



# **Arabic Literary Salons in the Islamic Middle Ages: Poetry, Public Performance, and the Presentation of the Past (ND Poetics of Orality and Literacy)**

*Samer M. Ali*

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Arabic literary salons emerged in ninth-century Iraq and, by the tenth, were flourishing in Baghdad and other urban centers. In an age before broadcast media and classroom education, salons were the primary source of entertainment and escape for middle- and upper-rank members of society, serving also as a space and means for educating the young. Although salons relied on a culture of oral performance from memory, scholars of Arabic literature have focused almost exclusively on written sources of the tradition.

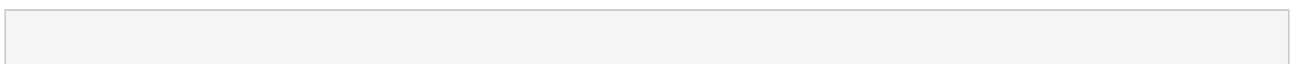
That emphasis, argues Samer Ali, has neglected the interplay of oral and written, as well as of religious and secular knowledge in salon society, and the surprising ways in which these seemingly discrete categories blurred in the lived experience of participants. Looking at the period from 500 to 1250, and using methods from European medieval studies, folklore, and cultural anthropology, Ali interprets Arabic manuscripts in order to answer fundamental questions about literary salons as a social institution. He identifies salons not only as sites for socializing and educating, but as loci for performing literature and oral history; for creating and transmitting cultural identity; and for continually reinterpreting the past.

A fascinating recovery of a key element of humanistic culture, Ali's work will encourage a recasting of our understanding of verbal art, cultural memory, and daily life in medieval Arab culture.

**"*Arabic Literary Salons in the Islamic Middle Ages* is a unique contribution to understanding how poetry and literature were received in medieval Islam. By brilliantly situating salons both in the context of their predecessors and in comparable European and Persian traditions, Ali shows how the *mujalasa* tradition shaped, and was shaped by, people from all ages and walks of life. His careful study makes this tradition, with its vibrant performative dimension, come to life for a contemporary audience." --Dale F. Eickelman, Dartmouth College**

"This important book makes a unique contribution to the social history of Arabic literature, literacy practices, and historical consciousness. Its arguments are built on meticulous, theoretically innovative readings of some key Abbasid works in their contexts of composition and salon performance. It will be of great value to Arabists and to scholars of world comparative literature, the ethnography of literacy, and historiography in and beyond medieval studies." --Margaret A. Mills, Ohio State University

"Samer Ali has written a wonderful, very accessible book that addresses important aesthetic phenomena of the Arab Middle Ages, especially those emanating from the heart of the Abbasid Empire. A major contribution is his inclusion of new or barely considered manuscript material as well as discussion of the social dynamics of everyday life in the Arab Middle East and North Africa, little known by most westerners." --Sabra Webber, Ohio State University



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