

Let Us Introduce You: Luke Yarbrough

By DJ Barger

At first glance, new History 112 students might mistake Dr. Luke Yarbrough for a peer. Having earned his doctorate just last year, Yarbrough is a little green compared to his colleagues. But despite his youth, Yarbrough already has a past with several distinctive twists and turns.

Born in the suburbs of Chicago, Yarbrough and his family soon moved to Aberdeen, Scotland. He learned English here, albeit in a Scottish brogue, though he believes this was useful in his later life.

“Although I lost the Scottish accent, I have a private theory that being introduced to its many trills and gutturals at a tender age made it easier to pronounce Middle Eastern languages,” Yarbrough said.

Yarbrough's family continued to move around, making a stop in Cairo, Egypt before returning to Chicago.

“I have lived in too many places for too little time to have a true hometown,” Yarbrough said.

After completing high school in Chicago, Yarbrough was ready for higher academic pursuits. He chose history as his course of study.

“I have always had a strong interest in history; it was my best subject in high school and my undergraduate major,” Yarbrough said.

However, Yarbrough was also drawn to the study of languages. He built a course of study that merged both his interests.

“I also knew that I enjoyed learning languages, in particular the rigorous study of texts. It was not until I began studying Arabic, however, that these interests congealed into a vocation,” Yarbrough said. “In a sense I found the study of historical texts in Arabic so endlessly challenging that after a few years of study I could either write off my investment in it as a waste or devote a large portion of my life to it. I chose the latter.”

Yarbrough received his bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees from Princeton University in New Jersey. He takes a particular interest in the Middle East in his studies.

“My broad field is traditionally known as Islamic history, with a focus on the first several centuries after the rise of Islam,” Yarbrough explained. “A topic of special interest at the moment is the multivalent position occupied by non-Muslims in Islamic societies. My current book project examines the history of Muslims' views on the question of whether non-Muslims ought to be appointed as state officials.”

Now, less than a year after graduating, Yarbrough is getting the chance to teach and share his interests with others through his two classes. One is “Origins of the Modern World (1500-Present),” which is required for most College of Arts and Sciences students to take. The other is “The Making of Islamic Societies,” a course of Yarbrough's own design.

“We are questioning the viability of a commonly used term—the Islamic world—by studying the formation of so-called Islamic societies in all their historical aspects between roughly the years 500 and 1100,” he said.

While Yarbrough's passion for the subject comes out in his lectures, he has other hobbies outside the realm of academia. When he isn't doing research or preparing for classes, he likes to try his hand at numismatics (the study

of currency), running, hunting, fishing and carpentry. He has a passion for gardening that he and his wife (an organic farmer) share. If he gets a chance, he likes to help her with her projects, which include urban farming and gardening.