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IRIS Field Work Grant
October 2, 2023

In summer 2023 I used the IRIS Field Work Grant to support a study abroad trip to Jordan. After having studied Arabic for three and a half years, and having taught first semester Arabic, I knew that the only way to begin to push my ability towards a higher level of mastery was to go and live in an Arabic-speaking country. This two-month journey took me to The Qasid Institute in Amman. My fluency and comprehension quickly grew not only due to my excellent teachers but also from the mundane every-day interactions (jumping into a taxi, ordering food or negotiating prices). No language study can be complete without cultural encounters and these excursions took me to Petra, Wadi Rum and Karak Castle. Particularly, tourist sites served as excellent moments for polishing my comprehension, requiring me to train my ear in real time in order to understand different dialects. Finally, my reading skills, arguably my weakest before I visited Jordan, developed to a new level where I began reading novels instead of articles.

The remainder of my funds will be used to support a research trip next summer to Paris, France to visit the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. While a vast majority of the manuscripts I study have been digitized some of them have not been done in color. As my research centers around the larger field of “Race in the Middle Ages” it is necessary for me to see these images completely, not only to gain an understanding of the borders of Latin Christian epidermal race-making but also to collect evidence of other visual vectors of racialization. Furthermore, as so much of my work focuses on the relationship of text and image, I welcome the opportunity to interact with these objects as their materiality may provide clues as to their medieval reception.

Both of these trips support my current project. My dissertation focuses on the various modulations of the “Sultan of Babylon” as both a historical and fantastical racialized construction in fourteenth and fifteenth century French and Italian manuscripts. In doing so, I also consider the royal performances and self-articulations of Mamluk Sultans in examining how Latin Christians used the iconography of historical Islamic rulers when constructing the “Sultan of Babylon.” This type of research will require me to read architectural inscriptions, court documents and portable object epigraphy to better understand the transmission of these narratives across the Mediterranean. By considering European texts alongside Arabic ones, I can make more complex arguments about cross-cultural encounters during this period.