of a number of graduate students who began the NMC-CESI.

“Because of the war, I couldn’t continue living in Syria,” he says. “Before the war, there was a stable life.”

Yazan says that since he began to attend the NMC-CESI workshops, organizers such as Costa, PhD students Rasha Elendari, Robert Martin and other Syrian-Canadians have provided a place where the newcomers and U of T students can learn from each other.

“When I came to Canada, I met Rasha and everyone here, and they told me not to worry,” he says, recalling his fears about moving to a new place and how little he knew about Toronto or Canada when he arrived.

Sometimes, participants stay indoors, working in groups. Other times, they head outdoors for picnics and sports.

Karam, a 24-year-old who arrived in Toronto via Lebanon, is keen on building his future, despite the difficulties of the past.

In 2011, he had tried to enrol at the University of Aleppo but to study in a Syrian university he would have needed a certificate that showed that he was enrolled in the army.

“It was a complicated and very difficult life,” he says.

Karam arrived in Canada in April after spending five years in Lebanon. But even in a refugee camp in Lebanon, he was not free from danger, Karam says.

“Hezbollah kidnapped me four times, and I survived,” he says. “They left me in forests. The last time I escaped, they told me that they would take me to hell.”

The purpose of the kidnappings, he says, was to get Syrian civilians back into Syria to serve in the Syrian army.

“Every night when I go to sleep, I think, ‘Wow, I am safe. But other people, lots of Syrian people are stuck in Lebanon,’” Karam says. “They can’t move anywhere. That’s really bad.”
It’s also been difficult for him to be away from family. Karam lives in Toronto by himself.

“I heard about the language exchange between Arabic and English, and I thought that sounds amazing,” he says. “We have fun every Saturday.”

He wants to apply to study business administration in Toronto after he finishes his high school certificate – he could not bring his certifications from Syria here. In the meantime, he is working on his computer programming and guitar playing skills.

“I’m working part-time and have a small income from the government but next year I will take a full-time job at night,” he says. “In the daytime, I will study.”

The path to a new future is one many of the attendees are embarking on, supported by the NMC-CESI volunteers. Organizers for NMC-CESI were able to secure a scholarship for Yazan to attend the Study English in Canada program for six months.

The NMC-CESI workshops also create a social network that can be invaluable.

“I met so many people through [the workshops], I have all of these friends now,” Yazan says.

Heba, an 18-year-old, moved to Toronto more than a year ago, also via Lebanon. She is the oldest of four kids in her family.

In an interview translated by Costa, Heba says that her father had special medical needs, and that her family was accepted to Canada a year after applying for asylum through the United Nations.

“When I first came to Canada, I didn’t know the language, but that has gotten easier when I started to go to school and make friends,” she says. “When you know the language, life becomes a lot easier”.

Heba says she would like to become a doctor.

“The workshops helped me meet friends in a new, different country, and helped me to communicate with Canadian people,” she says.

And the volunteers have gained something too.

“It’s like coming every Saturday to see your friends,” says Costa.
My Georgian Journey Through Language: How I fell in love with a country I knew so little about

On June 11, 2016/ By Grape Expedition/In archaeological dig, Archaeology, Field Students, Georgia, In the Field, Students Abroad, Summer Abroad
By Moska Rokay

A group of undergraduate Canadians from The University of Toronto and I left on an adventure through Georgia, and more importantly, about to embark in a field school experience with local Georgian students from Tbilisi State University on the Gadachrili Gora Regional Archaeological Expedition (G.R.A.P.E.).

The moment we arrived at the airport in Georgia, I was bombarded with words in a script hopelessly unfamiliar to me, and I was suddenly jolted back in time to my childhood, especially the first few years that I had been an immigrant in Canada.

Literacy is a privilege that a large percentage of the world is not, unfortunately, privy to, and I’m humbly grateful for the fact that I can read and write English fluently. I cannot say the same about my native tongue, Dari (Farsi). My family immigrated to Canada when I was six years old and, rather quickly, it was English that became my predominant language solely because I was far more exposed to it than Dari.

Those first few years in Canada were difficult for my family, specifically because of the language barrier. I saw my intelligent, educated parents struggle with a foreign language as they attempted to create a life for our entire family in an alien land.

My siblings and I, on the other hand, were picking up English fairly quickly because we were only children. As we grew older, our English improved but at the same time, our Dari (Farsi) was weakening and we were struggling to communicate complex ideas to our parents in our native tongue.

The feelings of illiteracy in my first few years in Canada are feelings that I never want to feel again, especially if I can do something about it. It’s precisely for this reason that I believe language is extremely important and this is why I wanted to tackle Georgian while in field school.

And in any case, it would be foolish to expect Georgians to know English. I was a guest in their country so I should learn their language. Even learning just a few phrases and words in Georgian were enough for me. However, I was pleasantly surprised at how quickly I was able to pick it up and how patient my Georgian colleagues are with me as I constantly bombard them with “How do you say X in Georgian?”

Naturally, the first thing I wanted to know was how to say hello. I don’t remember who taught me gamarjoba, but by learning hello I was just beginning my journey through this story.

Like any true Canadian, the next thing I had to learn was “sorry” and I cannot tell you how much I use bodishi just in one day as I clumsily navigate the busy streets of Tbilisi or the dirt-filled trenches of Gadachrili Gora.

“I knew that if I wanted to learn the story of Georgia I would have to learn a little bit of the language. And what a story it has to tell!”
The first few days in Tbilisi and then our dig house in Marneuli were rather uneventful as I learned some small basic words like ki/kho/diakh for “yes” and ara for “no.” This was to be expected from any story: the beginning is usually the slower part of most tales, after all. Rogor khar? (“How are you?”)

I said everyday to my Georgian friends and of course they always replied with kargad (“good”) because anything else would probably be too complicated for me. However, things became interesting when I started talking more to my Georgian colleagues.

Suddenly, the story was unraveling itself.

The first Georgian word I learned that was similar to Farsi was baghi which means “garden.” Sitting outside on the porch of our dig house, I knew that a knowing smirk had touched my lips. My Georgian friend said, “Ra? (What?).” And I told him that in Farsi we say “bagh.” His eyes lit up at my declaration and at that exact moment, I was determined to find out if there were more Farsi words in Georgian.

Here was the first twist in the story and I was left with a loaded question in my mind: Why was there Farsi in the Georgian language?

This question led me quickly to an answer and the first plot line in the story. East Georgia had been invaded by the Achaemenid Empire during the rise of the Persians in the 6th century BCE, and then also by subsequent empires originating from the modern day Iran area such as the Parthians/Arsacids and the later Sassanians.

The Arabs, Seljuks, Mongols, and the Qizilbash shahs would also eventually occupy Georgia as well. The language had without warning led me through another twist in its story. I only got a rough and highly condensed version of the history of Persian influence in Georgia, but it left me yearning for the entire tale now.

More and more Farsi words began popping up as I grilled my Georgian colleagues to teach me Georgian on site. It had come to the point where I was going through Georgian word after Georgian word as I hunted for another Farsi-related word.

I started off learning words relevant to the dig such as capcha for “trowel” or bari for “spade” not expecting to find any words related to Farsi but then suddenly I hit words like akandazi for “dustpan” or satli for “bucket” – both of which are close to Farsi!

I wasn’t the only one absolutely astounded at these discoveries – my Georgian colleagues were equally perplexed and speechless to know that some of their words were also in the Farsi language.

Of course, Arabic and Turkish also influenced Georgian as well, but the presence of Farsi is far more significant to me than anything else, regardless of the fact that I had studied Arabic for two years. The occurrences of Arabic and Turkish in the language are simply further plot twists in the story of Georgian, and ones that I will have the pleasure of exploring in the near future.

Naturally, the Farsi-related words in Georgian were easier to remember and, as a result, I noticed that I was picking up Georgian rather quickly. The language has many sounds that are similar to Arabic and Farsi, which means that I can pronounce certain words with more ease than someone that only knew English for example.

However, Georgian also has truly difficult letters and sounds that are very unique to the language, and that I doubt I will be able to produce anytime soon. But that’s okay. The point of learning a language is to communicate an idea and Georgians get quite excited when you attempt to speak in their language even if you mess up the words here and there.

So what have I learned from Georgian so far? I have learned that Georgians take great pride in their history, language and culture, which is why they have been so patient with me when I keep asking them questions. I also discovered a link between myself, and a country that I had never given two thoughts for before this field school.

And I’m far from finished. Fortunately for me, I have only started my chapter within the story of Georgian and I am excited to continue learning the beautiful language and its remarkable story.
Long before Grammy-award winning artist The Weeknd donated $50,000 to help launch Ethiopian studies at the University of Toronto, Michael Gervers was busy exploring, preserving and promoting a largely unknown ancient culture.

A professor in the department of history, Gervers has swung from ropes to get into rock-cut monasteries in Ethiopia. He’s created a database of tens of thousands of photographs—mostly his own—of Ethiopian art and culture.

And for decades, he’s taught one of only a handful of classes in Ethiopian culture and history in North America.

At a local event honouring him for his work on Ethiopian culture 11 months ago, Gervers came up with a novel concept.

He called on the Ethiopian community to raise money for Ethiopian studies at U of T and announced he’d kickstart the cause by matching their donation up to $50,000.

“I thought this was a perfect moment to try and make something happen,” Gervers said. “I gave them a challenge. I said that I would contribute $50,000 of my own money if they could match it. They accepted the challenge.”

Department chair Professor Tim Harrison says he hopes that, with continued support, U of T will eventually add more courses and be positioned to launch the first Ethiopian studies program in North America.

Like Latin, Ge’ez is now only used in religious services, in this case for the Ethiopian Orthodox and Catholic Churches. It would be a foundational language for Ethiopian studies, cross-listed with the Centre for Medieval Studies, allowing students in other programs to compare it to other Semitic languages.

“Michael Gervers started out as a historian of medieval England, but has developed into one of the most important scholars in the world today working on the history and culture of medieval Ethiopia,” said Professor Suzanne Conklin Akbari, director of the Centre for Medieval Studies.

“His initial gift—and, even more, his posing of a fundraising challenge to the Bikila Award and the wider Ethiopian community—was transformative. It created a dynamic partnership that brings together the diasporic Ethiopian community with university partners in Medieval Studies and Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations, exploring how we can work together to allow students—both undergraduate and graduate—to delve more deeply into the history of East Africa, and to understand the contributions of the peoples of Ethiopia to the world we inhabit today.”

Gervers fell into Ethiopian studies almost by accident.

A graduate of U of T, he has been researching and teaching medieval history and art history at the university for 40 years. It was his fascination with rock-cut architecture that led him to France, Turkey, Italy and eventually Ethiopia for the first time in 1982.

He was hooked.
Long before Grammy-award winning artist The Weeknd donated $50,000 to help launch Ethiopian studies at the University of Toronto, Michael Gervers was busy exploring, preserving and promoting a largely unknown ancient culture.
Sometimes the only source of this literature from the early period comes to us through Ethiopic text, but it’s a major gap that has not been filled because we don’t teach the language,” Gervers said. “There are tens of thousands of manuscripts in Ethiopia in Gëez and no one is reading them.”

In addition to pushing for Gëez to be taught at the university level, Gervers has also been working with U of T Scarborough on a library project to make the entire manuscript collection of the 15th century Ethiopian monastery at Gunda Gunde available online, a total of 35,000 pages of Gëez text.

Concerned that Ethiopian manuscripts were under threat after the government seized all church lands, Gervers began digitizing them. His online database (login and password: student) of Ethiopian art and culture now contains 65,000 images.

Thanks to a significant grant from the Arcadia Fund, he is also documenting through video interviews with craftsmen, monks and parishioners how Ethiopia’s rock-cut churches, which are carved out of stone – 20 metres underground, 6m high – are created. For much of the world, it’s a lost art. So far, he’s gathered 40 hours of video recordings, and now is seeking help from the Ethiopian community to transcribe and translate the video interviews, which will then be made available online.

Gervers said The Weeknd’s gift has helped shine a light on the study of ancient Ethiopian culture. For now, he’s just looking forward to seeing Gëez offered at U of T.

“I’m one of the first people who’s going to sign up,” he said.

Modern-day northern Ethiopia and Eritrea were the seat of The Kingdom of Aksum, a major naval and trading power from the first to the seventh centuries AD. One of the world’s first Christian kingdoms, it was a contemporary of Greek and Roman civilizations, controlling many of the trade routes between sub-Saharan Africa and the Mediterranean world.

Religious writings from 2000 years ago, long since disappeared from the modern world may still exist in Ethiopia translated centuries ago by monks there, but still undiscovered in old monasteries.

Part of the reason why few researchers delved into Ethiopia is because, unlike much of Africa which faced colonization by Europeans, Ethiopia did not. That meant most scholars were unable to use their native tongues to conduct research and very few, if any, institutions offered Gëez.

“Sometimes the only source of this literature from the early period comes to us through Ethiopic text, but it’s a major gap that has not been filled because we don’t teach the language,” Gervers said. “There are tens of thousands of manuscripts in Ethiopia in Gëez and no one is reading them.”

Support the fundraising campaign http://nmc.utoronto.ca/support-us/
New Publication

THE OTTOMAN CITIES OF LEBANON: Historical Legacy and Identity in the Modern Middle East

James A. Reilly

At the beginning of the sixteenth century Sultan Selim I invaded Syria and Lebanon, and the area would remain nominally under Ottoman rule until the end of World War I. Whether defined as essentially ‘Turkish’, and therefore alien to the Lebanese experience, or remembered in its final years as a tyrannical and brutal dictatorship, the period has not been thought of fondly in most Lebanese historiography.

In a far-reaching and much-needed analysis of this complex legacy, James A. Reilly looks at Arabic-language history writing emanating from Lebanon in the post-1975 period, focusing on the three main Ottoman administrative centres of Saida, Beirut and Tripoli. This examination highlights key aspects of Lebanon’s current political and cultural climate, and emphasises important points of agreement and conflict in contemporary historical discourse.

The 1989 Ta’if Accords, for example, which ended the Lebanese Civil War, were accompanied by calls for reinterpretation of how the country’s history could assist in creating a sense of national cohesion. The Ottoman Cities of Lebanon is invaluable to all historians and researchers working on Lebanese history and politics, and wider issues of identity, postimperialist discourse and nationhood in the Middle East.
JCSSS is a refereed journal published under the direction of its General Editor, Prof. Amir Harrak. JCSSS 16 (2016) includes the following articles:

Sidney H. Griffith, Catholic University of America
“Syriac into Arabic: A New Chapter in the History of Syriac Christianity”

Alexander Treiger, Dalhousie University

Aaron Butts, Catholic University of America
“The Christian Arabic Transmission of Jacob of Serugh (d. 521): The Sammlungen”

Jeannie Miller, University of Toronto
“What it means to be a Son: Adam, Language, and Theodicy in a Ninth Century Dispute”

Gagik Sargsyan, Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography (Yerevan) and Vincent van Vossel, Babylon Theological College (Erbil)
“The Inscriptions of the Old Armenian Church of Our Lady in Baghdad”
Jens Hanssen: ending the Syrian conflict is the key

The world has been shaken by terror in widely separated cities over the past week. Bombers struck in three cities in Saudi Arabia. At least 157 in perished Baghdad’s Karada neighborhood. Forty-two are dead and more than 250 injured after three suicide bombers struck the Istanbul Atatürk Airport.

And Bangladesh suffered its worst incident of terrorism when militants stormed a café in Dhaka, killing 20 hostages.

On July 5, the National Post reported that a University of Toronto student, Tahmid Khan, had been taken hostage in the Dhaka café but survived. After being freed from the café, the Post reported, Khan was placed in detention by authorities in Bangladesh. Read The National Post story.

A spokeswoman for the university confirmed that Khan is a student at U of T entering his fourth year. The university is concerned about the events that have unfolded and is monitoring the situation, she said.

No further information was available at the time of publication.

Jens Hanssen, an associate professor of Arab civilization and modern Middle Eastern and Mediterranean history, spoke with U of T News about the attacks and their possible repercussions, beginning in Baghdad.

Is the Baghdad attack a reflection of the conflict between Sunnis and Shiites?

Perhaps the attackers struck at Turkey for its recent rapprochement with Russia. The Istanbul attack may serve as a warning of what lies ahead should Turkey make common cause with Russia against ISIS.

The attack in Baghdad is the worst of sporadic bomb attacks on civilians since the U.S. and the United Kingdom invaded Iraq and ousted President Saddam Hussein in 2003. Since then virtually no neighbourhood outside the area formerly known as the Green Zone has been spared.

Violence in Baghdad hits everyone, in this particular instance, the most diverse neighbourhood of Karrada, which today is predominantly inhabited by Shia but has a significant Christian population and history.

This is a place where I spent a week after the U.S. invasion in July 2003 assessing the damage to Iraqi higher education. It is worth noting that there are reports that the carnage could have been prevented if the now jailed British conman James McCormick had not been allowed to sell fake security equipment.

Does the Baghdad bombing conform to the theory that ISIS terror in urban centres increases in inverse proportion to its fortunes on the battlefield?

Turkey is saying it was attacked by ISIS.

The attack indeed has the ISIS signature all over it. Istanbul and its airport are Turkey’s gateway to the West. What is known about the identity of the attackers suggests that they came from the central Asia republics of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Possibly they were trained by affiliates of ISIS in Raqq, the northern Syrian capital of the “Islamic Caliphate,” which the ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed two years ago to the day.
Are there other potential triggers to ISIS terrorism around the world?

I think to explain why ISIS attacks happen it is more instructive to examine the effect rather than the cause. Responses to such attacks have been so predictable and futile that I am beginning to suspect that ISIS needs no trigger. The only consideration is: on which occasions will the inevitable military posturing and anti-Muslim fury of the enemy be most helpful to their moribund campaign? Remember that ISIS is struggling to maintain territory and morale in Syria and Iraq. Spectacularly horrific suicide attacks mask substantial setbacks for ISIS forces on the ground.

Some Westerners are confused about Turkey’s role in the world since the ascent of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who is a Muslim. Is it possible to generalize about Turkey’s relations with the West?

Turkey under Erdogan has been keen on maintaining geopolitical autonomy from the West through a multi-pronged foreign policy. This worked remarkably well until the Syrian revolution of 2011 turned into protracted civil war. Erdogan early and rightly recognized that his former friendly neighbour, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, had to go in order to reestablish the peace and stability that has proved so elusive since the United States-led invasion of Iraq.

Erdogan may also have seen an opportunity to promote the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, whose members, he calculated, shared his vision of a neoliberal Islamic democracy. All that changed with the influx of mercenaries funded by the Gulf States or its many wealthy business families; as well as Iranian and Russian military and logistical support for Assad and his Hezbollah allies.

“Some Westerners are confused about Turkey’s role in the world since the ascent of Recep Tayyip Erdogan,”
Iraqis inspect the damage at the site of a suicide car bombing claimed by the Islamic State group on July 3, 2016 in Baghdad’s central Karrada district (photo by SABAH ARAR/AFP/Getty Images)
Can we expect the pendulum in Turkey to swing back to a secular and Western identity?

All indications are that Erdogan is succeeding in changing the staunchly secularist Republic that Kemal Atatürk built in the 1920s and 30s. He has purged the military, the judiciary, the media and the universities. Our colleagues who have protested against his policies are in prison. He has changed the constitution to give the president more executive power. He employs the same kind of machismo and demagogy that have made Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu popular in the conservative, religious and nationalist circles in their countries.

Erdogan’s populism has divided Turkish society. Secularists who used to run the show and mocked pious Turks as “lowly Arabs” are now on the defensive. But while Erdogan speaks a language of Islamic democracy, he acts more like an autocrat when it comes to dissenting voices, most notably on Kurdish or Armenian issues. He even called for blood-testing the Turkish-German members of parliament who voted to recognize the Armenian genocide.

There has been discussion of Turkish membership in the European Union.

Turkey has come a long way since the collapse of its economy in the late 1990s. The International Monetary Fund report in April approved Turkey’s economic growth as “robust” but predictably advised that “structural reforms” were needed. From a purely economic standpoint, the EU and even Turkey would gain from membership. Holding back the debate right now are Turkey’s human rights violations – a valid objection, in my view – and Islamophobia in Europe, which has only gotten worse since the Brexit campaign.

Will this attack destabilize the internal politics of Turkey?

Tourism will certainly suffer; it is already down by 30 per cent since a slew of attacks in Istanbul and Ankara. Politically, Erdogan might be facing questions about why he was formerly so soft on ISIS and other Islamist groups. So far he has been protected by the very structural changes to the political system he engineered. If the secularist parties can unite, the ruling AKP [Justice and Development Party] might lose its majority in parliament. But this is four years off.

Is there any end in sight to the violence?

I am afraid that these kinds of attacks will continue as long as the Syrian civil war is going on. Today politicians and pundits see Bashar al-Assad as the lesser of two evils. But without Assad, ISIS and its Islamist rivals lose their raison d’être. Only after Assad is gone can Syria’s future begin and the refugees return. The question is what means it will take to forge a consensus among all the parties, starting with the Syrians themselves and their neighbours, on how to end Assad’s rule.
An international team of archaeologists from United States, Israel and Canada have discovered stunning new floor mosaics decorating the interior of a synagogue dating to the Late Roman period (ca. 5th C.E.) in Israel.

Huqoq — the site of the discovery, located about 2.4 kilometres northwest of the Sea of Galilee — is an ancient Jewish village near the modern-day town of Migdal.

The mosaic panels decorating the floor of the synagogue’s nave (centre of the hall), portray two biblical stories: Noah’s Ark and the Parting of the Red Sea. The panel with Noah’s Ark depicts an ark and pairs of animals including elephants, leopards, donkeys, snakes, bears, lions, ostriches, camels, sheep, and goats. The scene of the Parting of the Red Sea shows Pharaoh’s soldiers being swallowed by large fish, surrounded by overturned chariots with horses and chariot drivers.

This year, five undergraduate students joined geoarchaeologist Emily Hubbard of U of T’s Archaeology Centre on the dig.

Witnessing the uncovering of the mosaics was very special: “After working so hard in the field day after day there is nothing like that moment when more of the mosaics are revealed and we all get to witness it,” said University College student Emma Kerr, who’s working towards an archaeology specialist degree with minors in Near & Middle Eastern civilizations and geographic information systems.

“There are incredibly decorated floors haven’t been seen since the fifth century and we get to help find them and be the first to see them. As an archaeology student, you can’t beat that!”

Three U of T students with previous experience on the site — Kerr, Irene Chirmanova and Camille Angelo — took on supervisor roles this season, while Anne James and Gabi Lichtblau participated in their first archaeological project.

“I really wanted to participate because I plan to specialize on Israel and the Middle East,” said James, a Trinity College student heading into her third year of studies in archaeology with a double minor in human and physical geography. “Plus I heard so many great things about the project and the cool things being uncovered.”

The Huqoq excavations are directed by Professor Jodi Magness of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, with Assistant Director Shua Kisilevitz of the Israel Antiquities Authority. U of T has been involved in the project since its inception in 2012 with various teams of undergraduate students taking part.

Recent U of T graduate Camille Angelo — who will start a Masters of Religious Studies at Yale Divinity School in the fall — has been participating in the project for three years. “I kept coming back because I wanted to answer all of our questions about the site. I found that our team could not maintain any expectations about what we might find because each phase presented so many surprises.”

According to the project leader, the scenes discovered are very rare in ancient synagogues. “The only other examples that have been found are at Gerasa/Jerash in Jordan and Mopsuestia/Misis in Turkey (Noah’s Ark); and at Khirbet Wadi Hamam in Israel and Dura Europos in Syria (the Parting of the Red Sea),” said Magness.
“This is by far the most extensive series of biblical stories ever found decorating the mosaic floor of an ancient synagogue,” said Magness. 

Mosaics were first discovered at the site in 2012, and work has continued each summer since then. In 2012, a mosaic depicting Samson and the foxes (as related in the Bible’s Judges 15:4) was found in the synagogue’s east aisle. The next summer, an adjacent mosaic was uncovered that shows Samson carrying the gate of Gaza on his shoulders (Judges 16:3). Another mosaic discovered in the synagogue’s east aisle in 2013 and 2014 depicts the first non-biblical story ever found decorating an ancient synagogue – perhaps the legendary meeting between Alexander the Great and the Jewish high priest. A mosaic panel uncovered in 2015 next to this scene contains a Hebrew inscription surrounded by human figures, animals, and mythological creatures including putti (cupids).

The two-week pre-dig program for U of T students was funded by the Canadian Friends of the Hebrew University.

The mosaics have been removed from the site for conservation, and the excavated areas have been backfilled. Excavations are scheduled to continue in summer 2017.
In Memory:
Professor Emeritus John (Jack) Holladay, B.Sc., Th.D.

Jack was the loving husband of Phyllis (Graham) Holladay, who left us far too early in 1993, the beloved father of Karen (Rick Owens), Kim (Martin Lenters) and Scott (Susan Holladay) and doting grandfather to Allison, Carolyn, Lindsey, Siobhan, Kelsey, Sean, Benjamin and Simon.

He is survived by his brother, Robert Holladay of Springfield, Illinois and his sister, Anna Marie Matteson of Battle Lake, Minnesota.

Born in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in 1930 to the Reverend John S. Holladay and Gladys Marie Carder Holladay, who were Presbyterian missionaries, Jack grew up in Thailand, then attended boarding school in India. He returned to Thailand just before the Japanese invasion and his entire family walked out of Thailand on the Burma Road ahead of the invaders. They got out on the last passenger ship to safely run a gamut of submarines as they returned to the United States.

He married Phyllis Graham in 1953, shortly after joining the Air Force and was posted to Alaska as an in-air radar observer. Shortly after the birth of their son Scott, they left Alaska and Jack began to study for the ministry at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago. Near the end of his time in Chicago, Jack won an essay contest which allowed him to work under the great archaeologist G. Ernest Wright.

After graduating with a Th.D from Harvard Divinity School, he worked at Princeton University before joining the Department of Near Eastern Studies at the University of Toronto. He was one of the investigators at Tel Gezer, where he supervised the excavation of the city’s Solomonic Gate. Jack loved his time in U of T, one of his main achievements being his landmark dig in the Nile Delta, the Wadi Tumilat Project, in which he was assisted in both field and lab work by his wife, Phyllis. His later years included a “disruptive” study of King David, Middle Eastern trade networks and the economy of ancient Israel and Judah.

Jack and his family joined Kingston Road United Church shortly after their arrival in Toronto, which became an important focus in their lives. He was an active choir member for decades and loved and was loved by the choir director and his fellow choir members.

Undaunted by a diagnosis of early-stage Alzheimer’s in his 80th year, Jack continued to live his life with love, dedication, purpose and style. He continued to assist with the publication of his work, facilitated by the wonderful support of his colleagues in Near Eastern Studies and was a loving father, grandfather and friend to those around him. Heartfelt thanks to Team Jack (particularly Sally and Pinkie) for their dedicated and compassionate support through the last few months of his life.

A Celebration of Life service was held at 11:00 a.m. on Monday, September 26th, at Kingston Road United Church, 975 Kingston Road, Toronto. His ashes will be interred alongside the remains of his wife Phyllis in South Bristol, during the summer of 2017.
The Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations is committed to imparting students with the knowledge and leadership skills to meet the most pressing challenges of the 21st century.

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