Scott Branting

Scott Branting began the year by receiving the position of Research Assistant Professor. He also continues to serve as the director of the Center for Ancient Middle Eastern Landscapes (CAMEL), the co-director of the Kerkenes Dağ archaeological project in central Turkey, and a participant in the MASS project. All three of these projects can be found in their separate Annual Report sections. He concluded the year anxiously awaiting the imminent birth of his first son.

During 2007–2008 Branting presented papers at the annual meetings of the Archaeological Institute of America, the Society for American Archaeology, in the AGENT 2007: Complex Interaction and Social Emergence Conference, and in the Modeling Mesopotamia Symposium. He gave public lectures in the Oriental Institute Members’ Lecture Series (co-sponsored by the Museum of Science and Industry), the Know Your Chicago Program (Graham School of General
Studies), a series of lectures at the State University of New York at Buffalo (co-sponsored by the Geography and Anthropology Departments and the National Center for Geographic Information and Analysis), an Oriental Institute Museum Docent Lecture, and at the Oriental Institute sponsored by the Oriental Institute and the Chicago Turkish Consulate.


Fred M. Donner

Fred M. Donner spent the academic year 2007–08 on a leave of absence, pursuing a project on the early development of Arabic-Islamic political vocabulary, for which he was awarded a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship. His hypothesis is that the early community of Believers — the forerunner of what we know as the community of Muslims — underwent a change in self-conception in the period around a.d. 680–720. The Believers had originally focused on the ideas of strict monotheism, the coming of the Last Judgment, and the need to observe strictly God's law (as revealed in the Hebrew Bible, the Gospels, and the Qur'an). This meant that the community of Believers also included some righteous Christians and Jews, as well as “Qur'anic” Believers (whom we would call Muslims). With time, however, the leaders of the Believers' movement began to focus more closely on the Qur'an as the true revelation, which they held to be superior to the others, and on the person of the prophet Muhammad, who had first instigated the Believers' movement through his preaching and building of a new community. It is at this time that the community shifted from being a community of Believers to being a community of Muslims, restricted to those who revered the Qur'an. During this process of redefinition, the Muslim leadership made an effort to re-name various political and communal institutions and practices that had grown up in the initial, “Believerish” phase of the community's history, by attaching to these institutions and practices terms drawn from the Qur'an. In this way, they attempted to legitimate these institutions and practices in “Islamic,” that is, Qur'anic, terms.

The only way to test this hypothesis is to see if actual documents from the first Islamic century (seventh century a.d.) — that is, from the “Believerish” phase in the community's history — provide hints that other terms, different from the usual Qur'anic terms that have since become well established, were in use for various institutions and practices. Few actual documents survive from this period in the community's history; the most important are undoubtedly Arabic papyri. Donner's research consequently took him to some of the most important collections of Arabic papyri in Europe — in Paris, Strasbourg, Heidelberg, Vienna, and Oxford — to look for traces of what we might call “pre-Qur'anic” terminology referring to various institutions and practices. He oi.uchicago.edu