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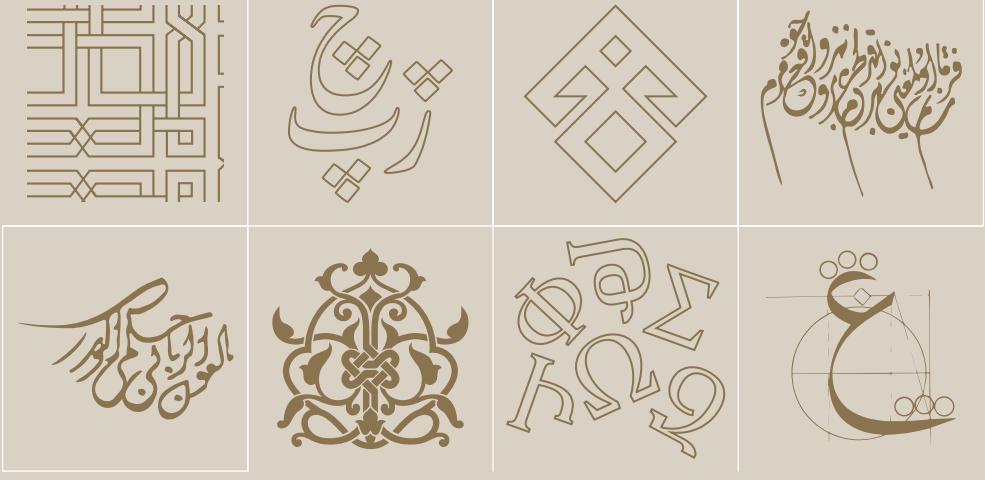

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evvelin kimesne bilmeye"

Kadim is that no one knows what came before.

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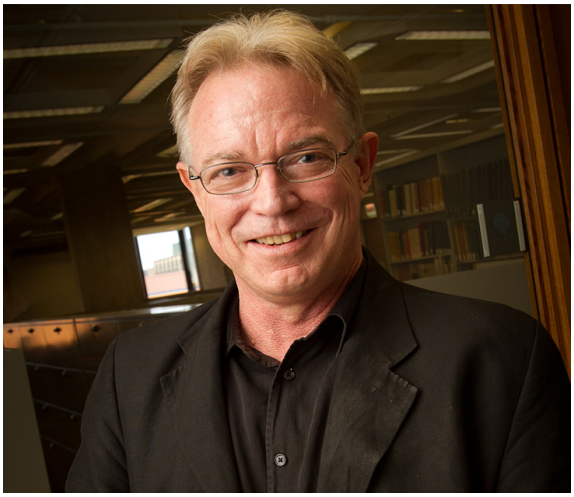
DergiPark

Cornell H. Fleischer: A Personal Memoir

KİŞİSEL HATIRALAR: CORNELL H. FLEISCHER

JOHN E. WOODS*

I first "met" Cornell Fleischer by telephone over fifty years ago. He had just received his BA from Princeton in Near Eastern Studies in 1972 and was applying to graduate programs in Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies. He had come highly recommended by his teacher Martin Dickson—who was also my dissertation advisor at Princeton—and the University of Chicago had offered him the very best fellowship available at the time. Our phone call then consisted of my trying to convince him to accept the Chicago offer and join our program as a doctoral student. It was a very pleasant conversation as I recall, but ultimately not successful from my point of view—Cornell decided to remain at Princeton.



We finally met in person in the fall of 1974 when I went back to Princeton to defend my dissertation. At that time, he offered me a place to sleep for several days in graduate student housing in the now-demolished Butler Tract, also known as "the Project." The first night—the eve of my defense—we stayed up nearly until dawn talking and listening to music. To this day I cannot hear Seals and Crofts' "Summer Breeze" without thinking about that time. At the defense, we were both somewhat bleary-eyed, but in the end, all turned out well for everyone. Over the following years, I followed Cornell's career closely, both through frequent phone calls with him and reports from Martin Dickson about his

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progress. Occasionally, I would have the chance to return to the East Coast to visit and I remember with great fondness one beautiful fall afternoon spent with Martin, Cornell, and other friends in the Gramercy Park Hotel in Manhattan. Later in the 1970s, during his research visit to Iran, he was my sole direct contact with my daughter, from whom I had become estranged for reasons beyond my control.

We often had long conversations about the pros and cons of his moving from the Ohio State University, where he had been teaching since 1979, to Washington University in St. Louis, where he would be able to build an entire program. His time at WashU from 1982 to 1993 were years of great achievement for him: he served as director of the enterprising Center for the Study of Islamic Societies and Civilizations, his seminal work on the Ottoman intellectual Mustafa Âli was published, and he was awarded a MacArthur fellowship. We came together once again in Princeton in 1990 to honor Martin with the announcement of the publication of his Festschrift; in 1991, our mentor and friend Martin passed away and Cornell and I along with a group of his students, former students, and friends met in Princeton and then traveled to New York to attend his funeral.

Meanwhile, some of us at the University of Chicago had other plans for him. Richard Chambers and I worked for years trying to raise money for a chair of Ottoman and Turkish studies in Chicago and, given the "classical" focus of our program, Cornell was immediately considered the leading candidate for what was to become the Kanunî Süleyman professorship of Ottoman and Modern Turkish Studies in 1993. Little did I imagine that the telephone call of some two decades earlier might have produced the result that it did!

It was during the thirty years that we were colleagues at the University of Chicago, however, that I came truly to realize the depth and breadth of his knowledge as a scholar, his regard for his field and his craft, and his devotion to his students and their success. Though neither of us had been students of Marshall Hodgson, through our common teacher Martin Dickson, we were both wholly committed to Hodgson's vision and approach to the study of the Islamicate world—Hodgson had incidentally tried to lure Martin to Chicago in the early 1960s—and tried to maintain his legacy in our teaching and scholarship. We increasingly began to see each other as "academic brothers," I, the elder by twelve years (though Cornell would never admit it)—both born in the Chinese, Turko-Mongol Year of Tiger, both aware of sharing the same scholarly genealogy: Martin Bernard Dickson—A. Zeki Velidî Togan—Vasily Vladimirovich Bartold. As brothers often do, we sometimes disagreed about things personal and professional, and he sometimes took exception to my playing the elder brother card.

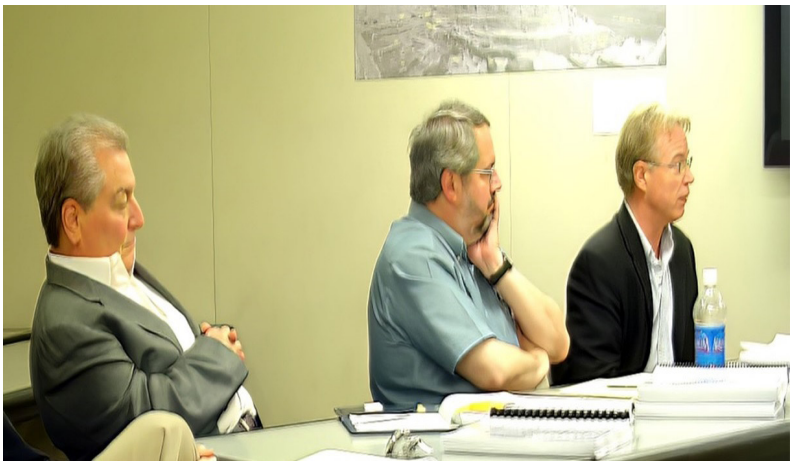
Cornell was absolutely committed to the mastery of philology—Arabic, Turkish, Persian— not as an end in itself, but as the key to unlocking the worlds of meaning of Islamicate texts and their significance. He therefore resented being labelled a Turkologist while his Arabic and Persian were equally fluent. He considered himself, moreover, not just an Ottomanist but a historian of the Islamicate world and beyond. He had little patience for those in the field who lacked what he considered to be the necessary linguistic and methodological skills, the respect and understanding of the work of previous scholars, and the requisite historical knowledge and vision pertinent to the topics at hand. He likewise encouraged his students to transcend the positivist impulse common to many Ottoman historians

who tended to focus primarily on archival sources. Instead, he inspired them to endorse his more humanistic approach based on his meticulous exploitation and innovative questioning of narrative and normative materials, while also making full use of the archives. In so doing, he introduced new ways of understanding later middle period and early modern Islamicate history to a generation of young scholars.

His concern about what he perceived to be the erosion of scholarship in the field overall, his own position at the University of Chicago, and the study of the Islamicate world in American universities in general were topics that dominated our COVID and post-COVID telephone calls right up to the time of his death. Nevetheless, he remained firmly convinced that the humanist values he imparted to his students and represented with his publications would eventually prevail over transitory fashions.

With his passing, I have lost another member of my family.

Professor Martin Dickson with his students, Cornell Fleisher and John Woods, in Princeton circa 1990.



Cornell Fleischer, Devin DeWeese, and John Woods gather for a dissertation defense at Chicago in 2009.

A snapshot from the MESA panel honoring Martin Dickson shows U of C colleague Fred Donner, Vera Moreen, Kathryn Babayan, and Cornell Fleischer (left to right) posing for a photo, Denver, 2012

A blurry snapshot of Zeki Velidi Togan and Martin Dickson, taken during their time at Istanbul University. Cornell Fleischer holds this photo in high regard.

The photograph captured at a conference in Salt Lake City, Utah in 1998 depicts Cornell Fleischer alongside his fellow students of Martin Dickson, namely Michel Mazzaoui, Kathryn Babayan, and John E. Woods, arranged from left to right.