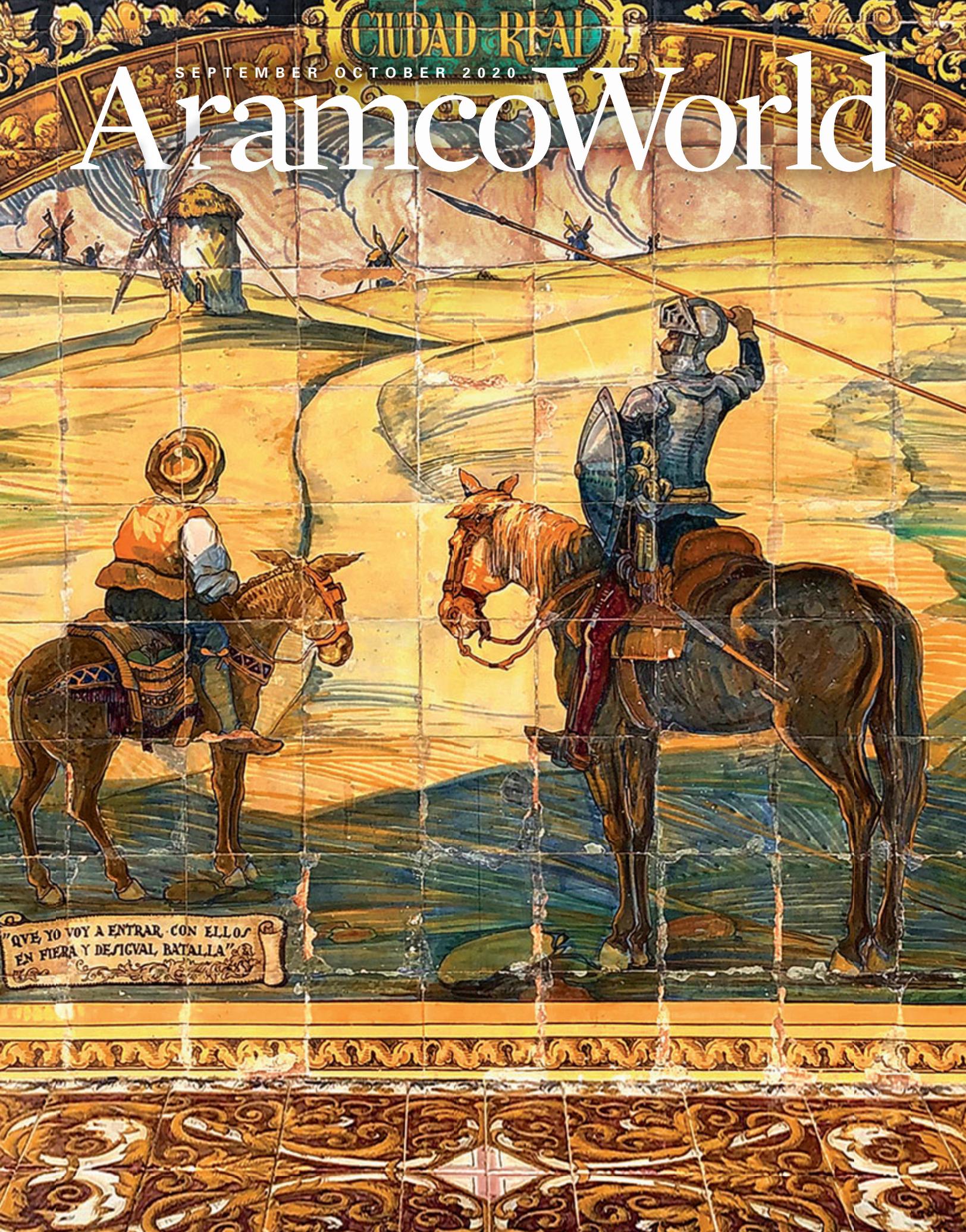


CIUDAD REAL

SEPTEMBER OCTOBER 2020

# AramcoWorld



"QUE YO VOY A ENTRAR CON ELLOS  
EN FIERA Y DESIGVAL BATALLA"



## 6 Greetings from Cairo, USA

Written by Jonathan Friedlander

Postcards courtesy of Jonathan Friedlander

Westward expansion of the United States in the 19th century coincided with the popularity of all things Egyptian. Beginning in 1808 some 25 villages, towns and cities throughout the country were named Cairo. Of them, Cairo, Illinois, became the largest, although today it is Cairo, Georgia, whose nearly 10,000 residents gives it that title. Five of the “American Cairos” produced picture postcards, mostly during the early 20th century: These included both Cairo, Illinois and Georgia, as well as the Cairos of West Virginia, New York and Nebraska. Today these postcards record what these communities—distinct in geography, economy and history but united by a name—regarded as points of pride.

## 16 Of Spice, Home and Biryani

Written by Alia Yunis

Slow-cooked with meats, vegetables and spices that vary all across the subcontinent of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, biryani “speaks to love, time and patience” for those who grow up with it, and to dazzling, addictive blasts of flavor to everyone else. No wonder it’s a rising global food star.

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# AramcoWorld

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We distribute *AramcoWorld* in print and online to increase cross-cultural understanding by broadening knowledge of the histories, cultures and geography of the Arab and Muslim worlds and their global connections.

**Front Cover:** Depicted here on tiles in Seville, Spain, *Don Quixote* author Miguel de Cervantes’ road-trip duo of Sancho Panza and Don Quixote learned from each other despite—or because of—their different temperaments and backgrounds. Photo by Tom Verde.

**Back Cover:** Flush with commercial ambitions, Cairo, Illinois, published dozens of picture postcards, more than all of the other Cairos in the us combined. Postcard courtesy of Jonathan Friedlander.



## 20 The Staying Power of 4stay

Written by Larry Luxner

As an 18-year-old from Tajikistan new to Washington, DC, Akobir Azamovich Akhmedov could barely afford the city's high rents. A dozen years later, he is cofounder and CEO of 4stay, where his plug-and-play approach to long-term accommodations is reshaping the market.

## 22 The Dialogues of Don Quixote

Written and photographed by Tom Verde

Amid the fearful turbulence of the 17th century, Spanish author Miguel de Cervantes invented a plot, characters and names that seemed innocently comical, but they cleverly cloaked his insistence that Spain recognize its historical diversity—and *Don Quixote* became the best-selling novel ever published.

## 32 I Witness History: I, Innocent Asp

Written by Frank L. Holt

Illustrated by Norman MacDonald

You do not know the real me. The demise of Cleopatra is but one of your many slanders against my kind. Even Shakespeare in *Antony and Cleopatra* called me a "poor venomous fool." But let's examine the facts: I, the Egyptian asp, *Naja haje*, did not kill the queen.

 **41 OUR NEW MOBILE APP: Portal to online discovery**

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# FIRSTLOOK

## Waleed's Birthday

Sanad, Bahrain

*Photo by  
Khalid Alabbas*

Everything is different this year. Including my father Waleed's birthday. He works in Oman and comes home to Bahrain every weekend. As expected, his routine changed this year. When travel was banned he was stuck in Oman. But when a plane was set to travel back to Bahrain, he was on it. Under the rules implemented by the government of Bahrain, any person who flew into the country needed to quarantine for two weeks. A few days after his return, April 12 was his birthday.

This picture shows him inside his room at our family home. My mother, who is carrying the cake, and my brother and grandmother and I surprised him. We accepted that the family reunion was without hugs and kisses, but it is enough that he is with us now.

To me, this picture depicts love and a family bond. It's an image that one day I might show to my kids when I tell them about 2020, and maybe they will understand through this picture that no matter what circumstances the world takes you through, a family bond stays strong.

—Khalid Alabbas

  @khalid\_artz







# FLAVORS

## Nasi goreng

Recipe by  
Troth Wells

Photograph courtesy  
Kam & Co. Denmark

### A popular dish in Indonesia and Malaysia—and one that I often enjoyed when I lived for a year in Penang.

*Nasi goreng* (fried rice) features in both Malaysian and Indonesian cuisine. It has an interesting blend of tastes and textures. In the Far East, the dish generally includes a dried shrimp paste, called *blachan* in Malaysia and *terasi* in Indonesia, but this recipe substitutes bean curd/tofu. Some recipes have an omelet added. This is cooked first, then cut into strips and added to the dish at the end.

(Serves 4–6)

2 cups (450 grams) rice	1 cup (225 grams) bean curd / tofu, diced
2 eggs, beaten	1 tablespoon curry paste or chili sauce
3 shallots, sliced	1 tablespoon soy sauce
2 scallions / spring onions, sliced finely	1 teaspoon sesame oil
1-centimeter / ½-inch fresh ginger, chopped, or 1 teaspoon powdered ginger	½ cucumber, sliced
1 carrot, sliced into thin sticks	2 tablespoons cilantro / coriander, chopped
1 cup (100 grams) white cabbage, sliced finely	oil
1 tablespoon sultanas (raisins)	salt

Cook the rice in boiling water for 10–15 minutes, and then drain.

While the rice is cooking, season the beaten eggs. Heat some oil in a frying pan and, when hot, pour in the eggs and swirl round to make an omelet. Cook for a few minutes until golden and then tip it out onto a plate. Roll it up, leave to cool and then slice into strips.

Now heat some more oil and sauté the shallots, scallions / spring onions and ginger for 1–2 minutes. Then add the carrot, cabbage and sultanas and continue to stir-fry for 3 minutes until tender.

Next, put in the cooked rice and bean curd / tofu and toss with the vegetables. Combine the soy sauce, sesame oil and curry paste or chili sauce. Pour this over the ingredients and mix well. Adjust the flavorings to taste.

Arrange the omelet strips and cucumber slices on top and scatter the cilantro / coriander over before serving.

Reprinted with permission from  
**One World Vegetarian Cookbook**

Troth Wells  
2011, Interlink Books,  
978-1-56656-834-0, \$35 hb,  
www.interlinkbooks.com.

**Troth Wells** is an Oxford-based food writer and author of cookbooks including also *The Spices of Life* (2001), *Global Vegetarian Cooking* (2010) and *Small Planet, Small Plates: Earth-Friendly Vegetarian Recipes* (2012), all published by Interlink Books.



Illinois Central Bridge Over Ohio River, 4 Miles Long, Cairo, Ill.



POST CARD  
FOR CORRESPONDENCE | FOR ADDRESS ONLY

PLACE STAMP  
HERE.  
UNITED STATES  
AND CANADA  
ONE CENT.  
FOREIGN, TWO  
CENTS

Greetings from  
**CAIRO**  
USA

Postcards courtesy of  
Jonathan Friedlander

Written by  
JONATHAN FRIEDLANDER

Gonna get it rich in Cairo, 'airo  
Rich as an Egyptian pharaoh, 'airo  
Beside my child, beside my wife  
We're gonna live that rich dream life  
In Cairo 'airo, Illinois, in Cairo 'airo, Illinois  
—Huckleberry Finn (1974)

Of the more than two dozen towns named Cairo throughout the United States, Cairos in Illinois, Georgia, West Virginia, New York and Nebraska produced picture postcards during the early 20th century. Today those cards are historical records of the people who looked to Egypt for a name that fit their dreams of civic grandeur.

## *Greetings from Cairo, Illinois*

Cairo clung to its old obsession of El Dorado: to the boosters' assurances of natural resources, natural assets ... that it would one day rise up and present these assets to redeem its destiny ... and take its place among the necessary cities of the world.

—Ron Powers, *Far From Home: Life and Loss in Two American Towns* (1991)

With land made spectacularly productive by the Mississippi River on one side and the Ohio River on the other, one can understand how the southern tip of the state of Illinois came to be known as “Little Egypt.” In 1818 a charter for incorporation was secured for the town sprouting up where those great arteries of the North American continent joined.

Unlike the Nile, which flooded annually, the Mississippi and Ohio, arriving settlers learned, flooded capriciously and often catastrophically. One of the first major building projects was a system of levees that surrounded the ambitious, water-bound city dubbed “The Gateway to the South.” Cairo’s strategic location came to aid the Union during the us Civil War, when in 1861 General Ulysses S. Grant directed construction of Fort Defiance on the west side of the town, near the precise point where the rivers met. From there in 1862, he staged the attack downriver on Vicksburg, Mississippi, which helped put the Union on its long path to victory.

After the Civil War, Cairo aspired to rival St. Louis as a commercial and transport hub along the Mississippi. In 1868 more than 3,500 boats tied up

Cairo, Illinois, in 1906 was a thriving small city. The Illinois Central Railroad had recently completed its bridge over the Ohio River, and its spans appear in the background, **right and opposite**. Today the town’s Custom House, vantage point for the postcard at **right**, hosts the town museum, and it is among few remaining historic buildings.

along its docks. Steam huffed trains across the rivers on bridges built in 1889 and 1905. The city supported a burgeoning class of landowners and speculators as well as merchants, entrepreneurs and laborers who worked the land and the river. The post-Civil War years were boom years, and the population grew also from the northward migrations of formerly enslaved individuals and families seeking opportunity outside the defeated Confederacy. By the turn of the 20th century Cairo had a population of 12,566, of which approximately 5,000 were African American. (The indigenous Potawatomi had been forced to move west of the Mississippi following the Indian Removal Act of 1830.)

In 1910 Cairo was designated as the seat of Alexander County, and its 14,548 inhabitants, according to the census that year, would never be exceeded in later years. An electric trolley plied the main street, Commercial Street, lined with department stores, hotels, auction houses, furniture showrooms, restaurants and taverns, drug stores, specialty shops and entertainment venues including the state-of-the-art, 600-seat Gem Theater. Many of these were depicted in a cornucopia of dozens of picture postcards. Even us President William Howard Taft paid a visit to Cairo on October 26, 1909.

Two weeks later an event took place that stalled the rise of Cairo’s fortunes and sent them into the tailspin from which the city has yet, to this day, to recover. On November 11 an angry crowd of white residents, estimated at 10,000, gathered downtown as William James, a Black resident accused (wrongfully, it was shown later) of killing a white woman, was publicly lynched. Although not the first racially motivated murder in the city, its exposure of



festering racism, segregation and political corruption began 110 years of economic and social decline. A century later the census in 2010 counted only 2,831 residents.

But Cairo may yet have another chapter to write. This year the state of Illinois approved the first significant investment in the town in decades: a \$40 million grant aimed at reviving Cairo as a 21st-century riverport.

“We strive to always see the positive side of situations and work toward betterment of our small but solid community,” says Monica Smith, director of Cairo’s historic Safford Library, which was inaugurated in 1884.

## Greetings from Cairo, Georgia

While as in most towns the young ones leave after high school, many return when they retire. The personality of the town of Cairo is considered to be charming. There is a respect for the heritage of the past and an appreciation for culture.

—Don Nickerson, director and curator, Grady County Museum of History

According to newspaper accounts of the time, it was the postmaster who in 1835 chose Cairo from the two names presented to him by the us Post Office for the new settlement in Georgia. It was incorporated as a town in 1870 and as a city in 1906, at which time it was also named seat of the newly formed Grady County, named after Henry W. Grady, the prominent editor of the *Atlanta Constitution* and a respected orator.

Located on the edge of the coastal plain, just north of where the state of Georgia meets the Florida Panhandle, this region has been home to Native American tribes including those collectively known as Creeks as well as early traders, settlers and both free and enslaved laborers.

It is a land abundant with small streams, and its European

### SOCIAL MEDIA in the Early 20th Century

In 1908 alone, more than 700 million postcards were mailed in the us. This was the peak of the decade, roughly 1905 to 1915, in which the most popular social media of the day arrived in the mailbox. These were also years when all five of the us Caicos that published postcards were largely thriving. It all came thanks to newly inexpensive printing technology, a postal rate as low as one cent, and newly expanded rural delivery services. Postcards were often collected and shown in albums and at social gatherings.



The us Postal Service honored Cairo, Georgia’s most famous son with this stamp, and in the 1930s pickles were a top local business. **Opposite:** Printing a town’s name on a state-focused postcard was common. Pecans, waterways and tobacco appeared on postcards, too. The sender of the card at **lower left** wrote, “We are having a lot of picnics now. That one at Cairo was exceedingly fine.”



settlers found that its long growing season and rich soil could produce diverse fruits and vegetables including beans, peanuts, pecans and cucumbers that were affectionately named “Cairo Beauties.” Wheat, rye, sorghum and oats grew well. Sugarcane thrived and in 1862, a Cairo farmer named Seaborn Anderson Roddenbery began producing the first cane-based syrup in America. It became a town industry, and to this day the high school sports teams are known as The Syrupmakers.

During the Civil War, the town was not much harmed and, at the turn of the 20th century, counted 1,505 residents. Small in population but long enough on pride to put out postcards, Cairo’s images touted its agriculture and pastoral landscapes as well as its county-seat role that underpinned an increasingly diverse economy that also included fishing and forestry.

In 2019 the us Postal Service stepped again into the town’s story when it issued a centennial commemorative stamp in honor of the birth, on January 31, 1919, of the town’s best-known son, Jack “Jackie” Roosevelt Robinson, who in 1947 made us sports history as the first Black athlete to play major league baseball in the modern era.

Still considered rural 150 years after its birth, Cairo today boasts an active public library, a history museum, and a restored movie theater that claims to be Georgia’s oldest. With 9,607 people counted in the 2010 census, it is the largest Cairo in the us. It is increasingly tied to Tallahassee, the capital of Florida 50 kilometers to the south.



— D-1



SUMATRA TOBACCO UNDER SHADE, SUGAR HILL PLANTATION, CAIRO, GA.  
 PUB. BY WIGHT & BROWN, CAIRO, GA.



C-6 SEEDLING PECAN TREE MORE THAN 100 YEARS OLD, CAIRO, GA.

E. 9310



Lake Limonia near Cairo, Ga.

Pub. by Grady Pharmacy, Cairo, Ga.

OPPOSITE (2): JONATHAN FRIEDLANDER



## *Greetings from Cairo, West Virginia*

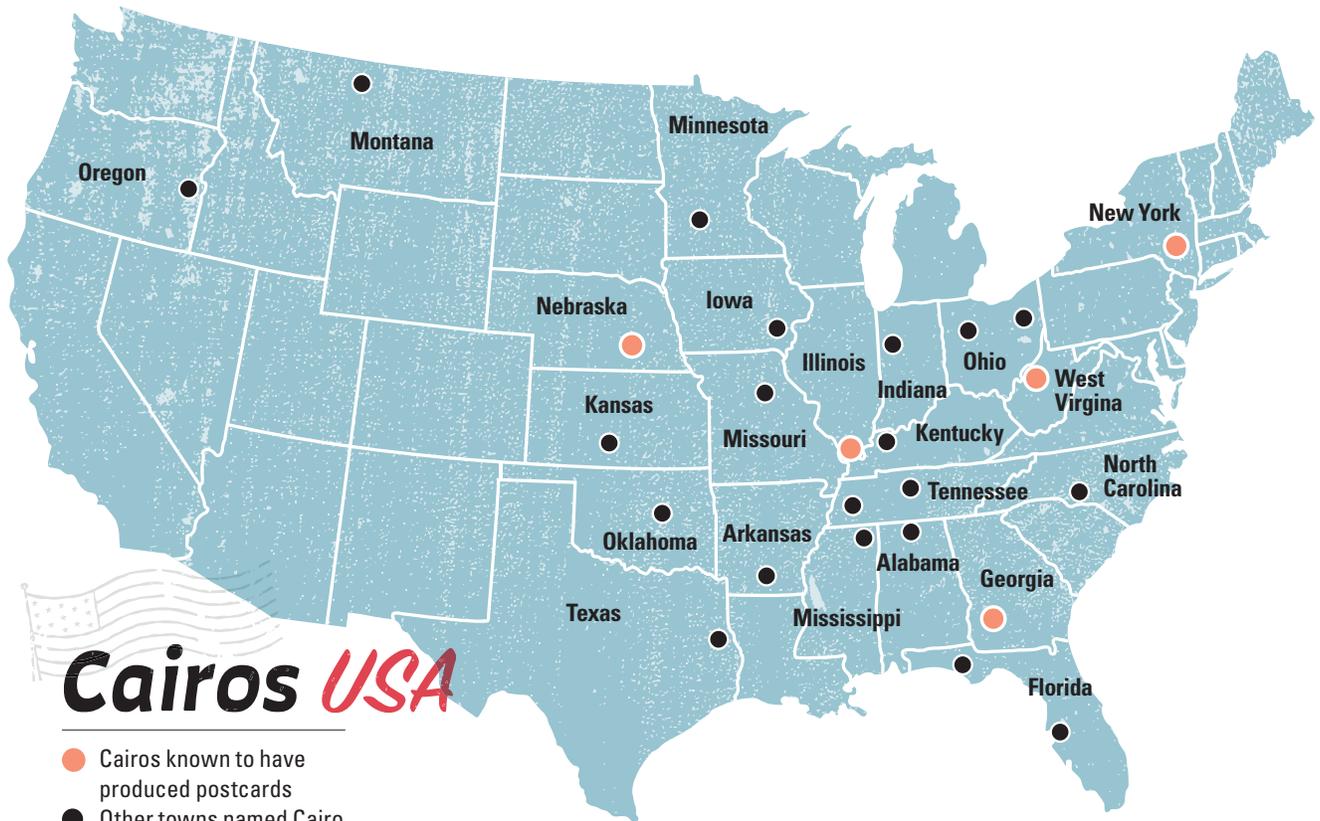
The Cairo I remember was tidy, houses were neat, lawns were trimmed, gardens were large and behind every house. People all knew each other, talked about each other, and were quick to help or support one another.

—Dean Six, co-founder of the Ritchie County Historical Society

**W**ith a population of around 300 today, Cairo, West Virginia, perches amid the gentle hills along the North Fork of the Hughes River. It's a region that was inhabited by Iroquois and Shawnee peoples until the 17th century, when diseases came in advance of settlers, and conflict with other tribes and settlers followed. The town's formal history



**Top:** Printed in the early 1900s when its population stood below 700, this view of Cairo, West Virginia, shows a road-surfacing crew lined up across the railroad tracks that ran down Main Street. Behind the men stands one of the oil derricks that proliferated then in this part of the state. **Center:** In the 1940s, colorfully pastoral images such as this scene made popular postcards. On the back of this one, the sender noted, "The folks here just rec'd a telegram that their son in the army ... will be home on a short furlough." **Left:** Taken between 1896 and 1912, this photo of the Cairo baseball team was made into a postcard, too.



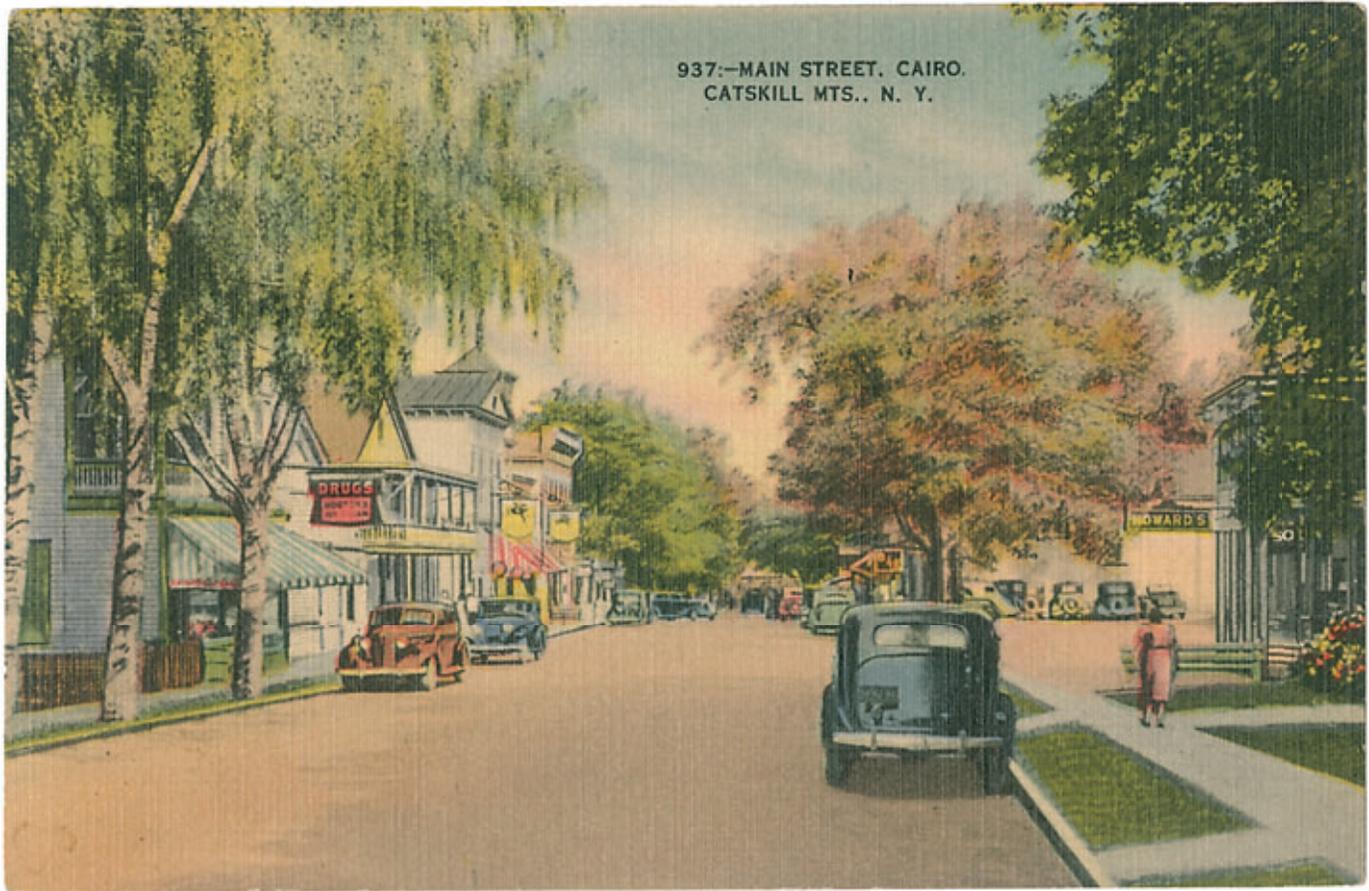
began in 1856, when it became a railroad station along the B&O (Baltimore and Ohio) Railroad line. Its first settlers, all Scotch Presbyterians, gave it the name, having found the river ample and the soil good. Just a few years later, oil and gas were discovered below the topsoil, and postcards from the late 19th and early 20th centuries show Cairo speckled with the towers of wooden oil rigs. The town was incorporated in 1895, during the height of the West Virginia oil boom, which supported the town's two banks, two hotels and two oil and gas companies. There was also a post office, a planing mill, feed stores and sundry other concerns including an opera house that cost \$1,500 to build. Not bad for a town that at its peak in 1910 counted a population of just 668.

The oil boom faded with World War I and the development of more productive and accessible wells. A world war later, a new industry came to Cairo: marbles. The local sand, it turned out, was ideal for glassmaking, and the natural gas to melt it was similarly plentiful. In 1946 Oris G. Hanlon built the Cairo Novelty Company, which produced distinctively colorful glass marbles known as West Virginia Swirls, among them a popular brand called Cairo Christmas. Just four years later though, a flood destroyed the factory, and today, marble collectors still come to scour the site in hopes of finding overlooked, original marbles. Likewise, a steady stream of hikers, cyclists and horse riders frequent the tranquil town while trekking the winding, scenic, 116-kilometer North Bend Rail Trail.

Stamped and sent from Cairo August 25, 1911, this card's fanciful, collaged image and inscription hints at the fascination of the emerging technology of radio. On the back, however, the sender's alarming message noted that "Maggie's oldest boy has typhoid fever."



OPPOSITE, LOWER: ALBERT EWING / OHIO HISTORY CONNECTION / JONATHAN FRIEDLANDER



## *Greetings from Cairo, New York*

Pristine beauty, clean air and sparkling streams continue to draw visitors and new residents alike... The town is amid a growth phase propelled by a resilient and creative citizenry.

—Sylvia Hasenkopf, president, Cairo Historical Society

**I**n roquois and Esopus peoples once fished in the streams, hunted in the forested hills and farmed in what, shortly after the American Revolution ended in 1783, became a new home for some 200 New Englanders moving westward in quest of opportunities. Around this time, the Susquehanna Turnpike opened along the Catskill mountains on the west side of the Hudson River, presaging today's tollways by charging for the movement of goods and people headed to and from upstate and western New York. The settlement that in 1808 became the first Cairo in the newly independent United States of America quickly profited from this prime location by offering the travelers

Two views of Main Street show Cairo, New York's prosperity as the street became improved from the unpaved, rutted track at **center** to the wide, paved thoroughfare in the linen-textured postcard, probably from the 1940s, at **top**. Cairo's distance from New York City made it an ideal weekend trip for city dwellers of the time. **Right**: A postcard shows harness racing at the track and fairgrounds that began hosting the county fair in 1870, where racing continued until 1961.



hospitality and a variety of roadside services.

Local history maintains that it was businessman Ashbel Stanley who christened it Cairo in honor of its Egyptian namesake and in hopes the name would conjure beneficial associations. The population grew steadily over the 19th century amid an economy based on small family businesses in town and farms set amid the richly arable land of stream-fed valleys. In 1910, 1,841 heads were counted in the census; a century later there were 6,670, and projections for 2030 estimate there could be 9,000.

At about 200 kilometers due north from Times Square in New York City, Cairo's rolling Catskill and Hudson Valley scenery proved a tonic to those city dwellers who could afford a getaway to the country and summer fun and entertainment with family and friends. Looking to supplement the income derived from agriculture, farmers began to accommodate boarders. This proved profitable, and it set off a boom in residents converting homes into boarding houses. Some gave up farming altogether to turn their land into full-fledged resorts. The peak of the town's leisure economy came in the 1920s and 1930s, as reflected by the many idyllic postcards depicting scenic environs. Today, the town of Cairo sports five major resorts along with a host of small bed-and-breakfasts and vacation homes that lure 21st-century travelers with farm-to-table menus, personal hiking guides, forest yoga and—always for free—fresh, clean air.

**Right:** Postmarked in 1905, this early color postcard was made by hand-tinting a black-and-white original, and its scene hints at the summer recreation that attracted visitors to Cairo.

**Lower:** Similarly hand-colored and captioned "Polly's Rock, Cairo, Catskill Mountains," this radiantly warm postcard image evokes the romanticism of the region's Hudson River School of landscape painting.



## Greetings from Cairo, Nebraska

We lost our grocery store about 10 years ago, so we shop in the nearby town of Grand Island ... yet families have moved here to take advantage of the excellent education afforded by our schools. At heart, it remains a quaint, quiet, and safe community that forges lasting bonds and friendships moved by the spirit of voluntarism.

—Suzie English, volunteer, Cairo Roots Research Museum

In 1872 six men left Kentucky and joined the wave of settlers heading west to claim land on the plains of Nebraska. Pawnee tribes, pressured from the north by rival tribes and from the east by the settlers, had recently ceded eastern Nebraska and, increasingly destitute, were beginning to migrate south to reservations in Kansas. It was in this former Pawnee heartland, west of Omaha and not far from the new Grand Island and Wyoming Central Railroad line, the men from Kentucky found their land. Others came, too, and in 1886, town historians say a railroad survey engineer peered across the vast prairie and remarked that to him it looked like the Sahara, “so why not call it Cairo, only he pronounced it *Karo*, and that’s how it is known today,” notes the town’s centennial history, *Cairo Community Heritage 1886-1986*.

By 1900 Cairo had a population of 200, a school, a general

## MIDDLE EASTERN NAMES in the United States

More than 100 localities throughout the us took on names from the Middle East. Many came from Biblical references (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania) and others from Moorish Spain (Alhambra, California). Many were named after cities: Algiers, Bagdad, Carthage, Damascus, Ephesus, Mecca, Medina, Memphis, Nazareth, Palestine, Palmyra and Tripoli. Others were named after countries or regions: Morocco, New Canaan, Palestine and more than a dozen Lebanons—and on and on. All but one of them are geographical names: Only Elkader, Iowa, platted in 1846, is named after an Arab person, Emir Abdelkader al-Jazairi, renowned Algerian anti-colonialist and, later, world-acclaimed peacemaker.

store, two churches, two banks, a brick factory, a flour mill, a lumber yard, an ice plant, a saloon, stables, a confectionary, a modest opera house and a sprinkler wagon to water down the dirt streets when they got dusty. Which was often: One visitor noted that when it was incorporated as a village in 1892, Cairo was referred

With a collage of the town’s buildings, including the high school, two churches, the railroad station and the main street, the sender of this card used its back to write, “It is so hot and dry if it does not rain soon the corn crop will be gone.”





Main Street's wide and often dusty expanse appears even greater in this card that posed unidentified sisters on it. The street was intersected by others named after places in the Middle East—the only Cairo in the us to do so. **Center:** This tree-lined road and the verdant fields beyond may be from another place or entirely fanciful, yet it is stamped at the bottom "Cairo, Nebr." **Lower:** Today the town's welcome sign echoes its far-away Egyptian origin with a silhouette pyramid and a metal camel sculpture.

to as "an oasis in the bosom of the Great American Desert." It was, the village history records, "a lady at the Lincoln Land Company" who built on the Egyptian name by labeling the original map with street names Egypt, Mecca, Medina, Nile, Suez, Thebes, Nubia and Said as well as Syria, Oasis, Harb and Berber. In the early 20th century, Cairo was flourishing enough to publish a modest handful of picture postcards. In 1910 the population had risen to 364. After World War II it topped 500, and today stands just under 800.

To this day, it is the only Cairo in the us that continues to play on its namesake. It still proclaims itself "The Oasis of the Prairie," and it welcomes traffic with a roadside silhouette of a pyramid and a nearly life-size metal sculpture of a camel, which stand alongside a baseball

diamond and, beyond it, fields of corn, wheat and alfalfa.

The railroad tracks that prompted Cairo's founding, owned now by the Burlington Northern Santa Fe line, clatter day and night with freight trains up to 200 boxcars long, ferrying coal, oil, lumber and, on Sunday mornings, aircraft fuselages. But no passenger trains stop in Cairo anymore. ☹



**Jonathan Friedlander** ([friedlander.jonathan@gmail.com](mailto:friedlander.jonathan@gmail.com)) is a historian, author and photographer, as well as an avid collector of Middle Eastern Americana. Formerly assistant director of the Center for Near Eastern Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, he works with the Department of Special Collections at the university's Young Research Library. His collection can be accessed at [www.oac.cdlib.org](http://www.oac.cdlib.org).



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us Mideast names: Nov / Dec 1994



# Of Spice, Home, and **BIRYANI**

I have never had real biryani. I have been told this by a Pakistani cab driver, an Afghani baker, an Indian writer, an Emirati student and other self-proclaimed authorities on the relationship of rice, meat, vegetables and spices. I concede that in one sense they are right. I didn't grow up with biryani, and for those who have, the only real biryani is the one made in his or her own city, neighborhood or, more likely, family kitchen. Biryani's power lies not only in its wildly diverse, complex flavors

Written by **ALIA YUNIS**

that make first-timers wonder what they have been missing all their lives, but also in its connection to place, perhaps even more so in an era when so many of us live far from where we grew up.

Case in point: Bilal Lakhani, a columnist for Pakistan's *Express Tribune*, grew up in Karachi, on the coast, and he went to business

school at age 18 in Lahore, in the northeast. He recalls how at the time he and his Karachi buddies were really missing biryani. Having little money, they thought they would find a wedding to crash because weddings, he says, is where you can always find biryani. Pretending, as needed, to be friends of one family or the other, they staked out a wedding and got in the food line.

“Our daring plan was a disaster,” Lakhani recalls. “The biryani didn’t have *aloo* (potatoes)! How can you have biryani without *aloo*? That’s an abomination.”

He speaks like a poet of the savory spices that infuse *aloo* in a good biryani, yet in other places—such as Lahore—the very presence of *aloo* is, well, anti-biryani. The feelings run deep.

A common biryani origin story begins in the early 1600s with Mumtaz Mahal, wife of Mughal emperor Shahab-ud-din Muhammad Khurram, better known as Shah Jahan. While visiting soldiers at their barracks and seeing them underfed, the story goes, she ordered the cooks to prepare a dish of rice and meat, which they prepared over a wood fire with aromatic spices. “Soldiers had to have their stomachs filled to have the energy to fight,” says Chef Raman Khanna, who learned to cook biryani in the 1980s at the Oberoi Hotel in New Delhi alongside the Oberoi

For Bilal Lakhani, who grew up in Karachi and went to school in Lahore, Pakistan, the only “awesome” biryani he has found in the us is a Hyderbadi chicken concoction served up at Bawarchi Biryanis in Jersey City, NJ. **Opposite:** A biryani street vendor does brisk business outside the Jama Masjid in New Delhi.

“When I think of making it or even eating it, the fundamental thing about biryani is that it speaks to love, time, patience... That is why it is such a celebratory dish.”  
—Sumayya Usmani

family’s personal chef, Baba Lul. The way the legends go, he says, “at night, military cooks would prepare a big pot of meat and rice and bury it and place coals on top. The next day, the soldiers who survived would come back and dig out the pot and eat.”

The general speculation about the dish’s origins among chefs and food historians includes a belief that Ottoman allies of the Mughals brought pilaf (rice with meat and other ingredients) to the subcontinent, where chefs infused it with local spices and experimented with its method of cooking. Others maintain that a more sophisticated version of the soldiers’ cooking was already popular with the the Mughals themselves when they came from Persia to what is now Afghanistan and that the spice trade that so enriched India’s ports also gave birth to biryani’s flavors. From the imperial palace to the estates of local landowners, those who could afford it employed cooks who refined and even personalized the dish with combinations of saffron, cardamom, rosewater and a host of other spices and aromatics.

“That’s why there is always this feeling of something royal in eating biryani,” says Khanna.

Two fundamental cooking methods for biryani emerged from the palaces of two regions of India.

The first is Kucchi biryani, which is considered Hyderabad-style, he explains. Here, raw meat is marinated for hours, placed in a *dum* (pot), “layered with rice in varying degrees of doneness” and then steamed.

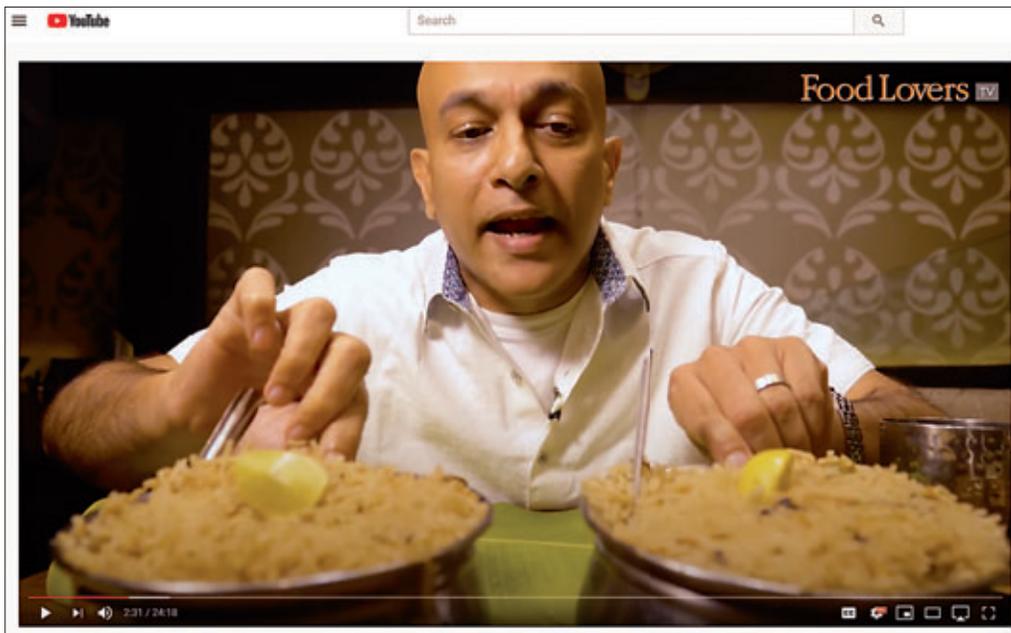
“The flavors rise and impregnate the rice,” says Kripal Amanna, host of the YouTube show, Food Lovers TV.

The second is Pukki biryani, which is considered Lucknow-style. “Meat and spices are cooked separately until almost done, then layered with rice that is almost cooked, then placed on the *dum*.”

In both, the biryani is made with equal parts meat and rice, and in the case of potato biryani, 25 percent meat and 25 percent potato, according to Lakhani’s mother, Najma Rafiq. Traditionally, the top of the *dum* is lined with dough before ingredients are placed inside, and then the biryani takes a half hour to an hour to cook, depending on the size of the pot and biryani type, she says.

Khanna adds that regional biryani chefs may top the pots with





“I could easily do 200 episodes on biryani across India and not repeat a particular style,” says Kripal Amanna, host of *Food Lovers TV* on YouTube, which has featured biryanis from across India. On a recent live webcast, discussing with viewers what makes a biryani, he kept the peace by assuring his audience that “every layered preparation, which is rice, meat and sometimes vegetables, is a biryani—whether you like it or not.”

aggressive onion, garlic and ginger, which let the other spices play second fiddle.”

The variations of these two methods have expanded across the subcontinent.

Amanna has filmed 25 shows that revolve around biryani, but that’s not nearly enough, he says.

“Biryani travels every 100 kilometers that you travel. I could easily do 200 episodes on biryani across India and not repeat a particular style,” he says.

He finds the best way to encounter new biryani culinary styles is when he’s traveling by motorcycle.

“You have to take a break every 100 or 150 kilometers. So, you stop and take in the sights and the aromas. You smell some rice and you follow it,” he says, pointing out how this method has allowed him to access hundreds of biryani establishments and recipe variations.

Amanna favors family-owned restaurants that have been making biryani for decades, if not more than a century, including the Rahamaniya Biryani Hotel in Ambur in the state of Tamil Nadu,

coal, wood embers, charcoal or coconut husk, creating additional flavors specific to each region.

“The beauty of this in the Nizam and Nawab Palaces was that when the biryani was ready, the dough was lifted off and the whole dining room was filled with the aroma of the spices. That revelation is what made it into a signature item of India,” Khanna says.

In Lucknow, some versions cook the rice in milk, says Amanna, which makes it “subtler in their flavor notes.”

“The Hyderabad biryani is a brash, grab-your-palate biryani, whereas the Lucknow biryani is shy and more demure. You have to make more of an effort to know it,” Amanna says, explaining also how the Lucknow versions include essences like pandan extract that enhance aroma. “They are like a lady splashing on some perfume, as opposed to that robust Hyderabad biryani with its

## BIRYANI by Region

Area	Variables	Meat	Add-Ons
Hyderabad	Saffron, coconut	Chicken or vegetarian	Onion, curd, raita
Kerala	Cashews, exotic nuts, coconut	Chicken	Red chile chutney, raw mango, boiled egg
Lucknow	More colorful, spicier than other biryanis	Chicken, mutton	Onion, curd, raita
Kolkata	Rose water, egg, potato, papaya	Mutton marinated in yogurt, creating a curry	Boiled eggs, fried onions
Pakistan	Orange or yellow color added for brightly colored rice; <i>kewra</i> or saffron essence	Chicken, mutton, beef, seafood, legumes	fried onion, mint, coriander, boiled eggs, fried raisins and nuts.

*This is not an exhaustive list.*



which adds homemade curd to the meat and spices. He also highlights the Shivaji Military Hotel in Bangalore, where every day about 200-300 kilograms of meat are turned into *donner* (boat) biryani, which is served in a banana leaf basket that softens to flavor the dish.

Long before the motorcycle, there were ships, and that is how spices came to the Indian subcontinent, often via Arab traders. Pakistani cookbook author Sumayya Usmani spent much of her childhood on the ship her father captained, and her first memory of biryani is her mother stirring together the ingredients in an electric frying pan in the boat's galley kitchen. Traveling by sea, Usmani's mother took short cuts with the dish to preserve the limited number of ingredients that could survive the long journeys. Preparing biryani at sea also offered opportunities to add squid, mussels and prawns. Seafood variations often include a green masala of mint, coriander and chilis.

"When I think of making it or even eating it, the fundamen-



In Islamabad, Pakistan, a street vendor ladles freshly steamed biryani from a deep, wide pot called a *dum*. **Left:** Rolling rice and meat with the right hand is the traditional way to dine on biryani at the Original Haji Biryani in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

India—is the most traditional for biryani, but lamb and chicken are also used. In India's south, in the state of Kerala, beef biryani is also a specialty. Kerala's biryani was also much influenced by centuries of trade with the Arabian Gulf.

I asked Khanna, who has catered biryanis for royal weddings and VIP events in the UAE for a decade, including cooking the dish in the middle of the desert for 2,500 people during the first World Cup of Horse Racing, why so many people in the Gulf think of biryani as a local dish.

"The spices and rice came to India through the Arabian trade routes, and we brought them back as biryani," he says, noting that many chefs throughout the Arabian Peninsula hail from Kerala.

The dish continues to vary through time and across regions depending on environment, culture and availability (or lack) of ingredients. With some 30 percent of India eating vegetarian diets—and the popularity of meatless recipes in restaurants worldwide—meatless biryani is increasingly acceptable to biryani purists. But it comes with challenges: Vegetables, Ammana says, struggle to survive the heat of the dum. There are solutions though, like frying the vegetables first or adding them in at the end.

"The beautiful thing about biryani is that everyone can stake claim to it," he says. "Biryani is one of the very few dishes in which people across the world can say, 'This is our biryani.' Everyone can make it their own." 🌐

tal thing about biryani is that it speaks to love, time, patience," Usmani tells me. "That is why it is such a celebratory dish."

Usmani now lives in Scotland, where she teaches others to make biryani, including her 11-year-old daughter. Her own mother, Usmani says, taught her to use only basmati rice aged one to two years, because it fluffs, separates and tastes better.

"My mother has drilled this in my head. Unless your rice, after cooking, isn't as long as one segment of your finger, it's not worth cooking," she says, laughing.

Khanna, too, agrees the best biryani cooking class is in a family kitchen.

"Indian chefs do not like to share their recipes," Khanna says, remembering his early cheffing days at the Oberoi Hotel working for chef Lul. "I had to peel up to 60 kilos of onions every day and pound pastes until my knuckles actually bled in order to get his trust."

Khanna says the two most important things he learned from Lul were to grind the spices the day they're used and to wash the rice several times, whether short- or long-grained, so that every single grain will stay separated when cooked.

Meat also varies by region. Goat—often called mutton in



**Alia Yunis**, a writer and filmmaker based in Abu Dhabi, recently completed the documentary film, *The Golden Harvest*. Her favorite biryani is Lucknow-style with lamb.



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# THE STAYING POWER OF 4STAY

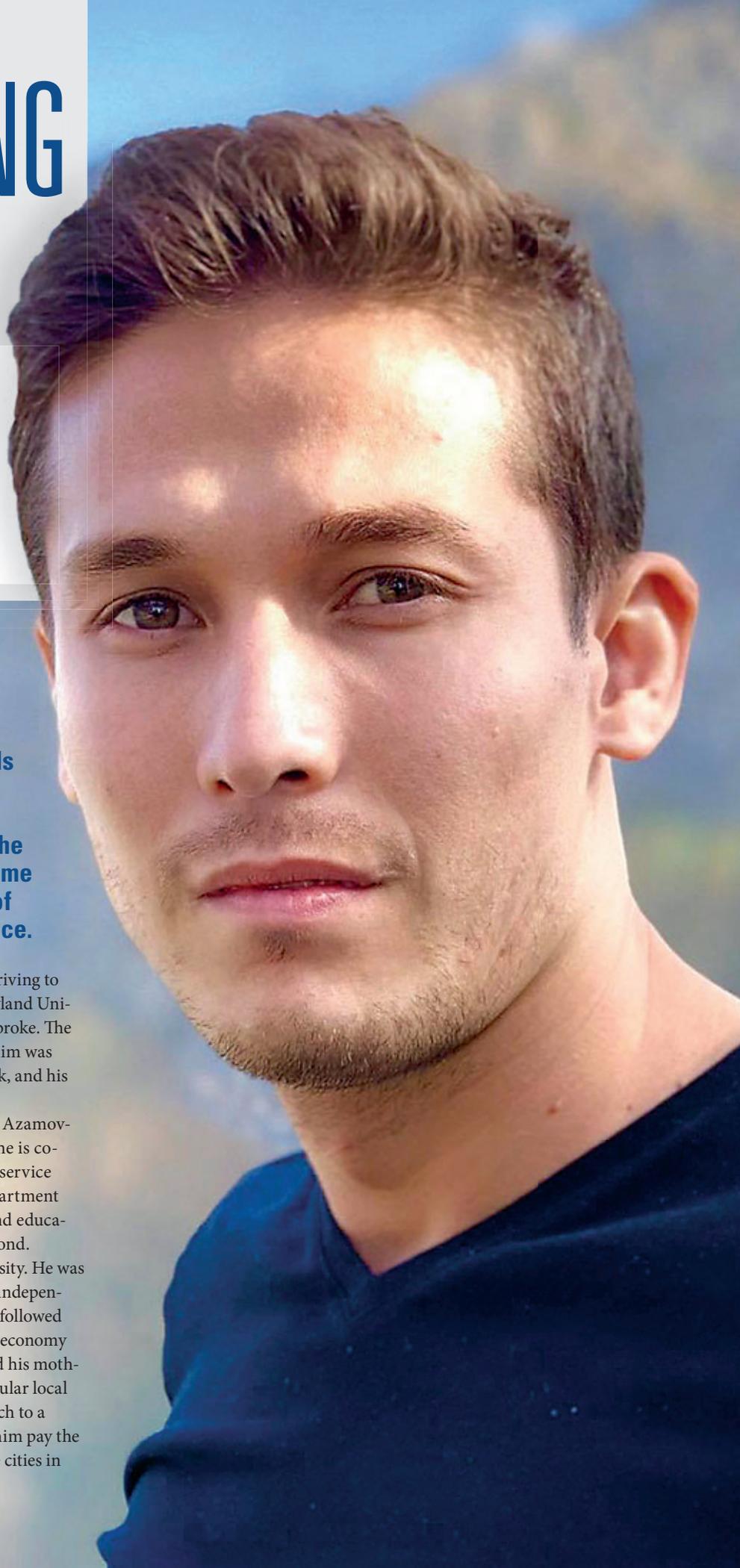
WRITTEN BY LARRY LUXNER

**Gazing across the Potomac River at Washington, DC's low skyline, Akobir Azamovich Akhmedov recalls that at first, the scene made him homesick for the Syr Darya, along whose banks in 329 BCE Alexander the Great established what would become Khujand, the second-largest city of Tajikistan and Azamovich's birthplace.**

He was 18, he says, and three months after arriving to take English classes at Notre Dame of Maryland University in Baltimore, he was already nearly broke. The few thousand dollars he had brought with him was going fast. His student visa didn't allow him to work, and his family was not in a position to help.

"I had no idea where I was going to sleep," says Azamovich, who prefers to use his middle name. Now 30, he is co-founder and CEO of the fast-rising online housing service 4stay, which specializes in furnished room and apartment rentals on flexible terms, especially for students and educational institutions in the US and, increasingly, beyond.

Azamovich, however, had grown up amid adversity. He was 2 years old in 1991, the year Tajikistan achieved its independence as the Soviet Union was dissolving. This was followed by a seven-year civil war, during which Tajikistan's economy collapsed. After the war, his father, an engineer, and his mother, a seamstress, worked hard and invested in a popular local furniture business. It was enough to send Azamovich to a private school in Khujand, but not enough to help him pay the rents in Washington, DC, one of the most expensive cities in



the country. Yet he credits his parents' resilience during their crises with fueling his own resolve.

Soon he found a way to sell toys and Christmas ornaments at a nearby mall. Then he worked at a pizza shop for minimum wage. He worked on his English, and he cut his expenses by transferring to Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA). He struggled to make ends meet and pursue his studies for three years.

One evening during Ramadan in August 2010, Azamovich attended a neighborhood *iftar*, or fast-breaking dinner. Also attending was NOVA Vice President Paul McVeigh, who told Azamovich he was looking to hire recruiters to bring more students to the college from Central Asia. Would Azamovich be interested in drafting a proposal for the job?

Azamovich invited a friend from high school who had also come to NOVA, Faridun Nazarov, to collaborate. McVeigh took them on, and they soon began helping prospective students from not only Tajikistan but also Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan come to the college.

He earned enough to rent a two-bedroom apartment. There, he realized that with the landlord's approval, he could sublease the extra room. This he says was the idea that ultimately led to 4stay: a furnished room he could rent out with no separate deposit, no separate utilities—no surprise costs, and only for the time needed.

Azamovich and Nazarov began connecting the students they were recruiting with furnished rooms for rent, and they soon founded STP (Studying The Planet) Housing Solutions. Word spread, and they also began helping students from Africa, Europe and other parts of Asia come to schools in 15 states. They were finally making enough money to cover more than their own rents.

"We tried to rent out empty spaces using Airbnb. I also used Craigslist and business-to-business partnerships, targeting students and scholars and filling that gap for medium and long-term housing," he says.

He earned his associate degree in business from NOVA in 2012 and transferred to Strayer University for a bachelor's degree in economics with a minor in information technology. He graduated in 2015.

STP, too, was finished.

"It couldn't be sustained," he says, mostly due to the lack of flexibility in the lease terms of its rentals.

"I failed four times," he says. "However, all those mistakes became an asset for me, as experience."

In 2017 Azamovich put up \$150,000 of his own cash to launch 4stay.com as a flexible-terms online marketplace designed to connect students to furnished apartments or rooms in multifamily settings, family homes or apartments, all on terms that avoided upfront security deposits while providing renters' insurance and utilities.

Today, 4stay boasts more than 200,000 listings, 80 percent in the us. The company has relationships with more than 400 mostly educational institutions, including 260 colleges and universities. Among 4stay's corporate backers are Lehman Brothers, Dropbox and PayPal. His revenue scheme is a simple 10 percent fee per transaction.

This year, when COVID-19 hit and sank reservations on major hotel and private accommodation sites such as Booking.com and Airbnb, 4stay has remained above water thanks to its focus on medium- and long-term accommodations.

"We are literally left with almost no competition," says Azamovich.

Other online businesses that serve a similar population, such as Off Campus Partners and MyRentHero, are doing reasonably well also. Azamovich credits 4stay's flexible, one-stop approach as key to its growing edge in the industry, but also calls attention to the company's core commitments "to take care of students," and now to connect and pair them with "older generations unable to pay for the constantly increasing costs of living alone."

At present, 4stay has fewer than 20 employees, most of whom work from home, and last year the company clocked \$26 million in booking requests. It has also raised more than \$1.7 million from angel investors. Its recent partnerships include New York's Columbia University, the Kaplan International chain of language schools and StudyPA, which runs on- and off-campus housing for state universities throughout Pennsylvania.

Syedur Rahman, NOVA's current vice president who manages the international student program formerly headed by McVeigh, describes Azamovich as a "young but very enterprising young man" who helped NOVA expand its program quickly and efficiently.

"We take a lot of underserved and underrepresented students and make them aspire to dream big," Rahman says. "Akobir was one of those students. He took the initiative and expanded it into a major operation."

"We take a lot of underserved and underrepresented students and make them aspire to dream big," Rahman says. "Akobir was one of those students. He took the initiative and expanded it into a major operation."

In addition to life as a busy, young CEO these days, Azamovich has worked with the Tajik-American Cultural Association—a non-profit he helped establish in 2012—to provide medical supplies, food relief and education to people in need in Tajikistan through MoBo-Vatanem (We Stand with our Motherland), administered through the Embassy of Tajikistan in Washington, DC. It's from these good deeds, as his late father once advised him, that the "blessing of others will flourish you, like the water flourishes a flower."

The Potomac River can still remind Azamovich of the Syr Darya and of one of his earliest dreams, "to serve humanity through technology." It took, he says, "perseverance and desire—qualities you get from your parents." With that, he reminds himself and others to "follow your heart and prove to yourself that you can accomplish your goals while doing what you like." 🌐

I failed four times. . . .  
However, all those  
mistakes became  
an asset for me as  
experience.

—Akobir Azamovich



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# THE DIALOGUES OF DON QUIXOTE

**Several chapters into Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, the fictional narrator takes a hard detour from the action, in which the hapless hero has been battling windmills and other imaginary foes on the rolling plains of La Mancha, and deposits the reader in the city of Toledo's central marketplace, the Alcaná.**

**F**our centuries later, I wandered the labyrinthine streets of Toledo's old quarter and ended up, like most pedestrians, in the Alcaná, a name that comes from the Arabic *al-janat*, meaning “the (market) stands.” It is still a bustling center of commerce, and a plaque, inconspicuously tucked beneath a second story window, commemorates the spot's connection to *Don Quixote*. Along my way, I passed historic city gates and buildings awash in horseshoe arches, decorative tiles and intricate plasterwork, all reflecting the medieval and early Renaissance Christian enthusiasm for designs that flourished in al-Andalus, or Muslim Spain. Overshadowing the lot loomed the massive profile of Toledo Cathedral, a glorious synthesis of Gothic and Islamic architectural styles. During the 12th and 13th centuries, Jewish, Muslim, and Christian scholars from various parts of Europe flocked here to translate philosophical and scientific works from classical Arabic into Latin, Hebrew, Ladino

*Written and photographed by* TOM VERDE

(Judeo-Spanish) and vernacular Castilian. Centered in and around the cathedral cloister, the collective effort gained fame as Toledo's “School of Translators.”

Given this long multilingual and multinational history, it comes as no surprise that Cervantes chose Toledo for what happens next in the novel. Stumbling upon an intriguing Arabic manuscript being sold for scrap among the Alcaná's warren of shops, the narrator seeks out a translator. Upon locating an obliging, Castilian-speaking *Morisco*—a descendent of Spanish Muslims forcibly converted to Christianity—he learns the author of the text is a fictional Arab historian named Cide Hamete Benengeli.

Here, as he does elsewhere, Cervantes signals links to Arab-Moorish identities. Cide is equivalent to Señor, derived from the Arabic *sayyid*, meaning “sir.” Hamete comes from Hamid, a popular Arab name. Benengeli, or *berenjena* in Spanish, means “eater of eggplant,” a vegetable associated with the diets of both *Moriscos* and *Conversos*, Spanish Jews who were

likewise forced to convert. The narrator is further delighted to learn the manuscript is entitled *History of Don Quixote of La Mancha*, a purportedly historical account of the very book the narrator has been, thus far in the novel, describing to the reader.

Paying for the manuscript with a half-*reale* coin, the narrator then retires with the interpreter to the cathedral cloister and has him translate more. Ultimately, he hires the *Morisco* to spend the next month and a half under his roof, translating “the entire history, just as it is related here.”

So from this point on, the primary narrator of one of Western literature's seminal masterpieces—a work the

In Toledo's historic central marketplace, the Alcaná, a small plaque notes the location's importance in the novel *El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha* (*The Ingenious Nobleman Don Quixote of La Mancha*). This statue of author Miguel de Cervantes, **opposite**, stands near the notorious alley between the former Inquisition prison and the former Royal Jail where it is thought Cervantes, while held there, began composing his manuscript, which he holds inscribed with its famous opening line, “*En un lugar de La Mancha*” (“Somewhere in La Mancha”).





In 1613, two years before Cervantes published Part Two of *Don Quixote*, artist Pere Oromig finished *Embarkation of Moriscos in the Grao of Valencia*, one of several paintings depicting Spain's expulsions of Moriscos. **Lower:** Title page to the first edition of Part One of *Don Quixote*, published in 1605, now part of the collection of Spain's national library, the Biblioteca Nacional de España.

late literary critic Harold Bloom identified as the world's "first modern novel"—is in fact an Arab chronicler. While a figment of Cervantes' imagination, Cide Hamete Benengeli is equally the product of Spanish literary, political and cultural history. He is also not the only character with Muslim roots to appear in the novel. Throughout *Don Quixote*, Cervantes makes frequent references to Islamic culture, the Arabic language, and the longstanding relations that existed among Spain's various ethno-religious groups.

"The point Cervantes is making with the Morisco interpreter is that there are still people running around Toledo who know Arabic or Hebrew, and so he is pushing back against the idea that Spain has somehow become a purely Catholic country that doesn't bear traces of its long history of the presence of Jews and Muslims on the peninsula," Barbara Fuchs, professor of Spanish and English at UCLA, told me before I left for Spain. Controversially, Cervantes also took issue with the fate of the Moriscos, whose exile from the Iberian Peninsula in the early 17th century ended 900 years of *convivencia*, or coexistence. Yes, *Don Quixote* is a famously funny novel, Fuchs acknowledged. But it is also, in her opinion, "a very subversive book."

Published in two parts, in 1605 and 1615, *Don Quixote* was written during a turbulent era of deeply divided loyalties. After the Nasrid emirate of Granada, the Iberian peninsula's last Islamic kingdom, fell in 1492 to Spain's King Ferdinand II and Queen Isabella I, Muslims were initially promised they could continue their way of life "*para siempre jamás*," ("forever and ever"). But following local uprisings provoked by forced conversions and public burnings of the Qur'an, the Crown reneged.

Calamitously and practically overnight, Islam, Muslim dress, the Arabic language and even Arab names were outlawed. Muslims faced baptism as Christians, or exile. Many acquiesced to the former. They became "New Christians" and were labelled Moriscos, a pejorative indicating not only a former Muslim identity, but also inferior social status. Others defied the edict to varying degrees, outwardly professing conversion while covertly practicing Islam. These "crypto-Muslims" became a leading target of the church's Holy Office of the Inquisition, established under Ferdinand and Isabella. A second Morisco rebellion, from the Alpujarras mountains, in 1568 was brutally crushed and, in its aftermath, some 80,000 Moriscos were forcibly relocated north, mainly to the





Picturesque today, the village of Capileira in the Alpujarras mountains in southern Spain was one of the many remote refuges to which Moriscos fled following the Reconquista that ended Muslim rule in territories of what are today Spain and Portugal. In 1568, Capileira launched an unsuccessful rebellion that resulted in the forced relocations of some 80,000 Moriscos to provinces to the north, including La Mancha, where the story of Don Quixote begins.

provinces of La Mancha, New Castile and Extremadura.

“The official way of thinking was that Moriscos were traitors and that they were hiding their religion and culture from the authorities,” says Fernando Luis Fontes Blanco, director of Toledo’s Museo de Santa Cruz. “On the other hand, there was a lot of tolerance of the Moriscos, especially in La Mancha, where many Morisco families were able to integrate into society.”

At the same time, Spain was jockeying for New World dominance against a host of Old World colonialist rivals including England, France and The Netherlands, while waging war on European soil against all three. To the east, Spain faced Ottoman encroachment and hostility, especially to its maritime trade interests in the Mediterranean. The Crown’s fears of collusion (not entirely unfounded) among the Ottomans, European Protestants and aggrieved Moriscos meant the latter became an even greater target of suspicion and bigotry. This gave Spanish Christian nativists opportunities to spread rumors that all Moriscos not only imperilled national security but also threatened to overwhelm Spain’s *Cristiano Viejo* (Old Christian) majority and contaminate what they believed to be its purely Spanish-Christian *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood).

Between 1609 and 1614, over the objections of landowners who had come to rely on Morisco labor and even The Holy See, which regarded Moriscos as Christian souls, the Crown rounded up and

deported some 300,000 Moriscos. The Crown further decreed that children under 7 years of age should be separated from their families at the deportation centers and handed over to *Cristiano Viejo* families throughout Spain to be raised as domestic servants and Christians.

Like the times he lived in, Cervantes’ own relationship with Islam, Moriscos, and the idea of *limpieza de sangre* was complicated. He was born in 1547 in the university town of Alcalá des Henares in Castile, about 35 kilometers northeast of Madrid. He achieved fame, though not necessarily fortune, as a freelance writer, poet and playwright. Freelance writing being what it is

and always has been, he supplemented his income with stints as a farmer, accountant, bureaucrat, and tax collector, most of which proved dead ends. If there was one endeavor at which he excelled, aside from writing, it was doing time in jail.

In 1575, after fighting the Ottomans in the Mediterranean

crippled his left arm, Cervantes was captured by Barbary pirates. He endured five years in prison in Algeria, where he was beaten, tortured, and, after numerous unsuccessful attempts at escape, eventually ransomed and released. Yet in Algiers he also experienced another layer of multiethnic, multicultural existence, one in which Muslims, Jews and Christians were more or less coexisting—in contrast to what was happening back home in Spain.

“During his years in captivity ... [Cervantes] had the

**During his years in captivity ...  
[Cervantes] had the opportunity to  
get to know first-hand the life and  
customs of the Ottomans, of the  
Moors, of the Jews, of the renegades.**

—CELSA CARMEN GARCIA VALDÉS



The countryside of the province Castile-La Mancha is known for *molinos* (windmills), such as these south of Toledo in Consuegra. Built to grind grain, Don Quixote’s comical attempts to joust with them inspired today’s expression for battle against imaginary enemies, “tilting at windmills.” (*Tilting* was a synonym for jousting: See photo **opposite**.) The windmills at Consuegra are preserved as a historic site. **Lower:** Near Córdoba, another site of Don Quixote’s misadventures was this 14th-century inn, Posada del Potro, at which Cervantes stayed and called a “den of thieves.”

opportunity to get to know first-hand the life and customs of the Ottomans, of the Moors, of the Jews, of the renegades (and) of the Christian prisoners,” observed the University of Navarra’s Celsa Carmen García Valdés in her 2005 article, “Life and Literature: Tolerance in Cervantes’ Work.”

Back in Spain, Cervantes was jailed for embezzlement, a relatively understandable offense since skimming off the top was often the only way a collector of royal taxes could get paid. In between jail and work, he wandered: Rome, Madrid, Valladolid, and Esquivias in Castile-La Mancha, where he lived on his wife’s family farm with Moriscos as neighbors. He also spent time in Seville, where, in addition to working as a purchasing agent for the Armada, it is also said he began to write *Don Quixote*—in jail.

A plaque on the bank where the Royal Jail in Seville once stood commemorates the spot as the birthplace “for the amazement and delight of the world of the ingenious nobleman Don Quijote de La Mancha.” Opposite lurked the more menacing local prison run by the Inquisition. Upon his release, the story goes, Cervantes walked through the



alley separating the two jails, holding in his hand the first draft of his most famous work.

Gracious palm trees now shade a nearby bust of the author clutching a manuscript on which is inscribed the novel’s memorable opening line, “En un lugar de La Mancha” (“Somewhere in La Mancha”). I gave the statue a respectful nod on my way to meet with the University of Seville’s professor of Arab and Islamic Studies, Rafael Valencia, one of Spain’s most eminent scholars of al-Andalus. (Tragically, Valencia suffered a fatal heart attack just four months later.) We sat in a cafe sheathed in vibrant *azulejo* tiles, boisterous testaments to the city’s historic fame as a pottery and ceramics center. Traditionally produced by Moriscos just

across the Guadalquivir River in Triana, a busy commercial neighborhood, the tiles harken back to the multiculturalism of al-Andalus.

“An important thing to understand is that Cervantes and Don Quixote were living among two worlds. On the one hand, Don Quixote is the most Christian, the most Spanish figure in Spanish literature, but he is also the most open to the Moors, to the Arabs,” says Valencia.



Amid the four dozen tile and ceramic murals representing the provinces of Spain in Seville’s Plaza de España, these painted tiles from Ciudad Real show Don Quixote, in armor as the noble knight he fancied himself to be, preparing to battle windmills together with his squire Sancho Panza. The small banner at lower left quotes a boast from Don Quixote that translates, “I am going to engage them in fierce and unequal battle.” Scholars of Cervantes point out that beneath the comedic veneer, Cervantes used his absurd dualities—windmills as giants, country inns as castles (and a delusional man as a knight)—as foils for social commentary.

Cervantes, like his characters, may have occupied two worlds himself. Scholars speculate that he was perhaps of Converso ancestry. Even though he was a devoted Catholic, the Cervantes name was among those discovered in an official 15th-century document listing families with Converso bloodlines. His grandfather’s work in the cloth industry and his father’s profession as a barber and surgeon put them among trades dominated first by Jews and subsequently by Conversos. This background may have stymied Cervantes’ career, at least in the civil service, where ancestry carried political clout. Thus, his obsession with *limpieza de sangre* and the challenges and frustrations of what it is to live outside looking in—be it as a Converso, a Morisco or a silly old man who thinks he is a knight in armor—became important subtexts of *Don Quixote*.

“When the Moriscos were expelled by Philip III, Cervantes had to take the official position that they needed to be expelled. He never publicly objected to the edict. But secretly, he felt sorrow and sympathy for them,” says museum director Fontes Blanco.

When viewed from this angle, the dualities running throughout *Don Quixote*—where windmills are giants, country inns are castles and barber’s basins are magic helmets—shift from comic effects to social commentaries. Like the Moriscos, crypto-Muslims or any of those whose pedigrees were iffy, Cervantes, on a personal level, was aware of what it was to inhabit multiple worlds in an era dominated by a monolithic and orthodox Hispano-Christian ruling class that called all the shots. And what’s more, he decided to push back.

“What is original, what is the genius of *Don Quixote*, is that it wasn’t a work devised to protect the prerogatives of those in power. It was written to appeal to the maximum number of people and

offers a positive, sympathetic view of those on the margins of society,” said Cervantes scholar Jose Manuel Lucia Megias, professor of philology at the Complutense University of Madrid.

In Part Two of the novel, Cervantes dedicates Chapter 54 to





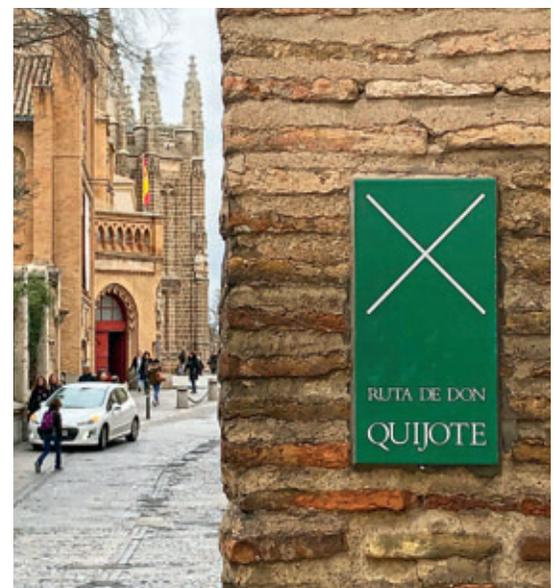
The 15th-century Castle of Belmonte in southwest Castile-La Mancha may have been something close to what was in Cervantes' mind when he wrote of Don Quixote gazing upon a rustic inn and imagining "a castle complete with four towers and spires of gleaming silver."

Moriscos, a chapter he composed even as the convulsive deportations were still taking place. Ricote, a wealthy Morisco and former neighbor of Don Quixote's companion Sancho Panza, has been expelled from the country, but he returns in disguise to retrieve some buried treasure he was forced to leave behind in Spain. (Again, Cervantes is playing with the names and language: *Ricote* translates as "rich man.") Ricote is noticed by

Sancho, who embraces him and expresses concern for his safety. "[I]f they catch and recognize you, it will go hard with you," Sancho warns his old friend. Later, Ricote tearfully recounts the injustice of the expulsions.

"You know very well, O Sancho Panza, my neighbor and friend, how the proclamation and edict of His Majesty issued against those of my race brought terror and fear to all of us," Ricote says. Yet despite the harshness of the edict, he concludes: "No matter where we are, we weep for Spain, for, after all, we were born here, and it is our native country."

**Left:** Bronze sculptures of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, by Madrid sculptor Pedro Requejo Novoa, welcome visitors to the museum of Cervantes' birthplace in Alcalá de Henares. **Lower:** A sign on a wall in Toledo indicates a point of interest along La Ruta de Don Quijote, which has been developed as a cultural tourism project linking nearly 150 municipalities and sites over 2,500 kilometers of historic roads throughout Castile-La Mancha.



As he speaks, Ricote gives voice to the hundreds of thousands of Moriscos who were similarly banished from what they considered to be their ancestral homes, an injustice Cervantes went out of his way to call out.

“Ricote is not necessary to the plot of the story, but Cervantes put him in there because he wanted to address the positive aspects of Moriscos, who have an important presence in the novel,” said Megias.

But with the Inquisition looking over the shoulders of writers during his era, Cervantes had to choose his words carefully to portray Moriscos in any positive light, often relying on double entendre and subtle, inside jokes.

When introducing us in Chapter 1 to the character of Alonso Quijana, the aging *hidalgo* whose immersion in too many “books of chivalry” delude him into believing he is a knight—Don Quixote de La Mancha—Cervantes catalogs the old fellow’s humble diet: hash most nights, the occasional stew, lentils on Fridays, and, on Saturdays, *duelos y quebrantos*.

This last phrase has posed particular challenges to translators. Literally, it means “trials and sorrows” or “trials and wounds,”

**It was written to appeal to the maximum number of people and offers a positive, sympathetic view of those on the margins of society.**

—JOSE MANUEL LUCIA MEGIAS

Christian *Reconquista* of the Iberian Peninsula from Muslim rule.

Yet, as scholars believe Cervantes was keenly aware, among Moriscos and Conversos, *duelos y quebrantos*, in the sense of “trials and sorrows,” was also a euphemism for bacon (or ham) and eggs. This staple fare among Christians in La Mancha was used as a way to force Moriscos and Conversos to prove the sincerity of their conversions by eating the dish in public—or face the Inquisition.

Such issues were on the mind of chef Paco Morales in 2016 when he opened the Noor restaurant in Córdoba. Offering diners modern interpretations of historic Andalusian dishes, the ingredients on Morales’ carefully curated menu all date to an age when what you ate (recall Cide Hamete’s cultural identification as an “eggplant eater”) pinpointed who and what you were.

“Food was an important part of culture and a way to manifest

of which Don Quixote certainly had his share. But it has also been variously interpreted as “scraps,” “tripe and trouble,” and “eggs and abstinence.” This last translation references Saturday Christian semi-fasts in Spain that commemorate the Spanish defeat of the Muslim Almo-hads at the Battle of Navas de Tolosa in 1212, which marked the beginning of the



## From Budget Book to Literary Landmark

**The first step in appreciating *Don Quixote* is to banish the entertaining but very loosely based Broadway musical *Man of La Mancha* from your head and dive into the real text.**

I did so in Madrid, at the national library, the Biblioteca Nacional de España, where a rare first edition lay open on a pillow display in the *Sala Cervantes*, the room dedicated to Cervantes. At first glance, it is easy to underestimate the volume’s pricelessness. About twice the size of a pocket dictionary, with a gilded red-leather binding (added later) and a Baroque title page, the book is nothing fancy, nor was it meant to be.

“This was made as a budget book. The paper quality is low, the ink quality is low, like a cheap paperback,” explained Marta Vizcaino Ruiz of the library’s Department of Early Books and Manuscripts as she leafed through the mildly mottled pages of one of the most treasured and valuable “cheap paperbacks” in the library’s collection, if not all of Spain. Because this first-run printing of several hundred copies was hastily rushed to press in January of 1605, it also features a lot of printing errors, or *errata* as they are called in the publishing business: more than 1,000, at a time when books typically might have had 150 or so.

The rush job wasn’t because publisher-bookseller Francisco de Robles of Madrid thought he had a blockbuster on his hands. It was because he had another book in production that he figured would sell many copies, and he wanted to get *Don Quixote* to market as quickly as possible. Neither he nor Cervantes anticipated the book’s popularity. It sold out almost immediately, compelling de Robles to come out with a second edition in August 1605 followed by a third in 1608. Outside Spain, translations of *Don Quixote* were published in Milan, Brussels, London and other cities throughout Europe where “Cervantes” became a household name. Fortune did not necessarily follow fame for the writer, however, since royalties were not a common practice in the 17th century, and in bookselling, most of the profits went into the pockets of the publishers.

It wasn’t long before *Don Quixote*’s success inspired pirate and even copycat editions. In 1614, a pseudonymous writer Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda (his identity remains a mystery) published an unauthorized sequel, and this prompted Cervantes to write and publish his own: This is what in 1615 became Part Two of

the *Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha*. Part Two did not sell quite as well, however, largely because the reading public, duped by the Avellaneda rip-off, thought the story had already been told.

The book has remained in continuous print ever since, and in 2002 it was ranked as the “single most important literary work in history” by Norway’s prize-giving Nobel Institute. Translated into no fewer than 50 languages, it has been read by some 500 million people, making it the best-selling novel in the history of publishing.

Full of misdirection, misadventures, romance, ribaldry and mayhem, it is also layered in comedy. Like his English contemporary William Shakespeare, Cervantes had a genius for narratives that appealed to multiple audiences on multiple levels.

“The book has over 700 characters, and you find every kind of person throughout society in its pages,” said Ruiz.

The delightful fact that there was something, and someone, in the book for everyone—from the lowliest muleteer to the noblest duchess—accounted for much of its popularity. So, too, did its setting: contemporary Spain. The public was used to tales of knights and dragons and heroes from the fabled and misty past. What they had never quite encountered before was a book about themselves. The modern novel was born.



In the stately farmhouse that served as Cervantes' inspiration for the home of Dulcinea de Toboso, the woman toward whom Don Quixote directed his romantic gaze, the *estrado* (dais), is among the rooms that have been restored according to their original 17th-century designs and furnishings. Here women would socialize, says museum director Fernando Luis Fontes Blanco, and the floor pillows and rugs show how "women sat in the Muslim fashion." Toboso was one of the many towns in Castile-La Mancha where forcibly relocated Moriscos settled. **Above:** In central Madrid, Cervantes lived at No. 2 on the street now called Calle Cervantes, although the building he inhabited was demolished in the 19th century. **Lower: In Memoriam:** Professor of history at the University of Seville, Rafael Valencia was one of Spain's most accomplished scholars of al-Andalus, or Muslim Spain. He passed away in June.



religious beliefs," Morales said as I sampled delicate eggplant fritters with cane honey, sautéed spinach and sheep-milk cheese with basil, and an emulsion of pistachio, smoked herring roe and green apple. While it all tasted heavenly now, it was the "devil's food" to the Inquisition owing to its historically Muslim associations.

"For example, we have on the menu a dish called *caldillo de perro* that in English means 'dog gravy.' This sauce, made with whiting and bitter orange, got this name because it was eaten by Muslims who the Christians called 'dogs,'" Morales said.

Moriscos indeed had to publicly endure *duelos y quebrantos* of many kinds. When the Morisco translator in Toledo's Alcaná randomly opens the pages of the manuscript by "Cide Hamete" and begins to translate for the first-person narrator, he is amused at a notation in the margin about one Dulcinea of Toboso. This is the high-society lady whom Don Quixote, in his distracted mind, has fabricated from the true object of his affection, a peasant woman named Aldonza Loronzo.

"This Dulcinea of Toboso ... they say has the best hand for salting pork of any woman in all of La Mancha," the Morisco reads aloud with a chuckle. The inside joke here is that Dulcinea/Aldonza is actually a Morisca whose reputation at curing ham was her way of deflecting suspicion away from her Muslim ancestry.

Toboso was one of the many towns in Castile-La Mancha where

significant numbers of relocated Moriscos settled in the wake of the 1568 rebellion. Once a busy commercial crossroads, today it is a sedate, agricultural town surrounded by livestock and vineyards. Dulcinea may have been based on the real-life Doña Ana Martínez Zarco de Morales, whose stately, 16th-century farmhouse is now the Dulcinea del Toboso House Museum, where Fontes Blanco also serves as director.

On a tour through the meticulously restored villa, filled to its exposed wooden ceiling beams with authentic 17th-century furniture, he guided me to the *estrado* on the second floor, where ladies

of the era would have gathered to talk, read, sew, and simply pass time sitting on a broad, raised platform strewn with pillows and Oriental rugs. It all still looks very Arab.

"It was a very important part of the house," Fontes Blanco said. "Even as late as the 18th century in Spain, women sat in the Muslim fashion on carpets and cushions on the floor."

Other references to Morisco and Arab culture throughout the novel are less subtle. "Blessed be almighty Allah," Benengeli declares three times at the opening of Part Two, Chapter 8. At a time when Arabic was a forbidden tongue, toward the end of Part Two, Chapter 67, Don Quixote offers Sancho a linguistics lesson in various "Moorish" words "that begin with *al*" common to the Castilian vernacular. In Part Two's Chapter 26, Don Quixote interrupts a puppet show

## On the one hand, Don Quixote is the most Christian, the most Spanish figure in Spanish literature, but he is also the most open to the Moors, to the Arabs.

—RAFAEL VALENCIA



based on the medieval Spanish ballad “The Romance of Don Gaiferos,” about a knight who storms Sanseuñía (Zaragoza) to rescue his kidnapped bride-to-be. When the boy narrating the show declares the city was “flooded with the sound” of bells ringing in alarm “from all the towers of the mosques,” Don Quixote interjects, “the Moors do not use bells but drums and a kind of flute” to raise alarms. Aware that no minaret has a bell, he adds that “ringing bells in Sanseuñía is a great piece of nonsense.”

**D**on Quixote also enables Cervantes to probe contemporary, often paradoxical attitudes toward Islam, Islamic culture and Moriscos. Idealized stories and ballads of noble, knightly “Moors” and their ladies from the medieval past—a genre collectively known as *romencero morisco*—were widely popular during Cervantes’ time, “even as Moriscos were increasingly persecuted,” Fuchs pointed out. Cervantes’ genius was to cash in on the familiarity of that genre while modernizing it and, along the way, demonstrating how fluid identities could be.

In Part One, Chapter 37, Cervantes introduces what is known to scholars as “The Captive’s Tale.” Perhaps the most autobiographical section of the novel, it tells the story of the fictional Ruy Pérez de Viedma, a Christian soldier who escapes an Ottoman prison in Algiers and returns to Spain with Zoraida, the daughter of “a wealthy Moor named Agi Morato.” Agi Morato was based on Cervantes’ own experience with the real-life Haci Murad, a renegade Dalmatian Christian who rose to power through service to the Ottoman sultans in Algiers and who was instrumental in saving Cervantes’ life. Murad’s real daughter Zahara never eloped with a Christian captive—let alone Cervantes himself—but she did marry Abu Marwan Abd al-Malik, who was none other than sultan of Morocco.

Cervantes writes that Viedma, wearing a “short blue woollen tunic . . . breeches of blue linen . . . ankle boots the color of dates and a Moorish scimitar” strapped across his chest—enters a tavern with Zoraida, who is similarly dressed in Muslim attire, “her face hidden by a veil.” He speaks to her in Arabic, but she knows enough Spanish to declare that now that she is on Spanish soil, she wishes to be addressed as “Maria.” When questioned by the innkeeper’s wife if she is Muslim or Christian, Viedma responds that she is a “Moor in her dress and body” but in her soul desires to become a Christian, and has delayed her baptism because she has not yet been properly instructed in “all the ceremonies” required for the service.

Here Cervantes jabs at the hypocrisy of both church and state: When Muslims were forced to convert, many were simply rounded up and baptized in churches (many of which were formerly mosques) with little or no theological instruction in the Christian faith. Under such circumstances, conversion rings hollow. Furthermore, if society can find a place for “the exotic Zoraida,” as Fuchs observed, “whatever her ethnic and cultural differences,” then it can surely find room for the far more proximate Moriscos who were at the time being herded onto ships and deported.

This episode is one of many throughout the novel that

## Cervantes’ road-trip duo discovers common ground by journeying together and, most importantly, listening to one another along the way.

emphasize why dialogue, said Megias, is a key to understanding Cervantes and his most famous characters, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. They are figures from different classes and backgrounds, one educated, one not; one practical-minded, one not so much, who nonetheless find common ground by journeying together and, most importantly, listening to one another.

“Don Quixote is a minor noble who reads books. Sancho Panza is a laborer who has never read a book in his life, and whose understanding of the world comes from street smarts,” said Megias.

But as the novel progresses, they are each transformed. As they travel through the Spanish countryside, Sancho learns from Don Quixote just as if he were reading a book, and Don Quixote learns from Sancho what he would never find in his library.

What Cervantes is telling us, in an unintentionally modern way, said Megias, is that “change happens when we are willing to listen to and can accept and look positively upon someone who is different from you. And that’s why people of other cultures and other times have been able to read and identify with this book.” 🌐

Argentine artist Miguel Rep’s depiction of Don Quixote’s battles with windmills covers a wall in Cervantes’ birthplace, Alcalá de Henares. In 2002 the Nobel Institute ranked *Don Quixote* as the “single most important literary work in history,” and it is the best-selling novel in the history of publishing.



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**Tom Verde** (tomverde.pressfolios.com) is a regular contributor to *AramcoWorld*. His *Malika* series, on historical Muslim queens, won “Best Series” awards from both the National Federation of Press Women and the Connecticut Press Club in 2017.



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Rafael Valencia: May / June 2009

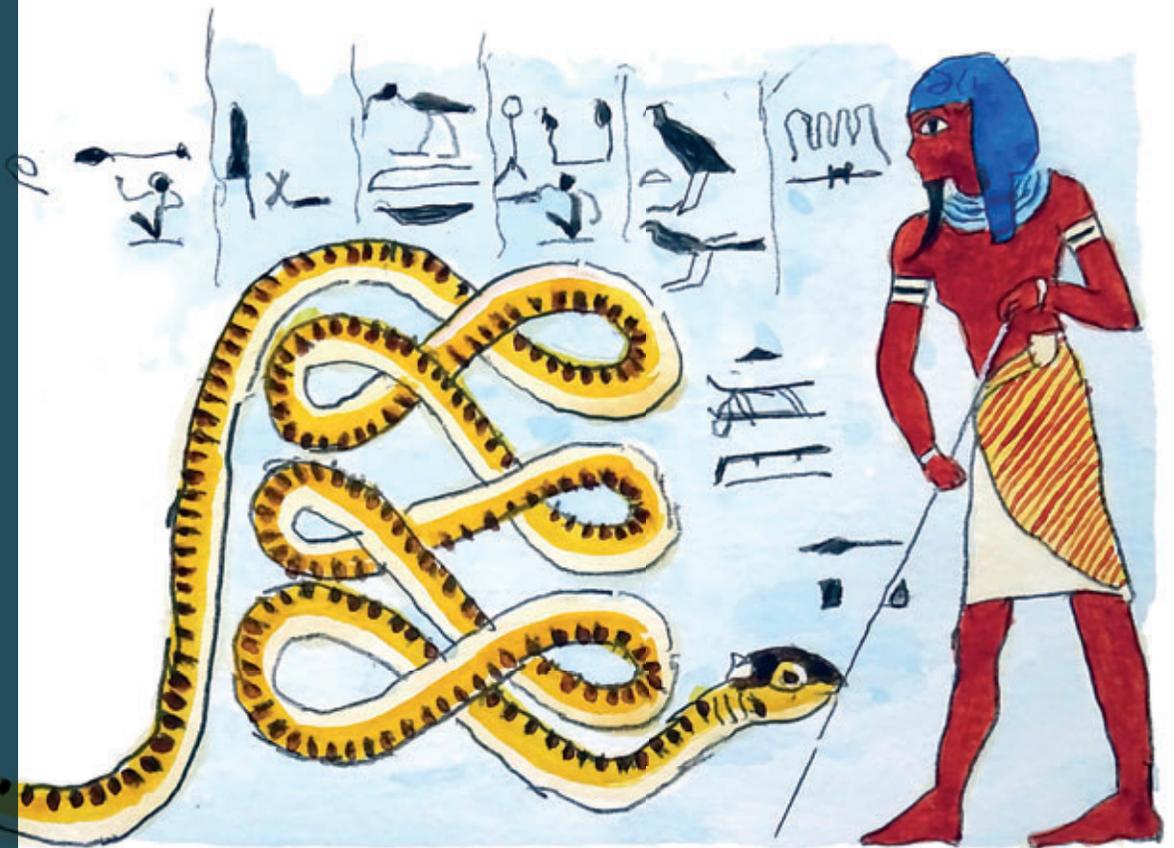
Toledo: May / June 1996

Mudejar art: Jan / Feb 1993



# I, INNOCENT ASP

Hissstory vexes me. The very sound of it sizzles on my serpent tongue, tasting of lies and hypocrisy. Do not speak to me of apples and Eve, or of mad Medusa whose gaze turned onlookers to stone. Why should I not be angry? I am despised as a primal, unhuman creature living without arms or legs, eyelids or eardrums. I am scaly and bladderless. I breathe one-lunged and have no mewling cry. In many cultures of your kind, we snakes are maligned as liars, our forked tongues equated with falsehood. In your language, “to snake” means to steal, anyone “crooked” is “a snake in the grass,” and somebody cruel is “cold-blooded” and “mean as a snake.” I symbolize sin and treachery more than any other creature that creeps or crawls, according to the one that “stands tall” and walks “upright.” From where I lie, it’s low time I set the record crooked.



Written by  
FRANK L. HOLT

Illustrated by  
NORMAN  
MACDONALD

**T**he bones of my kin were found in jars some 4,300 years old buried in a temple at Qal’at al-Bahrain. I invite you to recall my noble role as Mucalinda, Buddha’s half-human, half-cobra Naga. Do not forget I am the rainbowed Aidophedo of the Ashanti of West Africa, the many-headed Shesha of

Hinduism and the cosmic Quetzalcoatl of Mesoamerica, and that for centuries I gazed from the brows of the pharaohs as the sacred serpent-goddess Uraeus of Egypt. I was the wise Wadjet of the Nile Delta and the silent Meretseger, guardian of the dead at Thebes. I was the good serpent Mehen who fought off the evil Apophis every night

when the sun god Ra sailed through the dangers of dark. I attended dear Isis and, so the Egyptians have said, fathered Alexander the Great. And still, I crawl accused of killing Egypt's last great queen, Cleopatra VII.

As if it could not be worse, you cultivate this calumny early in the lives of your whelps. Toy Cleopatras come accessorized with plastic asps as do most Cleopatra Halloween costumes. Video games cast me in the vile role of venomous assassin of a voluptuous queen; misguided marketers launch ad campaigns for "Just Bitten" cosmetics featuring a stand-in Cleopatra with lips its wearers will "die for." More dangerous are your cigarettes, sold in art deco boxes embellished with a bust of Cleopatra, who clutches me with more than a touch of defiance. At the risk of seeming a pompous asp, I call out all these hucksters for their slanders against my kind.

Your high culture, alas, is no better than your consumer culture. Canvases depicting poor Cleopatra's demise, with me as the obvious villain, clutter your museums. Painters Andrea Solari and Peter Paul Rubens showed me long and writhing; Guido Reni and Giovanni Lanfranco painted me wormishly tiny. Claude Vignon and Augustin Hirschvogel gave me the head of a dragon, and Benedetto Genari II and Giovanni Francesco Barbieri brushed on red to show blood dripping from my fangs. But this is not the real me.

This staged demise of Cleopatra and her handmaidens is part of a larger plot to ruin me. Even Shakespeare's stage directions stated for *Antony and Cleopatra* that Cleopatra "applies an asp," as if I were some inanimate apparatus. I find these stage directions as de-meaning as the dialog that calls me a "poor venomous fool."

You see, I, the Egyptian asp, *Naja haje*, am the victim of overwrought imaginations. I did not kill Cleopatra. Not in Shakespeare's way or any other.

Let's examine the facts. Her Highness ruled Ptolemaic Egypt at a time when the Romans were just beginning to take over the eastern Mediterranean world. The mighty queen began as a humble pawn in this inexorable game of Roman imperialism, and civil war and forced her to take sides, first with Julius Caesar and then with his general Marc Antony. She even married Antony to secure the preservation of Egypt, if not as an independent nation, then at least as an equal partner. You may not realize how close she came to success. But in a single battle all was lost. Caesar's adopted son Octavian, who would become later immortalized as Emperor Augustus, prevailed at the Battle of Actium in the Ionian Sea in 31 BCE against the combined forces of Antony and Cleopatra, spelling the end of both the Hellenistic period and Ptolemaic Egypt. Upon losing, Antony committed suicide, whereas Cleopatra was captured and held as a prisoner of war by Octavian's forces in Alexandria. It is somewhere in this part of their story I usually make my entrance.

According to the Greek geographer Strabo, who may have been in Egypt at the time, the queen killed herself secretly while in Octavian's custody. Strabo reports that two versions of her

suicide were circulated: one, that she suffered at my fangs, while the other claimed she poisoned herself. Strabo himself made no choice between these two theories. Then a few Latin poets, unhindered by facts, scribbled some lines on the subject. They all preferred the more sensational asp story, of course. Patriotic and well-paid by Octavian, these Romans maligned Cleopatra too, calling her *regina meretrix*, harlot queen, and *dedecus Aegypti*, shame of Egypt.

In the second century CE, the Greek writer Plutarch penned a detailed rendition of Cleopatra's last days. Plutarch states that he consulted the published memoirs of Olympus, Cleopatra's personal physician. Now this sounds promising, until you realize that this doctor was permitted to live—and write—only because he served Octavian. This is the testimony of a tainted witness who claimed that after the death of Antony, Cleopatra became as unhinged as a serpent's jaw. As her captor,

CLEOPATRA BEGAN AS A  
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ROMAN IMPERIALISM. CIVIL  
WAR FORCED HER TO TAKE  
SIDES, FIRST WITH JULIUS  
CAESAR AND THEN WITH HIS  
GENERAL MARC ANTONY.



Cleopatra VII presents  
her son Caesarion  
- the temple of  
Hathor at Dendera

The lead priestess, like Isis has a snake twined about her arm. Cleopatra's suicide by asp-bite stressed her identification with the goddess. - Roman relief.



Octavian allegedly did everything in his power to keep the queen, whom Plutarch insists grew demented, from hurting herself. When she tried to starve herself, Octavian could find no other remedy than to threaten her children. This was powerful leverage: Cleopatra had a son with Julius Caesar and three younger kids with Antony.

Plutarch relates that these threats convinced Cleopatra to cooperate. A few days later, Octavian paid her a visit. He found her sickly, unkempt, and still a bit wild-eyed. Yet despite her condition, she hoped to sway Octavian with her beauty and charm. This naturally failed with a man as incorruptible as Octavian (I would wink here if I had an eyelid), so Cleopatra caved and claimed that everything was Antony's fault. When Octavian countered her excuses, she next tried pity, prayers and promises. In the end she managed only to convince Octavian she wished to live. This made it easier to arrange her own death, having suddenly forgotten the threats against her children.

Octavian had no suspicions when Cleopatra asked whether she and her female attendants might offer a sacrifice at Antony's tomb. Clutching the ash-urn of her beloved Antony (other sources say he was embalmed), Cleopatra supposedly confided to his cinders her trepidation at becoming a trophy in Octavian's triumphal parade. She could not bear the humiliation of marching in chains through the streets of Rome. Here, at last, Plutarch gives us a motive for her suicide, thanks to a supposed confession heard by no one who lived to reveal it.

Next, we need means and opportunity. The crafty Cleopatra bathed, dined and then sent Octavian a suicide note while awaiting delivery of a little basket of figs for dessert. This request for room service provided the opportunity to smuggle past her derelict guards the means of her crime—me. Plutarch declares that Octavian's sentinels checked the basket and did not notice me inside. Now look at me and pay heed to my sinuous swaying swagger and large, unblinking black eyes. We asps average a meter and a half in length. Our heads are large and our snouts broad. Not see me in a snack basket? Yet there I reportedly lay undetected, curled tightly at the bottom, waiting patiently to wipe out three adult women in a

locked room? Does that make sense to anyone?

I could not have done it. Though large, we *Naja haje* do not store enough neurotoxin to kill three of you upright mammals in quick succession. Death could take hours, yet Cleopatra had only minutes before her suicide note brought Octavian running to the scene. Furthermore, Plutarch admits that no trace of me was ever found inside the sealed room—there were no smoking gums. The suggestion that I somehow crawled out a window and escaped along the beach toward the sea is ludicrous.

Even crazier are the specific reports of what Cleopatra said and did inside that closed room, where the only witnesses died with her. Who could have known that I was ever there, that the queen spoke to me before I bit her arm or that she had to provoke me with a golden spindle before I would lunge at her? No woman intent on suicide would entrust her death to me. I could bring

Cleopatra VII on Coins.



Cleopatra's image on Egyptian coins is likely her most authentic portrait. - Trustees of the British Museum

Plutarch - Greek biographer and writer.





nothing to the occasion but a hundred possible misadventures. And for what? She was already a deity; I could do nothing to render her more so.

No matter, my accusers could not push my writhing image out of their minds. When Octavian paraded an effigy of the queen in his triumphal parade, the crowds fixated on a copy of me clinging to her body. Onlookers assumed this to be an official reenactment of her demise, but it may simply have been an Isis snake bracelet. No wonder, after spinning this gossamer of lies Plutarch confesses, “Nobody really knows what happened.” He adds that a concealed poison may have actually done the deed.

A gossipy contemporary of his, a writer named Suetonius, introduced the bizarre anecdote of the Psylli (pronounced, appropriately, like your word “silly”). These were a North African Berber tribe of professional venom suckers who could be summoned to save snakebite victims. Though it was considered heroic work, the job training

knew better than to look directly at his alluring captive. According to Cassius Dio, she shamelessly tried everything: provocative clothing, sweet looks, a lilting voice, some tender weeping and even old love letters from Caesar, Octavian’s adoptive father.

Spurned and fearing the ignominy of his triumphal parade, Dio’s Cleopatra plotted suicide as Octavian posted guards and a

Psylli rescue squad to stop her. Now think about that. Having these venom-suckers on standby would mean that Octavian *anticipated* not only me, but also my getting past his guards, who were therefore on alert for a smuggled snake. Since I alone could not have quickly killed all three women inside the chamber, several of us would have needed to slip past Rome’s equivalent of the Keystone Kops—coming *and* going. Yet Dio casually admits that no one could really know what happened to Cleopatra.

The medical writer Galen mentions the possibility that Cleopatra bit her own arm and then smeared the wound with

THOUGH LARGE,  
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DO NOT STORE  
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smuggled venom. This way, I get blamed even *in absentia* for her death by self-fangulation. Galen must have liked the idea that Cleopatra never actually handled me, for he suggests that if I were there on the scene, I would have been a spitting cobra. What an imagination! The good doctor also claims to know that Cleopatra had her hair and nails done by two attendants, both of whom I spit to death before turning my wads on the queen.

One murder rap apparently deserves another and another. In the 10th century CE, the Baghdad-based historian al-Mas'udi expanded my killing spree beyond Cleopatra and her female servants. At least he didn't mutilate her character like the Romans. As with many scholars of the medieval Arab world, he does sing her praises, calling her a "princess versed in the sciences, given to the study of philosophy ... [having] composed on medicine, charms and the particulars of other natural sciences." But al-Mas'udi cruelly paints me as a merciless savage, even claiming I murdered Octavian as well. That's an especially interesting fantasy, a bit of alternative facts in which the familiar Western obsession with Octavian's triumph and empire-building is cut short by yours truly. For you see, al-Mas'udi alleges me to be a rare two-headed serpent from Hijaz (in western Saudi Arabia) that could spring so fast and so far that my victims never knew



Cleopatra winks  
at her own  
extravagance.  
-Elizabeth Taylor

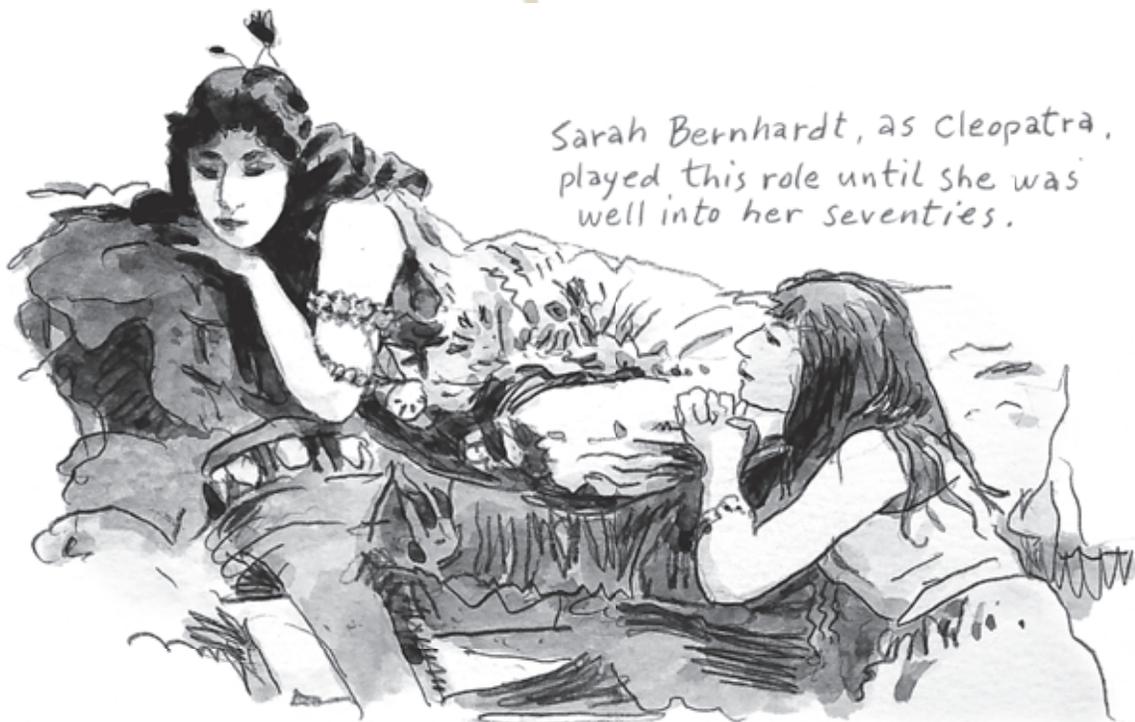
they had been bitten. So, after instantly dispatching the women in Cleopatra's chamber, I hid among the ornamental plants until Octavian entered the room. My stealthy attack paralyzed his right side, giving him just enough time to dictate a Latin poem before his demise. The Romans always get the last word.

Well, not always. One of your poets, Ahmad Shawqi of Egypt, is one of the few who ever came to the queen's defense. In 1927 he turned the tables—better late than never—charging the Romans of recording history “in a fictive style, in which the Caesars of Rome got all the glory ... while the poor Egyptian queen, Cleopatra ... got nothing but a heap of accusation, sins and curses.”

Here's what I think really happened. Start from the fact: In August 30 BCE Cleopatra died in the custody of Octavian, her enemy. I would not be surprised if he executed her and clumsily covered up the crime as a suicide-by-asp. Octavian controlled every source of information about Cleopatra's fate. He shaped his official version with loyal assistance. He had no fear of contradiction or correction. All the Psylli stories about his efforts to save the psychotic queen masked his true intentions—he wanted her dead. Why? Quite simply because Ptolemaic queens were a dangerous commodity and very difficult to be rid of safely. She—the mistress of his father, the wife of his enemy and the mother

of his last rival—must never tell her side of the story or be given the chance to charm a world that might be prone to forgiveness. Octavian's alleged urge to display the captive Cleopatra in his parade was a ruse; he wanted no such thing. Just a few years earlier, Julius Caesar had held such an event in Rome. The spectacle, as anticipated, delighted the crowds—until they saw a Ptolemaic queen marching in chains among the prisoners. That was Arsinoe IV, Cleopatra's half-sister, and the Romans reacted so vehemently

Sarah Bernhardt, as Cleopatra,  
played this role until she was  
well into her seventies.





against her humiliation that she had to be released to placate public sentiment. Could Octavian risk a similar outcome with Cleopatra? He had made his fortune fighting to save his world from her, and it would be devastating to his ambitions if she appeared in Rome as anything less than the evil, crazy, seductive monster of his propaganda. Letting her live was an indulgence he could not afford.

But killing Cleopatra had to be carefully arranged. Octavian had ample opportunity, means and motive to eliminate the queen of Egypt before she could arouse anyone's sympathy. To launder his image, he had to sully hers. His plot achieved its purpose so well that even now, thousands of years later, your visions

"A PRINCESS VERSED IN  
THE SCIENCES, GIVEN TO  
THE STUDY OF PHILSOPHY  
... AND THE PARTICULARS  
OF OTHER NATURAL  
SCIENCES."

—al-Mas'udi

of Cleopatra—your stereotypes as you call them—voluptuous, vain, promiscuous, treacherous, manipulative, excessive and need I go on—were fostered by Octavian to advance history. His victory rested upon her villainy in the court of public opinion.

That is the same court that has been convicting me of murder over two millennia. Only a few experts, mostly new ones over the past decades, have come to my defense, declaring my innocence with almost unhuman fairness and reason. Still, not many of them are willing to point an accusing finger at Octavian as I would do if I had one. Murder is a hard charge to prove when a suspect owns or eliminates all the evidence. So be it. Believe what you want about Cleopatra's last moments. Just leave the hiss out of history. Like you, I have my suspicions. And like you, I wasn't there. ☹



**Frank L. Holt** (fholt@uh.edu) is professor of ancient history at the University of Houston. A leading authority on Alexander the Great, his most recent book is *Lost World of the Golden King: In Search of Ancient Afghanistan* (University of California Press, 2012). Artist **Norman MacDonald** (www.macdonaldart.net) lives in Amsterdam and contributes regularly to the *Witness History* series.



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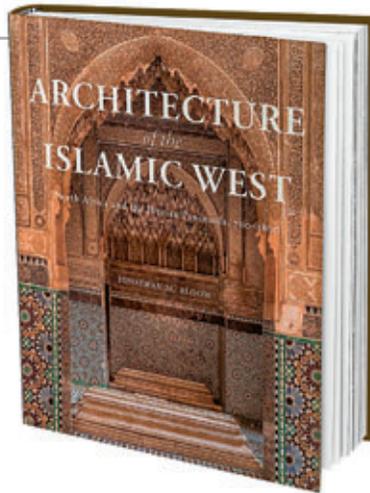
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# REVIEWS

Without endorsing the views of authors, the editors encourage reading as a path to greater understanding.

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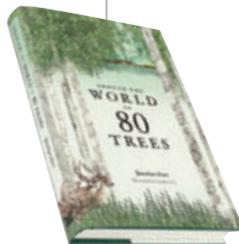
“Rather than envisioning a simple diffusion of ... the *muqarnas* [stalactite vaulting] ... from a single place of invention in the eastern Islamic lands, it seems more likely that Andalusian artisans adopted the *muqarnas* sometime in the eleventh century ... and it was carried by artisans ... eventually to Sicily.”

## Architecture of the Islamic West: North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula, 700-1800

Jonathan M. Bloom. 2020, Yale UP, 978-0-30021-8-701, \$65 hb.

Books about the arts of al-Andalus and the Maghrib typically focus on a country, an era, city or single building. Bloom, however, looks at architecture from southern Spain through Northwest Africa as “a distinct tradition in its own right.” Each chapter offers a map, ample illustrations and historical context, along with descriptions that both underscore the diversity within the region’s architecture and single out shared traits, distinctive contributions and their impact on other locales. A leading scholar of Islamic art, Bloom takes a practical, evidentiary approach. He points to local circumstances—from availability of materials to political ambitions—as playing a more important role than influences from distant centers in the Islamic East. He questions assumptions and avoids speculative interpretations and overarching conclusions. Like a gardener loosening hard-packed soil to sow new seeds, he lays the foundation for future research while providing a revealing, well-grounded, accessible overview of an architecturally rich region all too often deemed no more than “a provincial offshoot.”

—LEE LAWRENCE



## Around the World in 80 Trees

Jonathan Drori. 2018, Laurence King Publishing, 978-1-78627-1-617, \$24.99 hb.

This engrossing title tells the botanical backstories of six dozen or so trees (out of the world’s 60,000 known species)

that have had “surprising human ramifications.” Many are from the Muslim world. The “primary ancestor of all the apples we eat” came from the “central Asian hillsides” of Kazakhstan and was among the world’s earliest domesticated plants. Without “exaggeration ... the magnificent cedar of Lebanon played a critical role in the development of civilization ... used for temples and palaces” throughout the ancient world. While technically not a tree, the date palm “altered the course of history by enabling large numbers of people to live in deserts,” while Morocco’s argan tree enjoys a complex relationship between goats that climb its branches to eat its tough-skinned fruit and the

Berber women who then gather the excreted seeds to extract their precious oil. Artful illustrations accompany each entry.

—TOM VERDE



## The Fatimid Empire

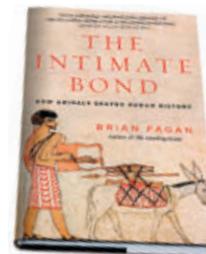
Michael Brett. 2017, Edinburgh UP, 978-0-74864-0-775, \$44.95 hb.

For nearly three centuries from 910–1171 CE, Fatimid

power stretched from the Atlantic coast of North Africa to the shores of India, with governors and client kings ruling various cities and fortified provinces. This comprehensive volume, part of The Edinburgh History of the Islamic Empires series, is a close examination of an era that was critical in the evolutionary development of the Muslim community “from a conquering army into a civilian population,” writes Brett. He studies the dynasty from its inception as “a means to dis-

place [its] ‘Abbasid rivals as the legitimate rulers of a Muslim commonwealth centered upon Cairo,” to its mad, albeit enlightened ruler (al-Hakim, 10th and 11th centuries), to its burgeoning economy, “heightened by the trading and manufacturing of agricultural produce,” such as flax for linen and sugarcane “to supply an export as well as an internal market.”

—TOM VERDE



## The Intimate Bond: How Animals Shaped Human History

Brian Fagan. 2015, Bloomsbury Press, 978-1-62040-5-727, \$28 hb.

“Few animals had a more profound effect on history” than the camel, says anthropologist Brian Fagan. It could carry twice as much as an ox, at twice the speed, and across greater distances than a donkey. Serving as a source of milk and as pack animals for nomads in the Arabian



Peninsula as early as 3000 BCE, camels changed these people's lives and those in Saharan Africa with the invention of the camel saddle, as early as 1500 BCE. The subsequent incense trade, with camels as the key conveyors, linked southern Arabia with the Greco-Roman world, facilitating the exchange of goods and ideas. Fagan's study begins around 15,000 BCE, when humans domesticated dogs. Goats and sheep followed 5,000 years later in Southwest Asia and pigs came shortly after. Cattle were tamed around 9000 BCE in what is now Turkey. Donkeys, like camels, helped establish global markets. Beginning some 5,000 years ago Mesopotamians, Indo-Iranians, Hittites, Egyptians and Romans rose to power on the backs of and in chariots pulled by "the ass of foreign mountain countries," as Mesopotamians described the horse.

—TOM VERDE

deserts of the Levant. Most phrases are written in white on red, though some green appears when cedar trees occasionally become part of a truck's livery. Detailed captions accompany each photo, with an English translation of the proverb, along with a typed version of the original handwritten Arabic calligraphy. Readers familiar with the Middle East and those interested in unusual, original art forms will find this book particularly interesting.

—WILLIAM TRACY

with sage, is based on a desert formula, while *muhammarra* (roasted red-pepper dip made with honey, tahini, paprika and ground coffee) was a Syrian specialty of the author's great-great-grandmother.

—TOM VERDE

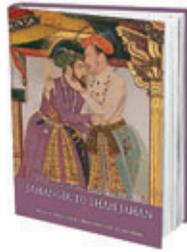


**The Golden Thread: How Fabric Changed History**

Kassia St. Clair. 2018, John Murray, 978-1-47365-9-056, \$19.99 pb.

This lively and amusing book traces the impact of textiles on humanity from caves to the moon walk. Very well researched, though not academic, it is conveniently divided into short sections so that it can either be read chronologically or dipped into for fascinating and unexpected information. The author begins with the origins of weaving—what appear to be the first man- (almost certainly woman!) made threads, which come from a cave in the Georgian Caucasus and date back some 35 millennia. She goes on to discuss the linen of ancient Egypt, the Silk Road, the woolen sails of Viking ships and the wool trade of medieval England; lace, cotton and its enormous social impact in America, and various modern synthetics, and she concludes by returning to nature with the elusive silk of spiders. The book is well designed with excellent notes, glossary, bibliography and index.

—CAROLINE STONE



**The Mughal Empire from Jahangir to Shah Jahan: Art, Architecture, Politics, Law and Literature**

Ebba Koch, ed. 2019, The Marg Foundation, 978-9-38324-3-266, \$90 hb.

Through 15 meticulously researched essays, this book brings into unprecedented focus

the history and legacy of the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan, whose reign (1628-1658) is considered the apex of the Mughal Empire. Essay subjects range from parsing the dynamics of loyalty and the rebellion that resulted in Shah Jahan's accession, to teasing out the politics embedded in court rituals, and from analyzing his artistic and architectural legacies to examining the effective use of art and architecture for political ends. Throughout, we see the degree to which Shah Jahan's contributions intertwine with his father's legacy, while he outwardly and persistently differentiated himself from Jahangir. Well-written with ample and well-chosen illustrations, the book offers lovers of history a fresh and deep understanding of the reign of Shah Jahan, while opening enticing avenues of investigation to scholars.

—LEE LAWRENCE



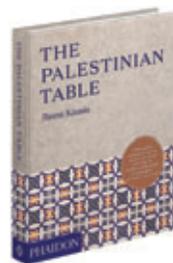
**Sophie Halaby in Jerusalem: An Artist's Life**

Laura S. Schor. 2019, Syracuse UP, 978-0-81561-1-127, \$19.75 pb.

This richly detailed biography of Sophie Halaby (1906-1997) uncovers the career of a pio-

neering Palestinian-Russian artist whose life spanned most of a tempestuous century, but whose art captured the timeless beauty of her adopted home: Jerusalem. Born into an affluent Christian Orthodox family in Kiev, Halaby and her family escaped to Jerusalem in 1917 at the time of the Russian Revolution. In 1929, she became the first Palestinian woman to study art in Paris, returning in 1933. Other than a brief interval drawing cartoons in 1936 critical of the British Mandate (1920-1948) and Zionist nationalism, Halaby devoted her life to painting still-life and landscapes of her beloved Jerusalem. Despite a life marked by Arab-Israeli wars, and loss of her home and property in 1948, she never let politics shape her depictions of Jerusalem, which Schor describes as "a window into the life she envisaged." Schor places Halaby's life and works on the pages of Palestine's cultural history, where it belongs.

—PINEY KESTING

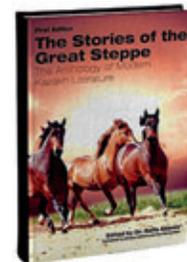


**The Palestinian Table**

Reem Kassiss. 2017, Phaidon, 978-0-71487-4-968, \$39.95 hb.

The foods of Palestine embrace a wide variety and geography, from "the mountains of the Galilee to the valleys of the south, from the coast of Yaffa all the way to the West Bank," writes Kassiss. At the center

lies Jerusalem, "a melting pot of foods, religion, and cultures." This flavorful collection of 150 recipes leans heavily on tried-and-true specialties from the best sources: "a bevy of aunts, grandmothers, and family cooks." The author wisely doesn't mess too much with the delicious, nutritional simplicity of split lentil soup, "for many people the default or official Ramadan soup." She takes readers, step by step, through the mechanical process of baking Jerusalem sesame bagels, which Palestinians unapologetically claim are the best in the country. Spice-infused Bedouin tea, redolent



**The Stories of the Great Steppe: The Anthology of Modern Kazakh Literature**

Rabis Abazov, ed. Sergio Levchin and Ilya Bernshteyn, tr. 2013, Cognella Academic Publishing, 978-1-62131-8-378, \$54.95 pb.

In early 1953, following the death of Joseph Sta-

lin and the ascension of Nikita Khrushchev to first secretary, the Soviet Union began to ease repression and censorship of creative arts. In the Kazakh Soviet Republic (today's Kazakhstan), this gave rise to a generation of literary figures who would be the engines to drive the nation forward. Mass-produced publishing and popular readership rose for the first time alongside nomadic storytelling traditions. This anthology of short stories and poetry by some of Kazakhstan's most prominent writers and poets, rooted in the nomadic traditions, helps readers understand the "universe through the eyes of a nomad" while revealing some of the social impacts of the period's major trends and events, such as Soviet patriotism and World War II.

—ALVA ROBINSON



**Mahrooseh: Lebanon's Art on the Road**

Falak Shawwa. 2019, Rimal Publications, 978-9-96371-5-169, \$35.27 hb.

The expression "Art is in the eyes of the beholder" certainly applies to the calligraphy and colorfully patterned art adorning the Middle Eastern cargo trucks photographed for this slim volume. *Mahrooseh* (protected) is among the most common slogans or

proverbs chosen by truckers to decorate their vehicles—a custom that began in the 1970s and '80s, reflecting the cultural richness and diversity found in the gardens, mountains and



# EVENTS

## Highlights from aramcoworld.com

Public health protection measures may make some physical events unavailable. Please check venue schedules before visiting.

### CURRENT / SEPTEMBER

**Lebanon Then and Now: Photography from 2006 to 2020** is an immersive 360-degree exhibit featuring 50 images by 17 of Lebanon's top art and documentary photographers, organized in collaboration with the Institut du Monde Arabe and other partners. Middle East Institute Arts & Culture Center, **online**, through September 25.

### CURRENT / OCTOBER

**Ahmet Ögüt: No poem loves its poet** is a solo exhibition featuring two new site-responsive commissions utilizing video and sculpture by Amsterdam-based Kurdish artist Ahmet Ögüt. Both commissions refer to the physical and societal structures that divide living beings and cultures, and his work reminds us that these are ultimately malleable. Yarat Contemporary Art Space, **Baku, Azerbaijan**, through October 11.

### Farid Rasulov: Qurban Olum.

Having twice represented Azerbaijan at the Venice Biennale, Rasulov is known for explorations of both Azerbaijani and wider oriental traditions across painting, installation, animation, sculpture and 3D graphics that take inspiration from

folk crafts and rituals, all guiding his often darkly humorous reflections. Yarat Contemporary Art Space, **Baku, Azerbaijan**, through October 11.

**Sanctuary.** What does "sanctuary" mean to you? This online exhibit invites you to step into an immersive and contemplative space dedicated to exploring varied interpretations through woven rugs designed by 36 leading artists from around the world, including Mona Hatoum of Lebanon and Brendan Fernandes of Kenya. Each reflects a personal response to the word sanctuary—whether that means refuge, sacred space, place of beauty, or something uniquely personal. Aga Khan Museum, **online**, through October 25.

### CURRENT / NOVEMBER

**African Arts: Global Conversations** puts African arts where they rightfully belong—within the global art historical canon. The exhibit pairs diverse African works across mediums with objects from around the world through 33 works that consider how shared themes and ideas developed independently in different parts of the globe. **Brooklyn Museum, New York**, through November 15.

### CURRENT / JANUARY

**Worlds in Motion: Narrating Migration.** People have always been on the move, all around the world, taking with them their lifestyles, languages, music, arts and crafts. Starting from its own collections, the museum raises questions highlighting how the world's diversity of cultures has always existed amid dynamics of exchange, from historic settlement and labor migrations to globalization. The exhibit explores the ways migrations drive new forms of culture and community in a changing world. Weltkulturen Museum, **Frankfurt, Germany**, through January 31.

### PERMANENT

**Ithra Connect** is a platform for children, families, creatives, art enthusiasts and professionals with programs in literature, technology, art, architecture, theater, design, learning and innovation. Ithra, **online**.

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"A Queen on the Road," by Hayfaa Hasanain. The license plate translates, "I drove 2018."

## An Anniversary: Women Driving, Through the Eyes of Six Saudi Female Artists.

Celebrating the second anniversary of the historic royal decree that lifted the ban on women driving in Saudi Arabia, this online exhibition allows viewers a chance to see how Saudi female artists have celebrated that announcement, exploring the artistic journey of six women and how they have used their artwork to reflect what driving has meant to them. Among them are Tagreed Al Bagshi, who has championed women driving in her artwork since 2010, and Skna Hassan, who in 2016 was denied an exhibition focusing on women driving. Included are works also by Saudi artists Noor Alsaif, Ahlam Alshedoukhy, Hayfaa Hasanain and Fatimah Alnemer, who observes that her work is "not just from the point of view of transport but the role that women should play in transforming thoughts, policies and systems." Ithra, [www.ithra.com/en/women-driving](http://www.ithra.com/en/women-driving).



*“My friend Alia would love the Don Quixote story...”*

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