

Acknowledgments

This book began as a lecture at the University of Nanjing, where I was invited in 2019 by my colleague, Professor Lihong Song, to speak to his students. A year later, Prof Song Invited me again to Nanjing, this time to give a graduate seminar based on that lecture. By the end of it, he suggested that I turn the seminar into a book. Both the lecture and the seminar were based on a course I developed and had been teaching at the University of Cambridge, mostly to students of Arabic. I mention these audiences, Chinese students, and Arabists because none is typical of people who usually engage in this subject. It's a difference that shaped a book which tries to do two things at once: to introduce a familiar subject to people who are not too familiar with it; and to speak about a fraught subject with caution. I hope I have managed it. Since some of the cultural aspects the book deals with are outside my usual remit, such as civic culture, architecture, art, and music, I want to thank generous colleagues and friends who read versions of this book and advised me, including Hizky Shoham, Haim Yacobi, Derek Penslar, Vincenzo Vergiani, Yirmi Pinkus, Yair Qedar, Raz Kohn, Ruth Cats, and Assaf Shelleg, who has been especially generous with his time and attention. I also want to thank my long-time friend and colleague Eran Kaplan, whose wisdom continues to inspire me. My harshest critic by far was my partner, Thiago, who argued passionately about the thorny issues this book raises. The fact that many of these issues were new to him challenged me and made me look at them afresh. I hope the book is better for it.

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