

## Crone and the End of Orientalism

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Readers of this volume may well be familiar with the range of tropes, found especially in Arabic biographical dictionaries, which describe a given scholar's immense learning and erudition, inexhaustible industry, and definitive, comprehensive or trenchant contributions to branches of Islamic learning. None shall be employed here because none does the honoree's achievement full justice. Besides, she loathes clichés.<sup>1</sup> I accordingly abdicate my responsibility as laudator, clichéd or otherwise. Instead – and in deep respect for her scholarly temperament – I should like to *argue* a case. The case is that the professional study of early Islamic history changed essentially between *ca* 1975 and 1990, and that although this reshaping was a collective project, Crone's work above all determined it, and, in some respects, continues to do so.

Now insofar as this change is characterized as a shift in perspective, greater “skepticism” or, more narrowly, a privileging of one set of sources for another, this, too, may not come as much of a surprise to some of the volume's readers. After all, it is Crone who appears in a “fictitious dialog” between a *shaykh* and *tālib*, which is intended to discredit a skeptical position on the transmission of material in Prophetic biography.<sup>2</sup> How many Islamicists can claim such celebrity? But this characterization grossly minimizes things, for what was (and remains) at stake was more than the soundness of *ḥadīth* or *sīra*, as the title of this contribution suggests. In fact, narrowing the scope of change to how one reads evidence (or in what language) recycles the very terms of Orientalist reference that Crone so spectacularly exposed. She was the principal force in dislodging something like a disciplinary *habitus*, I shall argue, because her project was more ambitious and far-reaching.

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- 1 This is obvious to anyone who has read Crone, but some of us have had the experience of learning the lesson the hard way. “Why must everything vibrate?” she once asked of a draft of mine that used “vibrant” at least one too many times.
  - 2 Schoeler, *The Biography of Muḥammad*, 120. It is worth noting that authority is inscribed into the shape of the dialog itself: the skeptical position is attributed to the naïve, Crone-referencing *tālib*, who is reduced to temporizing silence by the patronizing *shaykh*. One would have to be obtuse to deny that shadows of culture, generation and gender darken at least some of the occasionally rancorous debate about Islamic origins.

For all the antecedents, precedents and continuities that must necessarily qualify an argument for rapid and profound historiographic change, it can safely be said that no period in the history of *Islamwissenschaft* rivals in originality the decade that began with *Hagarism* (1977), and ended with *Meccan Trade and Roman, Provincial and Islamic Law* (1987), via *Slaves on Horses* (1980), and *God's Caliph* (1986).<sup>3</sup> It was chiefly because of Crone's serial assaults on a range of scholarly orthodoxies that a settled consensus about early Islamic history – what questions were to be asked, how they were to be answered, and what, for the most part, the answers were – was overturned. Implicitly and explicitly comparative, and unremittingly dialectical, the assaults demolished orthodoxies because their very methods repudiated so many of mainstream Orientalism's unspoken rules: not just its self-regulating authoritarianism or disciplinary insularity, but also what might be called its philological gnosticism – the practice of narrating as history more-or-less self-evident truths embedded in culturally valorized texts.

The claim that a disciplinary *habitus* was abandoned is a bold one, and I shall not be able to substantiate it to the satisfaction of all my readers. I freely concede that the following merely outlines the shape of an argument that it is premature to make in full. For one thing, the impact of revisionism takes time to work through the system. "Looking at things in new ways is very hard, much harder than our garden-variety histories of scholarship suggest," writes Marchand in her exhaustive survey of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German scholarship on the Orient.<sup>4</sup> For another, a framework for understanding mid- to late twentieth-century European and North American scholarship on the pre-modern Middle East or Islam has not yet been assembled.<sup>5</sup> That scholarship is inflected by political culture is a truism, of course;<sup>6</sup> but how, for instance, post-War American "engagement" with the Middle East set it apart from British, French, and German varieties, freed as they became of the con-

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3 Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*; Crone, *Slaves on Horses*; Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph*; Crone, *Meccan Trade*, and *Roman, Provincial and Islamic Law*.

4 "Even after the publication of a path-breaking book, many are left fumbling in the dark, without the proper resources or training to switch gears; many will have to finish old research projects even though they are obsolete simply because they are too far along to abandon them." See Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*, 217.

5 There is a well known and steady stream of research on modern Middle Eastern studies (thus Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East*), and a less well known and rising tide of scholarship on Islamic studies before the Second War, such as Haridi, *Das Paradigma der "islamischen Zivilisation"*, but too little has been written about twentieth-century scholarship; for now, see Irwin, *For Lust of Knowing*.

6 For just how profoundly instrumental scholarship on the Middle East and Islam is supposed to be, see Kramer, *Ivory Towers on Sand*.

straints of imperial entanglement, remains an open question. But given the modest number of scholars working in a small handful of academic networks, one may not need political culture to explain why a tired field's regeneration began where it did. Be this as it may, there is no question that the dominant strain until the mid-1970s was deeply conservative – even complacent and self-satisfied, as we shall see. Since it was against that conservatism that the tide was turned, it is with it that we can make a proper start to this appreciation of Crone's contributions.

## 1

In 1974 Crone completed her PhD dissertation under the supervision of B. Lewis,<sup>7</sup> already celebrated as the author of *The Arabs in History*, which was written in 1947 and published in 1950; by 1973 it had appeared in the fifth of its six editions, and it remains in print to this day, lightly revised, some 65 years after its original publication, available in multiple platforms and translations, the most recent apparently being an Uighur e-book.<sup>8</sup> At once authoritative and concise, it showcases Lewis's extraordinary linguistic and historical range; and adorned with epigrams credited to Isaiah, God, Tennyson, Ṭabarī, Rimbaud, and Marlowe (amongst others), it effortlessly exudes the transcendent command of history and culture that was once a mark of British Orientalism. It also captures, in miniature, what was then the settled consensus on the essential shape of Islamic history in Anglo-American scholarship, both conceptual and chronological: his is an untroubled narrative of the rise and decline of a civilization, framed largely (though not exclusively) in ethnic and political terms. In other words, the little book's big and enduring success cannot be understood properly unless one concedes that it introduces its readers to an Islamic-Middle Eastern culture without disturbing what was in many respects a nineteenth-century template of history.

In fact, *The Arabs in History* documents a disciplinary inertia that is nothing short of staggering.<sup>9</sup> It is both a tribute to Lewis's powers of synthesis and a diagnostic of so much of Orientalism's torpor that *The Arabs in History* can be read as an epitome of much of *The Cambridge History of Islam*, which

7 Crone, "The Mawali in the Umayyad Period."

8 Lewis, *The Arabs in History*.

9 Cf. Hitti's symmetrically titled *History of the Arabs*, an 822-page "modest attempt to tell the story of the Arabians and Arabic speaking peoples," which, first published in London in 1939, had reached its fourth edition by 1949.

appeared in 1970, some 33 years later;<sup>10</sup> this is the case in both vision and narrative effect.<sup>11</sup> Implicated as I am in the volumes that succeeded this effort, I will be the first to concede that every Cambridge history is by its very nature something of a Frankenstein's monster, its oft-recycled limbs re-animated by dubious science.<sup>12</sup> And because Cambridge histories conventionally function as authoritative statements about the state of a given field, they often serve as lightning rods for sharp and sometime internecine criticism. What better way for a Young Turk to make a name? In this case, however, the reception was especially brutal. Almost immediately the *Cambridge History of Islam* was recognized as obsolete in both conception and execution.<sup>13</sup> The *coup de grâce* was delivered by R. Owen, whose excoriating review describes a lifeless beast of a project, one pervaded by a "general sense of omniscience," and a "malaise" caused by disciplinary insularity; until disabused of their fixation upon "civilization" as the unit of historical analysis, Orientalists were unlikely to produce sophisticated history.<sup>14</sup>

The rude reception should not have come as a complete surprise. I do not need to rehearse in full how methods and conclusions that subverted Orientalism's positivist consensus – an accepted framework of questions about (and sources for) where "Islam" came from, or who Muḥammad was, about the basic chronology and essential nature of early Islamic institution- and state-building, or the origins of orthodoxy or orthopraxy – had been marginalized. One can point to the paradox that was I. Goldziher (d. 1921). Issuing from the creative fusion of Talmudic study and *Religionsgeschichte*,<sup>15</sup> his brilliance was recognized by contemporaries, but the results of his *ḥadīth* criticism were largely wished away for decades. For his part, J. Schacht (not without some bitterness and self-interest) was "astonished" by the profession's failure to develop

10 Holt, Lambton, and Lewis (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Islam, Volume 1A*.

11 Thus the acute Arkoun in his review of *The Cambridge History of Islam*, 97: "En somme, *The Cambridge History of Islam* se présente non seulement comme un état actuel des connaissances sur l'histoire de l'Islam, mais aussi comme la consécration d'une forme de la connaissance historique, d'un mode de détermination, d'interrogation et de retranscription des documents (en majorité écrits)."

12 Cook et al. (eds.), *The New Cambridge History of Islam*.

13 In addition to Arkoun, see Roux's long diatribe, at once querulous and trenchant, in his review of *The Cambridge History of Islam*. Even one of the project's contributors, Claude Cahen, could not resist taking some swipes in a review that appeared in the *Revue Historique*.

14 Owen, "Studying Islamic History"; always the gentleman, Albert Hourani was more polite in *The English Historical Review*, but his frustration was thinly disguised.

15 Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*, 329.

his own lines of criticism, aligning his rough treatment at the hands of N. J. Coulson with that of the Hungarian master: “[W]hat happened in the past to the work of Goldziher had happened again, recently, with regard to the conclusions . . . achieved by critical scholarship,” he wrote.<sup>16</sup> One can also point to the case of J. Wellhausen (d. 1918), whose source criticism of early *akhbār* was abandoned, at least until rekindled by A. Noth (d. 1999), whose *nasab* meant that he could scarcely have escaped the influence of such criticism.<sup>17</sup> And, finally, one can point to the criticism of the historicity of Prophetic *sīra* leveled by the ill-tempered H. Lammens (d. 1937), or the consequences of the dissertation written in the 1920s by J. Fück (d. 1974) on the transmission history of Ibn Ishāq,<sup>18</sup> 40, 50, or 60 years could go by before they were taken up.<sup>19</sup> The most generous reading of the situation would grant that German *Arabistik* was slightly less lethargic in the 1960s, at least insofar as it generated some literary criticism of *ḥadīth* and *akhbār*,<sup>20</sup> and form criticism of the *sīra*.<sup>21</sup> According to this reading, the Islamic historical tradition was starting to come into focus as primary in the sense that, understood properly, it shed light on the circumstances of its secondary development. What it was not was a repository of accounts that accurately documented the events that they purport to relate: it told us about

16 As has been well documented, the resistance came not only from Coulson, but also from Gibb and Watt, who chose to avoid engaging Schacht’s arguments. For a discussion (and the quotation), see Wakin, “Remembering Joseph Schacht (1902–1969),” 29–30; for Schacht’s opponents, see Forte, “Islamic Law: the Impact of Joseph Schacht”; see also Crone, *Slaves on Horses*, 14, and Crone, *Roman, Provincial and Islamic Law*, 123, note 59.

17 Noth, “Der Charakter,” and *Quellenkritische Studien*, which is revised and translated as Noth and Conrad, *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition*. (The father was Martin Noth [d. 1968], theologian and Old Testament critic.) See also Crone, *Slaves on Horses*, 14. Shahid (*Byzantium and the Arabs*, vol. 2, part 1, 291) speaks dismissively of a “Hamburg school,” but I know of no such *madhhab*.

18 Lammens, “Qoran et tradition: comment fut composée la vie de Mahomet,” and “L’Âge de Mahomet et la chronologie de la sīra”; Fück, “Muhammad ibn Ishaq: literarhistorische Untersuchungen.”

19 See, *inter alia*, Conrad, “Abraha and Muḥammad.”

20 Thus Stetter’s study of al-Bukhārī’s *Ṣaḥīḥ*, “Topoi und Schemata im Ḥadīṭ,” which prefigures Noth’s *Quellenkritische Studien*, and had obvious consequences for *ḥadīth* criticism; see Berg, *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam*, 17.

21 Fück’s work was extended by Sellheim, “Prophet, Chalif und Geschichte,” which was followed up a decade later by his student, al-Samuk, “Die historischen Überlieferungen nach Ibn Ishāq” (such as it is, post-Fück scholarship on *sīra* to the late 1970s is discussed on 4–16).

the eighth and ninth centuries, not the seventh. Even so, the norm was decades of *décalage* between critical insight and systematic progress.<sup>22</sup>

The scholarly somnolence that I have described belongs to a very different time, one that is difficult to conjure now. The story circulates widely that H. A. R. Gibb (one of Lewis's teachers) reported that he was still learning Arabic 40 years after starting it;<sup>23</sup> he was recycling a monotheist stereotype of "multitude and prediction"<sup>24</sup> and, much more significantly, monitoring an academic frontier. For joining the Orientalist guild required paying one's dues – not merely endless years of language study, but the acculturation of broader disciplinary norms. Chief amongst these was the framing expectation, which was itself based on intellectual and cultural pre-commitments about the nature of philology, literature, and society, that the project of reconstructing Islam was essentially transcriptional – about setting an Islamic score to Western instrumentation, one might say. Because the sources were held to constitute a reasonable, coherent, and (not coincidentally) largely Sunni consensus,<sup>25</sup> the scholarly project was by definition conservative; the framework created by those sources being fundamentally sound, this boiled down to introducing new details, texts and figures, and qualifying and adjusting subordinate interpretations. All this goes some way towards explaining why so much of the most path-breaking work in the post-War period was disproportionately produced not by members of the European Orientalist establishment (there was no American one to speak of),<sup>26</sup> but by those who worked either on its margins or entirely outside of it. The body of evidence was not necessarily changing, but because they were drawing upon fresh ideas and approaches, historical materialists (Annaliste, Marxist, or otherwise, such as C. Cahen, M. Rodinson and M. Lombard), along with other non-conformists (such as M. G. S. Hodgson), were breaking new ground. Predictably, much of their work was ignored.<sup>27</sup>

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22 There are several other examples, but an especially telling one is the failure to pursue the perspicacious Brunschvig, "Ibn 'Abdalḥakam et la conquête de l'Afrique du nord."

23 According to Irwin (*For Lust of Knowing*, 325), in the 1960s Oxford students were set the essay topic "What explains Muhammad's success?" When I arrived there in 1993 it was still being set by some tutors.

24 Conrad, "Abraha and Muḥammad," 230–3.

25 On Gibb's view (following Goldziher) of Shi'ism as an "adversarial cult," see Irwin, *For Lust of Knowing*, 242.

26 For the very shallow roots there, see Irwin, *For Lust of Knowing*, 213–14 and 245–7.

27 As noted by Crone herself in *Slaves on Horses*, 212–13, note 97.

## 2

Crone's and Cook's *Hagarism* appeared in 1977, a "pretentious humbug" in the words of one especially rattled reviewer.<sup>28</sup> It proposed that Muḥammad led a messianic movement of Jews and Arabs towards Jerusalem, and that the history of this conquest movement was radically transformed, starting in the late seventh century, into the myth of origins that was (and is) consecrated in (and by) the Islamic historical tradition. The reconstruction has enjoyed little popularity – and not just because it was an unfamiliar argument expressed in a peppery style; it can also be said to have substituted a large corpus of late and tendentious literary representations with a small corpus of early, but manifestly polemical literary representations.<sup>29</sup> R. B. Serjeant may have been amongst the most patronizing of the work's critics, but in both method and conclusions the book was widely panned by the Orientalist establishment.<sup>30</sup>

In pairing *Hagarism* with Wansbrough's *Quranic Studies* – the two were "foaled in the same stable," as he evocatively puts it – Serjeant was probably the first to express what has since become a common misunderstanding, viz., that "revisionists" or "skeptics" are more or less all of a piece,<sup>31</sup> or belong to the same "school." Of course Crone and Cook owed a deep debt to Wansbrough's thinking, but Wansbrough himself made his own views clear about *Hagarism*,<sup>32</sup> and, more generally, about the prospects for historical reconstruction, Hagarene or otherwise: they were very dim indeed, the relevant accounts being "incarcerated in a grammar designed to stress the immediate equivalence of word and world," as he so memorably put it.<sup>33</sup> His was a textual austerity that rejected the conventional relationship between signified and putative referent, and so

28 Serjeant in his review in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 76–8.

29 A fair-minded recapitulation (and rejection) can be found in Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*, 47–59.

30 As Donner understated it 30 years later (in the *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*, 197–9), the book "came as a very loud wake-up call to the then rather sleepy field of early Islamic studies and, like most wake-up calls, its arrival was not exactly welcomed."

31 The collapsing of diverse hermeneutic attitudes into a single "skeptical" or "revisionist" position is a chronic source of confusion; for one discussion, see Robinson, "The Ideological Uses of Islam," 205–28.

32 Where he takes the authors to task for their "methodological assumptions, of which the principal must be that a vocabulary of motives can be freely extrapolated from a discrete collection of literary stereotypes composed by alien and mostly hostile observers.;" see Serjeant's review of *Hagarism*, 155–6.

33 Wansbrough, "Res ipsa loquitur: History and Mimesis," which is reprinted in *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History*, 162.

had little in common with Crone's (and Cook's) pragmatic skepticism. For her part, Crone was to make equally clear her objections not only to Wansbrough's most notorious argument for the late crystallization of the Qur'ānic text,<sup>34</sup> but also to his exiling of Islamic origins from an Arabian setting.<sup>35</sup> The question of when the Qur'ān achieves agency upon the law is one thing;<sup>36</sup> but that it provides for Crone reliable information about the religious and social setting of Arabian Muslims can hardly be doubted.<sup>37</sup> In sum, anyone who thinks at all deeply about Wansbrough's work will recognize how distant his interests lay from Crone's, especially as her ideas evolved during the 1990s.

An obvious source of this and other confusion is *Hagarism's* terseness – sometimes even its gnomic quality. Opening the book is akin to entering a conversation *in medias res*: the historiographical assumptions that undergird the argument, forged in Bloomsbury in the early 1970s, were only fleshed out in subsequent works that appeared in the 1980s, especially *Slaves on Horses* and *Meccan Trade* in Crone's case, *Muhammad* in Cook's.<sup>38</sup> There (and elsewhere) no room is left for doubt. "The entire tradition is tendentious, its aim being the elaboration of an Arabian *Heilsgeschichte*, and this tendentiousness has shaped the facts as we have them, not merely added some partisan statements that we can deduct. Without correctives from outside the Islamic tradition, such as papyri, archaeological evidence, and non-Muslim sources, we have little hope of reconstituting the original shape of this early period."<sup>39</sup> Historiographic skepticism had been in the air, but never had it been delivered with such concussive force: *Hagarism*, *Slaves on Horses*, *Meccan Trade*, *Roman, Provincial and Islamic Law*, and *God's Caliph* hammered not only at the central planks of that *Heilsgeschichte*, but also the elaboration of the political and intellectual traditions in the eighth and ninth centuries, as we shall see.

Language, model, and evidence delivered the blows. Much could be said about Crone's style, particularly what might be called its "prosecutorial rhetoric." Question-posing is very common across academic prose, of course, but in her

34 Here it is worth noting in passing that Cook's reconstruction of the 'Uthmānic skeleton is hardly compatible with Wansbrough's model of gradual crystallization; see Cook, "Stemma of the Regional Codices."

35 See, for example, Crone, "Two Legal Problems," 16 (esp. note 48). Some of the landscape is concisely and accessibly surveyed by Donner, "The Qur'ān in Recent Scholarship."

36 Crone, "Two Legal Problems."

37 Crone, "How Did the Quranic Pagans Make a Living?"; Crone, "The Religion of the Qur'ānic Pagans."

38 Crone, *Slaves on Horses*, 3–17; Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 203–29; Cook, *Muhammad*, 61–76.

39 Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 230.



hands it is uncommonly potent, not merely inaugurating argument (especially by addressing the *status quaestionis*), but also propelling and steering it. “What was the nature of the early caliphate?”; “How much, and in what way, did the customary law of the pre-Islamic Arabs contribute to Islamic law?”; “How long did the Khārijites continue to call their imams *khalīfa* and *amīr al-muʿminīn*?”; “Having unlearned most of what we knew about Meccan trade, do we find ourselves deprived of our capacity to explain the rise of Islam?”<sup>40</sup> The question framed, the interrogation begins: witnesses (sources) are probed, stories are checked out, probabilities measured. A particularly good example of discrediting a witness appears in *Meccan Trade*, where she sets a jackhammer into the exegetical foundations of the *sīra*. The Qurʾān alludes to a journey in Sūrat Quraysh, but what are we to make of the accounts that explain it? The answer is worth reproducing nearly in full:

The journeys, we are told, were the greater and lesser pilgrimages to Mecca: the *hajj* in Dhūʿl-ḥijja and the *ʿumra* in Rajab. Alternatively, they were the migrations of Quraysh to Ṭāʾif in the summer and their return to Mecca in the winter. Or else they were Qurayshī trading journeys. Most exegetes hold them to have been trading journeys, but where did they go? Then went to Syria, we are told: Quraysh would travel by the hot coastal route to Ayla in the winter and by the cool inland route to Buṣrā and Adhriʾāt in the summer. Or else they went to Syria and somewhere else, such as Syria and Rūm, however that is to be understood, or Syria and the Yemen, as is more commonly said: Quraysh would go to Syria in the summer and to the Yemen in the winter, when Syria was too cold, or else to Syria in the winter and the Yemen in the summer, when the route to Syria was too hot. Alternatively . . .

In short, the sura refers to the fact that Quraysh used to trade in Syria, or in Syria and the Yemen, or in Syria and Ethiopia, or in all three, and maybe also in Iraq, or else to their habit of spending the summer in Ṭāʾif, or else to ritual visits to Mecca. It celebrates the fact that they began to trade, or that they continued to do so, or that they stopped; or else it does not refer to trade at all.<sup>41</sup>

40 Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph*, 1; Crone, “Jāhili and Jewish Law: The *Qasāma*,” 153–201 at 153; Crone, “The Khārijites and the Caliphal Title,” 85–91 at 85; Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 231.

41 Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 205–9.

Cataloging the tradition's inconsistencies had never been carried out with such devastating results.<sup>42</sup> Imagery serves to rouse, rile, and provoke: early Islamic history is a "whirlwind," and what remains is "rubble," "dust," and "debris from an obliterated past"; the *Kitāb al-muḥabbar* "rank[s] with the *Guinness Book of Records* among the greatest compilations of useless information"; early Muslim lawyers suffer from "collective amnesia."<sup>43</sup> From this perspective, her prodigious referencing – those avalanches of notes that plow through conventional wisdom and anticipate counter-argument – serves not merely to document and substantiate in exhaustive detail, or surface problems and ventilate debates.<sup>44</sup> The notes are also the equivalent of the prosecutor's binders, thumping theatrically upon the courtroom table.

If the sources narrate *Heilsgeschichte*, the most salient features of which are the Arabian origins of monotheist preaching and the articulation of a proto-Sunni political order, how is one to write genuine history? Here it must be underlined that skepticism about the preservation of authentic, seventh-century material in eighth-, ninth- and tenth-century sources is not simply a matter of disposition or temperament. To be sure, Crone both reflected (and propelled) a trend discernible across several fields of pre-modern history towards accepting the limitations of evidence and deploring the hubris of historians who pretend that things are otherwise. "The natural vice of historians is to claim to know about the past,"<sup>45</sup> is how one western medievalist has responded to the paucity of contemporaneous evidence for regions of the post-Roman west. W. Raven puts it nicely, speaking of the *horror vacui* that leads some scholars, despite all the obstacles, to mine for facts in *sīra* and non-*sīra* material that stands at several generational, cultural, and geographic removes from Muḥammad's west Arabia.<sup>46</sup> This said, Crone's skepticism is grounded in a deeper critique of Orientalist positivism, especially its implicit

42 Cf. Kister, "The Expedition of Bi'r Ma'ūna," 346: "In summary, it may be said that the traditions about this expedition are contradictory as to whether the expedition was a peaceful one sent to teach Islam and the Koran, or a military enterprise; whether it was sent to the Banū 'Āmir or to Sulaim; whether the members of the expedition were slain by clans of Sulaim, by clans of 'Āmir b. Ṣa'ṣa'a, by clans of Sulaim led by 'Āmir b. al-Ṭufail; or by a man of Sulaim; whether the 'Āmir b. Ṣa'ṣa'a opposed the relations between Abū Barā' and the Prophet or supported it."

43 Crone, *Slaves on Horses*, 6–10; Crone, *Roman, Provincial and Islamic Law*, 98.

44 Thus *Slaves on Horses* features 91 pages of text, followed by 6 appendices (in 107 pages – entirely dominated by references), which are followed by no fewer than 711 endnotes spread across 70 pages. Cf. Crone, *Roman, Provincial and Islamic Law* (4 appendices, etc.).

45 Howe, "Anglo-Saxon England and the Postcolonial Void," 25–47.

46 Raven, "Sira," *EI*<sup>2</sup>.

exceptionalism, its imperviousness to model-building, and the insights (some obvious, some less) that come with understanding social change as the product of both the particular and the universal. "I have simply refused to treat the Arabs as an exception to the normal rules of history, and something is badly wrong in Islamic studies if I have to *justify* this procedure," she wrote in response to an especially offended member of the Arabist old guard.<sup>47</sup> It would be folly to try to encapsulate thousands of pages of scholarship within a single sentence, but this may be as close as one can come.

Strange as it may sound, to understand Crone's approach to Islamic history one is well advised to read what she has to say about non-Islamic history, especially about the state, politics and religion.<sup>48</sup> Doing so clarifies her terms of historical and sociological analysis (e.g., "barbarian," "religion"), as well as her materialism; perhaps even more important, it reveals a framework of understanding the patterns of pre-modern global history. What one also finds, *inter alia*, is an inversion of Orientalist presumptions: it is early modern Europe that presents the "oddity," the Islamic Middle East an elaboration of the norm.<sup>49</sup> From this perspective, the argumentative rhetoric of *Slaves on Horses*, etc., can be seen as an admonition that the field should be arguing about Islamic history not within its own terms, but as a series of problems that constitute one trajectory – the spread of a monotheist religio-political tradition within the late antique Middle East – that is itself one variation of pre-modern history. *Slaves on Horses* consigns Wellhausen's venerable *Das arabische Reich und sein Sturz* to obsolescence in part because it offers a better understanding of Umayyad factionalism (and the like),<sup>50</sup> but in larger part because it frames the Sufyānid-Marwānid-Abbasid narrative as an ongoing (and unsuccessful) set of solutions to the central challenge of early Islam: how, in the absence of sophisticated ruling traditions of their own, were Muslims to institutionalize God's dispensation without assimilating the traditions that they had replaced? This is why adducing Icelandic sagas (to take one of many examples) is not the performance of erudition,<sup>51</sup> although that erudition – or, more precisely, the combination of erudition and industry – is stupefying. (Surely I am not the only one to arrive at an article's end punch-drunk, or to have been dumfounded to

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47 Crone, "Serjeant and Meccan Trade," 240.

48 Crone, *Pre-industrial Societies*.

49 See, for example, Crone, *Pre-industrial Societies*, 147.

50 Wellhausen, *Das arabische Reich und sein Sturz*, which is translated as *The Arab Kingdom and its Fall*.

51 Crone, *Slaves on Horses*, 8–9.

learn that her field of knowledge encompasses various species of baboons?)<sup>52</sup> Rather, such referencing is about drawing parallels and comparisons in order to isolate what is distinctive (sometimes even remarkable) in Islamic history.

What all this means is that reconstructing history is more than a matter of identifying what is reliable. A first step, of course, is controlling for date, provenance or perspective, such as by relying exclusively or chiefly upon the testimony of sources that provide alternatives to the Arabo-Islamic *Heilsgeschichte*, such as Syriac or Hebrew apocalypses, pre-canonical *ḥadīth*, papyri, coins, documents, and poetry, or, for that matter, traditions that lie outside of the Sunni mainstream.<sup>53</sup> But reconstructing history is also a matter of identifying the most promising fit between evidence and model. An egregious case of misfit, one in which bad evidence is imposed badly upon social setting, is Watt's interpretation of Muḥammad's program in the Ḥijāz: Watt was wrong not merely because he was reading the sources credulously, but because his model of west Arabian society was laughably anachronistic. "Watt's desire to find social malaise in the desert would have been more convincing if the Meccans had been members of OPEC rather than the *ḥilf al-fudūl*."<sup>54</sup> R. Dussaud may have thought the "problem of Muḥammad" solved by "les arabisants,"<sup>55</sup> but Crone knew that *historians* had scarcely addressed it as such, and so, in stark contrast to Watt's view, what is provisionally offered as a solution to the "problem" of Meccan trade seeks to align the available evidence, duly evaluated, with the appropriate model.<sup>56</sup> To make sense of the marriage of prophecy and conquest in early seventh-century Arabia, one should thus look to comparable moments of human history in which alien domination triggered primitive political action – that is, nativist movements.

Comparisons pay dividends. To my mind, *God's Caliph* is the most exciting and consequential work of early Islamic history written over the last half century, and it packs its extraordinary punch because it applies evidence to model so effectively. Of course Watt and Schacht (amongst others) had set the groundwork for challenging the classical Sunni view on the Umayyad and early Abbasid caliphate,<sup>57</sup> but it was Crone and Hinds who recognized how deeply

52 Cook, "Ibn Qutayba and the Monkeys," 66, note 97.

53 Such as in Crone and Zimmermann, *The Epistle of Sālim Ibn Dhakwān*.

54 Crone, *Slaves on Horses*, 209, note 71 (where Shaban is guilty of the same).

55 Thus his review of Blachère's *Le Problème de Mahomet*, 163.

56 Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 4.

57 Watt, "God's Caliph: Qur'anic Interpretations and Umayyad Claims," which is reprinted in Watt, *Early Islam: Collected Articles*; Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*.

the jurists' and traditionists' views had misrepresented things, especially by denuding legislating and salvific caliphs of their religious authority. As they show in exacting detail, documentary, numismatic, and literary evidence, all of which can be dated to the seventh and eighth centuries, documents a pre-classical conception of God's Deputyship rooted in (and legitimated by) Muḥammad's indivisible authority.<sup>58</sup> What results is a genuinely radical revision of the state's governing institution,<sup>59</sup> along with a striking recasting of early Islamic religious history, in which the genealogies of orthodox and heterodox positions are re-mapped: the Sunni construction of the caliphate is shown to be a departure, the Imami conception an "archaism rather than an innovation."<sup>60</sup> Had Walter Bauer been an Islamicist, he might well have shown the same.

That the origins and evolution of early Islam *constitute problems* may sound banal, but as pursued by Crone they ramify in several main, sometimes intersecting, but always interesting lines of inquiry. One concerns how tribes relate to states, including how tribes turn into states;<sup>61</sup> in the case of the birth of Islam in its tribal environment, the work of "unlearning" initiated by *Meccan Trade* has now yielded to a re-appraisal of trade as a source of both wealth and information.<sup>62</sup> Another is about incorporation, especially the social practice and legal institution of clientage;<sup>63</sup> since the genesis of *walā'* is predictably murky, the inquiry necessarily leads to the vexing and controversial question of how Islamic law relates to pre-Islamic and contemporary legal traditions (Jāhili, Roman, provincial, and Jewish). A third addresses colonialism and how natives respond to it.<sup>64</sup> A fourth is about rulership and the law, both in theory and practice.<sup>65</sup> Still another, closely related in some respects, aims to describe

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58 Whatever the ultimate inspiration for the idea may be; see Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph*, 111–15; and Crone, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought*, 40.

59 The caliphate would remain near or at the heart of future work on political thought; see below, note 63.

60 Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph*, 99.

61 Thus, for example, Crone, *Slaves on Horses*, 18; Crone, "The Tribe and the State"; Crone, "Tribes and States in the Middle East."

62 Crone, "Quraysh and the Roman Army."

63 Thus, Crone, *Slaves on Horses*, 49–57; Crone, *Roman, Provincial and Islamic Law*; Crone, "Mawālī and the Prophet's Family"; Crone, "The Pay of Client Soldiers."

64 Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 247–52; Crone, "Imperial Trauma: The Case of the Arabs"; Crone, "Post-colonialism in Tenth-century Islam"; and Crone, *Nativist Prophets*.

65 Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph*; Crone, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought*.

the evolution of religious ideas, especially by throwing into doubt orthodox truisms.<sup>66</sup>

In sum, behind the “combination of holy law and learned laity”<sup>67</sup> that may be said to characterize classical Islam lies a multitude of ideas, movements, practices, and institutions. Some were compelling only in the short term, others enduring; but in one way or another they were all formed by history, especially the articulation of an Islamic political order. One can agree or disagree with specific assertions or arguments, but there is no denying the overall impression created by her body of work: early Islam was more contentious, more controversial, and more creative than most Orientalists could ever have imagined.

### 3

This last point has obvious significance not just for reconstructing early Islamic history, but also for the present.

Things have changed over the last 40 years or so. As is well known, across the humanities and social sciences, all manner of literary and cultural critiques have thrown into doubt a wide range of certainties, both methodological and substantive (if one is allowed to posit such a crude dichotomy). Meanwhile, in our networked and globalized world, digital technology now narrows to seconds and minutes the time between event reported (or book published) and opinion voiced, creating a virtually infinite public sphere for scholarly and cultural debate. In the case of Islam and the Middle East, the debates have been driven mainly by state and non-state violence, demographic change within Europe (especially resulting from Muslim immigration), and the emergence of new varieties of Islamic political thought, some still theoretical, some finding application in Middle Eastern states. Sometimes the debates are sterile or substantive, still other times even existential. What will become of the “West” if its religio-cultural-legal traditions fail to withstand the effects of Muslim immigration? How does one engineer an “Islam” that will prosper in multicultural and democratic societies, especially given the rise of conservative, even militant Islamism? Since past practice is commonly adduced to answer these

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66 Of several examples, an especially good one is Crone, “The First-Century Concept of *Hijra*.”

67 Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*, 30.

and other questions, it is little wonder that Islamic history matters more and more.<sup>68</sup>

The demand for information and understanding having grown so, supply has accordingly adjusted; and the stakes being so high (at least for some), the din of polemics has risen as well. In some respects, these are the best and worst of times for Islamic studies. At their worst, the polemics recycle perennial aspersions: Muhammad did not exist or is an imposter;<sup>69</sup> the Qurʾān is a sham text.<sup>70</sup> Islam discredited, the West is best, or so we are supposed to conclude. On the other hand, more scholars and students study early Islam than ever before, accessing online tools and data that used to be the preserve of graduate seminars. Debates about Qurʾān manuscripts, once limited to Orientalists' correspondence and the like, now appear in mass-market magazines and newspapers.<sup>71</sup> In the early 1970s, an unlikely argument about the Christian origins of the Qurʾān was ignored outside of a small circle of scholars;<sup>72</sup> by the early 2000s, a pseudonymous book, also on the Christian origins of the Qurʾān, could generate multiple editions, a translation, and a collected volume, not to mention innumerable blogs, all in a matter of a few years.<sup>73</sup> In 1961, with Watt's biography still casting a long shadow, Rodinson looked across about 25 years of scholarship on Muḥammad, and thought eight monographs worth mentioning.<sup>74</sup> Over the last four years or so alone one can count many more than that, some proposing radically new views,<sup>75</sup> others holding to fairly conventional lines.<sup>76</sup>

68 Thus An-Naim (*Islam and the Secular State*, 45), where he sets out to show that his "proposal for a secular state is more consistent with Islamic history than is the so-called Islamic state model proposed by some Muslims since the second quarter of the twentieth century."

69 Spencer, *The Truth about Muhammad*, and his *Did Muhammad Exist?*

70 For example, Ibn Warraq, *Virgins? What Virgins?*

71 Lester, "What is the Koran?"; Lester, "The Lost Archive."

72 Lüling, *Über den Ur-Qurʾān*: a revised version and translation appeared 30 years later as *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation: The Rediscovery and Reliable Reconstruction of a Comprehensive Pre-Islamic Christian Hymnal Hidden in the Koran under Earliest Islamic Reinterpretations*.

73 Luxenberg, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran: ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache*, 4th ed., which is translated as *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran*, and debated in C. Burgmer (ed.), *Streit um den Koran*.

74 Rodinson, *Muhammed*, 343–6.

75 Thus Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet*; Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*; and Powers, *Muḥammad is Not the Father of Any of Your Men*.

76 Thus Nagel, *Mohammed*, which is translated as *Mahomet*; Jansen, *Mohammed: Eine Biographie*; Lo Jacono, *Maometto*; Peters, *Jesus and Muhammad*; Brockopp (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Muḥammad*.

These and other signs of the efflorescence of Islamic studies are difficult to imagine absent the critical turn effected in the 1970s and 1980s. A generation ago, the essential soundness of the early Islamic historical and biographical traditions was self-evident, and at the center of the Orientalist tradition such criticism as took place amounted to little more than filtering obvious anachronisms, and reconciling or harmonizing inconsistencies and contradictions. It is testimony to the persuasiveness of the revisionist critique that writing Prophetic biography in a conventional sense – that is, by re-narrativizing *sīra* episodes – no longer occupies the center of the field; it is left to popularizers or scholars writing in a popularizing mode. As far as the historiography of early Islam is concerned, the burden of proof has shifted decisively: what was once effortlessly assumed is now painstakingly documented.<sup>77</sup> In fact, much of what was radical in the 1970s and early 1980s is now middle-of-the road, the radical fringe now occupied by those who deny what so-called revisionists freely concede, e.g., that Muḥammad existed or that the conquests took place.<sup>78</sup> It is largely due to the skeptical turn that the once-sleepy field of early Islamic historiography has changed beyond recognition,<sup>79</sup> and so, too, the study of early Islamic documentary and material culture (e.g., archeology, epigraphy, papyrology, and numismatics). It is upon the basis of such sources that matters once settled (such as the nature of the earliest Islamic state) are now subject to stimulating controversy.<sup>80</sup>

Needless to say, some of what is written about Islam has created more heat than it has light. To serve a broad audience of non-Islamicists Crone has

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77 For examples of the painstaking work now being undertaken in the hope of establishing the authenticity of *sīra* narratives, see Motzki, “The Murder of Ibn Abī l-Ḥuqayq”; Schoeler, *The Biography of Muḥammad*; Görke and Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte über das Leben Muḥammads*. That such attempts are successful should not be taken as granted; for one set of recent criticisms, see Shoemaker, “In Search of ‘Urwa’s Sira.”

78 For an early example, Koren and Nevo, “Methodological Approaches to Islamic Studies”; for a recent one, Popp, “The Early History of Islam.”

79 For years the standard had been Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*; an incomplete list of recent monographs focusing on the early period includes Duri, *The Rise of Historical Writing*; Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*; Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*; Schöller, *Exegetisches Denken und Prophetenbiographie*; and Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*.

80 The bibliography is huge, but two complementary examples are Johns, “Archaeology and the History of Early Islam,” and Hoyland, “New Documentary Texts and the History of the Early Islamic State.” The intra-Islamicist kerfuffle about the Nessana evidence should now be evaluated in the light of Ruffini, “Village Life and Family Power in Late Antique Nessana.”



written online and commissioned works of *haute vulgarisation*,<sup>81</sup> thus implicitly or explicitly arguing against ignorance, willful or otherwise. She has always been as generous as she is uncompromising in her comments on the work of students and colleagues,<sup>82</sup> but it is tempting as well to infer from the sparer prose and lighter referencing in some of her more recent work an attempt to deliver sophisticated Islamic history to non-Islamicists curious about the pre-modern background to contemporary events. This is explicitly the case of *Medieval Islamic Political Thought*, which, tracing a 600-year evolution from Muḥammad to the Mongols, is something of a summa of 30 years' work. Accommodating "political thought" in an expansive sense so as to include sectarianism, politics, political theory, law, theology (and much more besides), it subsumes an extraordinary array of sources and problems, and traces the contentious but nearly always consistent attempt to engineer a theocracy that expressed Muslims' possession of both "truth and power."<sup>83</sup> As much as *Slaves on Horses* made Wellhausen's work on the Umayyad caliphate obsolete, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought* is the first sustained study that makes political, religious, and ideological sense of Islamic history. The book's implications for modern Islamic thinking are not inconsiderable, and so leave no doubt that the present converses with the past.

What, then, is the responsibility of the scholar, especially one who claims to know a distant and seminal past? Liberal societies require "truthful inquiry," as B. Williams reminds us, which can take "myths to pieces."<sup>84</sup> One answer that she gives is to insist on the primacy of evidence and the difficulty of reaching conclusions. We might well wish the early Islamic community to have been ecumenical, but that does not make it so.<sup>85</sup> We might wish to prove that the leather trade was key to Qurashī wealth, but at present the model is better than the evidence.<sup>86</sup> Another, perhaps less obvious answer issues directly from the historicizing project itself. For the scholar, what better way to reduce the "tension" between "historian and believer" than to highlight the constructed

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81 Crone serves as General Editor of the "Makers of the Muslim World" series of biographies (Oneworld); for a list of published volumes, see <http://www.oneworld-publications.com/series/makers-of-the-muslim-world>.

82 Everyone has a story, and mine, which is typical, has her responding to a long and undisciplined draft article within 36 hours – with three single-spaced pages of comments. Much to my embarrassment, she understood my intended argument better than I did.

83 Crone, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought*, 16.

84 Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, 265.

85 As she argues in her review of Donner, *Muḥammad and the Believers* at <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/42023/among-the-believers>.

86 Crone, "Quraysh and the Roman Army."

and contingent nature of orthodoxy in general and the Sunni synthesis in particular?<sup>87</sup> Here it should be recalled that the process of harmonizing inconsistencies and contradictions that produced the master narrative of Islamic history, more-or-less faithfully recapitulated by the majority of Western historians until a generation ago, was fundamental to Sunni success, not least of all because it was so radical. For not only was controversy to be forgotten and the process that created consensus obscured by the onset of “collective amnesia”;<sup>88</sup> it is also the case that hermeneutical techniques were put in place to routinize the harmonization of contradictions and inconsistencies, such as the imposition of Tradition upon Scripture.<sup>89</sup> History as description is one thing, and history as prescription something else; when the two are confused, sometimes it takes a correspondingly radical reappraisal to set things right. And Crone’s contribution – that ongoing project of comprehensive disambiguation – aims at precisely that.

So more than any other scholar, it is thanks to her that historians are finally doing their subject justice. We may – or *should* – disagree about the precise causes and vectors of change, but one can hardly disagree with P. Brown that early Islam constituted “the last, most rapid crisis in the religious history of the Late Antique period.”<sup>90</sup> Highly controversial, inventive and experimental, the project that Muslims set for themselves was as ambitious as it was unimaginable. How is one to make sense of it or draw proper lessons from it without asking fundamental questions about how it came to be?

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87 This highlighting project cuts across virtually the entirety of her published work; for “tension,” see Crone, “No Compulsion in Religion,” especially at 162.

88 As good an example as any being the so-called “four-caliph thesis,” which not only went some way towards reconciling Sunni and Shi’ite views, but also defanged God’s caliph; see Crone, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought*.

89 Crone, “No Compulsion in Religion,” 164–5.

90 Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity, AD 150–750*, 189; cf. Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis*, where the debt to Brown, Crone, and Cook is made explicit.

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## Crone and the End of Orientalism

*Chase F. Robinson*

Readers of this volume may well be familiar with the range of tropes, found especially in Arabic biographical dictionaries, which describe a given scholar's immense learning and erudition, inexhaustible industry, and definitive, comprehensive or trenchant contributions to branches of Islamic learning. None shall be employed here because none does the honoree's achievement full justice. Besides, she loathes clichés.<sup>1</sup> I accordingly abdicate my responsibility as laudator, clichéd or otherwise. Instead – and in deep respect for her scholarly temperament – I should like to *argue* a case. The case is that the professional study of early Islamic history changed essentially between *ca* 1975 and 1990, and that although this reshaping was a collective project, Crone's work above all determined it, and, in some respects, continues to do so.

Now insofar as this change is characterized as a shift in perspective, greater “skepticism” or, more narrowly, a privileging of one set of sources for another, this, too, may not come as much of a surprise to some of the volume's readers. After all, it is Crone who appears in a “fictitious dialog” between a *shaykh* and *tālib*, which is intended to discredit a skeptical position on the transmission of material in Prophetic biography.<sup>2</sup> How many Islamicists can claim such celebrity? But this characterization grossly minimizes things, for what was (and remains) at stake was more than the soundness of *ḥadīth* or *sīra*, as the title of this contribution suggests. In fact, narrowing the scope of change to how one reads evidence (or in what language) recycles the very terms of Orientalist reference that Crone so spectacularly exposed. She was the principal force in dislodging something like a disciplinary *habitus*, I shall argue, because her project was more ambitious and far-reaching.

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- 1 This is obvious to anyone who has read Crone, but some of us have had the experience of learning the lesson the hard way. “Why must everything vibrate?” she once asked of a draft of mine that used “vibrant” at least one too many times.
  - 2 Schoeler, *The Biography of Muḥammad*, 120. It is worth noting that authority is inscribed into the shape of the dialog itself: the skeptical position is attributed to the naïve, Crone-referencing *tālib*, who is reduced to temporizing silence by the patronizing *shaykh*. One would have to be obtuse to deny that shadows of culture, generation and gender darken at least some of the occasionally rancorous debate about Islamic origins.

For all the antecedents, precedents and continuities that must necessarily qualify an argument for rapid and profound historiographic change, it can safely be said that no period in the history of *Islamwissenschaft* rivals in originality the decade that began with *Hagarism* (1977), and ended with *Meccan Trade and Roman, Provincial and Islamic Law* (1987), via *Slaves on Horses* (1980), and *God's Caliph* (1986).<sup>3</sup> It was chiefly because of Crone's serial assaults on a range of scholarly orthodoxies that a settled consensus about early Islamic history – what questions were to be asked, how they were to be answered, and what, for the most part, the answers were – was overturned. Implicitly and explicitly comparative, and unremittingly dialectical, the assaults demolished orthodoxies because their very methods repudiated so many of mainstream Orientalism's unspoken rules: not just its self-regulating authoritarianism or disciplinary insularity, but also what might be called its philological gnosticism – the practice of narrating as history more-or-less self-evident truths embedded in culturally valorized texts.

The claim that a disciplinary *habitus* was abandoned is a bold one, and I shall not be able to substantiate it to the satisfaction of all my readers. I freely concede that the following merely outlines the shape of an argument that it is premature to make in full. For one thing, the impact of revisionism takes time to work through the system. "Looking at things in new ways is very hard, much harder than our garden-variety histories of scholarship suggest," writes Marchand in her exhaustive survey of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German scholarship on the Orient.<sup>4</sup> For another, a framework for understanding mid- to late twentieth-century European and North American scholarship on the pre-modern Middle East or Islam has not yet been assembled.<sup>5</sup> That scholarship is inflected by political culture is a truism, of course;<sup>6</sup> but how, for instance, post-War American "engagement" with the Middle East set it apart from British, French, and German varieties, freed as they became of the con-

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3 Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*; Crone, *Slaves on Horses*; Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph*; Crone, *Meccan Trade*, and *Roman, Provincial and Islamic Law*.

4 "Even after the publication of a path-breaking book, many are left fumbling in the dark, without the proper resources or training to switch gears; many will have to finish old research projects even though they are obsolete simply because they are too far along to abandon them." See Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*, 217.

5 There is a well known and steady stream of research on modern Middle Eastern studies (thus Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East*), and a less well known and rising tide of scholarship on Islamic studies before the Second War, such as Haridi, *Das Paradigma der "islamischen Zivilisation"*, but too little has been written about twentieth-century scholarship; for now, see Irwin, *For Lust of Knowing*.

6 For just how profoundly instrumental scholarship on the Middle East and Islam is supposed to be, see Kramer, *Ivory Towers on Sand*.

straints of imperial entanglement, remains an open question. But given the modest number of scholars working in a small handful of academic networks, one may not need political culture to explain why a tired field's regeneration began where it did. Be this as it may, there is no question that the dominant strain until the mid-1970s was deeply conservative – even complacent and self-satisfied, as we shall see. Since it was against that conservatism that the tide was turned, it is with it that we can make a proper start to this appreciation of Crone's contributions.

## 1

In 1974 Crone completed her PhD dissertation under the supervision of B. Lewis,<sup>7</sup> already celebrated as the author of *The Arabs in History*, which was written in 1947 and published in 1950; by 1973 it had appeared in the fifth of its six editions, and it remains in print to this day, lightly revised, some 65 years after its original publication, available in multiple platforms and translations, the most recent apparently being an Uighur e-book.<sup>8</sup> At once authoritative and concise, it showcases Lewis's extraordinary linguistic and historical range; and adorned with epigrams credited to Isaiah, God, Tennyson, Ṭabarī, Rimbaud, and Marlowe (amongst others), it effortlessly exudes the transcendent command of history and culture that was once a mark of British Orientalism. It also captures, in miniature, what was then the settled consensus on the essential shape of Islamic history in Anglo-American scholarship, both conceptual and chronological: his is an untroubled narrative of the rise and decline of a civilization, framed largely (though not exclusively) in ethnic and political terms. In other words, the little book's big and enduring success cannot be understood properly unless one concedes that it introduces its readers to an Islamic-Middle Eastern culture without disturbing what was in many respects a nineteenth-century template of history.

In fact, *The Arabs in History* documents a disciplinary inertia that is nothing short of staggering.<sup>9</sup> It is both a tribute to Lewis's powers of synthesis and a diagnostic of so much of Orientalism's torpor that *The Arabs in History* can be read as an epitome of much of *The Cambridge History of Islam*, which

7 Crone, "The Mawali in the Umayyad Period."

8 Lewis, *The Arabs in History*.

9 Cf. Hitti's symmetrically titled *History of the Arabs*, an 822-page "modest attempt to tell the story of the Arabians and Arabic speaking peoples," which, first published in London in 1939, had reached its fourth edition by 1949.

appeared in 1970, some 33 years later;<sup>10</sup> this is the case in both vision and narrative effect.<sup>11</sup> Implicated as I am in the volumes that succeeded this effort, I will be the first to concede that every Cambridge history is by its very nature something of a Frankenstein's monster, its oft-recycled limbs re-animated by dubious science.<sup>12</sup> And because Cambridge histories conventionally function as authoritative statements about the state of a given field, they often serve as lightning rods for sharp and sometime internecine criticism. What better way for a Young Turk to make a name? In this case, however, the reception was especially brutal. Almost immediately the *Cambridge History of Islam* was recognized as obsolete in both conception and execution.<sup>13</sup> The *coup de grâce* was delivered by R. Owen, whose excoriating review describes a lifeless beast of a project, one pervaded by a "general sense of omniscience," and a "malaise" caused by disciplinary insularity; until disabused of their fixation upon "civilization" as the unit of historical analysis, Orientalists were unlikely to produce sophisticated history.<sup>14</sup>

The rude reception should not have come as a complete surprise. I do not need to rehearse in full how methods and conclusions that subverted Orientalism's positivist consensus – an accepted framework of questions about (and sources for) where "Islam" came from, or who Muḥammad was, about the basic chronology and essential nature of early Islamic institution- and state-building, or the origins of orthodoxy or orthopraxy – had been marginalized. One can point to the paradox that was I. Goldziher (d. 1921). Issuing from the creative fusion of Talmudic study and *Religionsgeschichte*,<sup>15</sup> his brilliance was recognized by contemporaries, but the results of his *ḥadīth* criticism were largely wished away for decades. For his part, J. Schacht (not without some bitterness and self-interest) was "astonished" by the profession's failure to develop

10 Holt, Lambton, and Lewis (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Islam, Volume 1A*.

11 Thus the acute Arkoun in his review of *The Cambridge History of Islam*, 97: "En somme, *The Cambridge History of Islam* se présente non seulement comme un état actuel des connaissances sur l'histoire de l'Islam, mais aussi comme la consécration d'une forme de la connaissance historique, d'un mode de détermination, d'interrogation et de retranscription des documents (en majorité écrits)."

12 Cook et al. (eds.), *The New Cambridge History of Islam*.

13 In addition to Arkoun, see Roux's long diatribe, at once querulous and trenchant, in his review of *The Cambridge History of Islam*. Even one of the project's contributors, Claude Cahen, could not resist taking some swipes in a review that appeared in the *Revue Historique*.

14 Owen, "Studying Islamic History"; always the gentleman, Albert Hourani was more polite in *The English Historical Review*, but his frustration was thinly disguised.

15 Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*, 329.

his own lines of criticism, aligning his rough treatment at the hands of N. J. Coulson with that of the Hungarian master: “[W]hat happened in the past to the work of Goldziher had happened again, recently, with regard to the conclusions . . . achieved by critical scholarship,” he wrote.<sup>16</sup> One can also point to the case of J. Wellhausen (d. 1918), whose source criticism of early *akhbār* was abandoned, at least until rekindled by A. Noth (d. 1999), whose *nasab* meant that he could scarcely have escaped the influence of such criticism.<sup>17</sup> And, finally, one can point to the criticism of the historicity of Prophetic *sīra* leveled by the ill-tempered H. Lammens (d. 1937), or the consequences of the dissertation written in the 1920s by J. Fück (d. 1974) on the transmission history of Ibn Ishāq,<sup>18</sup> 40, 50, or 60 years could go by before they were taken up.<sup>19</sup> The most generous reading of the situation would grant that German *Arabistik* was slightly less lethargic in the 1960s, at least insofar as it generated some literary criticism of *ḥadīth* and *akhbār*,<sup>20</sup> and form criticism of the *sīra*.<sup>21</sup> According to this reading, the Islamic historical tradition was starting to come into focus as primary in the sense that, understood properly, it shed light on the circumstances of its secondary development. What it was not was a repository of accounts that accurately documented the events that they purport to relate: it told us about

16 As has been well documented, the resistance came not only from Coulson, but also from Gibb and Watt, who chose to avoid engaging Schacht’s arguments. For a discussion (and the quotation), see Wakin, “Remembering Joseph Schacht (1902–1969),” 29–30; for Schacht’s opponents, see Forte, “Islamic Law: the Impact of Joseph Schacht”; see also Crone, *Slaves on Horses*, 14, and Crone, *Roman, Provincial and Islamic Law*, 123, note 59.

17 Noth, “Der Charakter,” and *Quellenkritische Studien*, which is revised and translated as Noth and Conrad, *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition*. (The father was Martin Noth [d. 1968], theologian and Old Testament critic.) See also Crone, *Slaves on Horses*, 14. Shahid (*Byzantium and the Arabs*, vol. 2, part 1, 291) speaks dismissively of a “Hamburg school,” but I know of no such *madhhab*.

18 Lammens, “Qoran et tradition: comment fut composée la vie de Mahomet,” and “L’Âge de Mahomet et la chronologie de la sīra”; Fück, “Muhammad ibn Ishaq: literarhistorische Untersuchungen.”

19 See, *inter alia*, Conrad, “Abraha and Muḥammad.”

20 Thus Stetter’s study of al-Bukhārī’s *Ṣaḥīḥ*, “Topoi und Schemata im Ḥadīṭ,” which prefigures Noth’s *Quellenkritische Studien*, and had obvious consequences for *ḥadīth* criticism; see Berg, *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam*, 17.

21 Fück’s work was extended by Sellheim, “Prophet, Chalif und Geschichte,” which was followed up a decade later by his student, al-Samuk, “Die historischen Überlieferungen nach Ibn Ishāq” (such as it is, post-Fück scholarship on *sīra* to the late 1970s is discussed on 4–16).

the eighth and ninth centuries, not the seventh. Even so, the norm was decades of *décalage* between critical insight and systematic progress.<sup>22</sup>

The scholarly somnolence that I have described belongs to a very different time, one that is difficult to conjure now. The story circulates widely that H. A. R. Gibb (one of Lewis's teachers) reported that he was still learning Arabic 40 years after starting it;<sup>23</sup> he was recycling a monotheist stereotype of "multitude and prediction"<sup>24</sup> and, much more significantly, monitoring an academic frontier. For joining the Orientalist guild required paying one's dues – not merely endless years of language study, but the acculturation of broader disciplinary norms. Chief amongst these was the framing expectation, which was itself based on intellectual and cultural pre-commitments about the nature of philology, literature, and society, that the project of reconstructing Islam was essentially transcriptional – about setting an Islamic score to Western instrumentation, one might say. Because the sources were held to constitute a reasonable, coherent, and (not coincidentally) largely Sunni consensus,<sup>25</sup> the scholarly project was by definition conservative; the framework created by those sources being fundamentally sound, this boiled down to introducing new details, texts and figures, and qualifying and adjusting subordinate interpretations. All this goes some way towards explaining why so much of the most path-breaking work in the post-War period was disproportionately produced not by members of the European Orientalist establishment (there was no American one to speak of),<sup>26</sup> but by those who worked either on its margins or entirely outside of it. The body of evidence was not necessarily changing, but because they were drawing upon fresh ideas and approaches, historical materialists (Annaliste, Marxist, or otherwise, such as C. Cahen, M. Rodinson and M. Lombard), along with other non-conformists (such as M. G. S. Hodgson), were breaking new ground. Predictably, much of their work was ignored.<sup>27</sup>

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22 There are several other examples, but an especially telling one is the failure to pursue the perspicacious Brunschvig, "Ibn 'Abdalḥakam et la conquête de l'Afrique du nord."

23 According to Irwin (*For Lust of Knowing*, 325), in the 1960s Oxford students were set the essay topic "What explains Muhammad's success?" When I arrived there in 1993 it was still being set by some tutors.

24 Conrad, "Abraha and Muḥammad," 230–3.

25 On Gibb's view (following Goldziher) of Shi'ism as an "adversarial cult," see Irwin, *For Lust of Knowing*, 242.

26 For the very shallow roots there, see Irwin, *For Lust of Knowing*, 213–14 and 245–7.

27 As noted by Crone herself in *Slaves on Horses*, 212–13, note 97.

## 2

Crone's and Cook's *Hagarism* appeared in 1977, a "pretentious humbug" in the words of one especially rattled reviewer.<sup>28</sup> It proposed that Muḥammad led a messianic movement of Jews and Arabs towards Jerusalem, and that the history of this conquest movement was radically transformed, starting in the late seventh century, into the myth of origins that was (and is) consecrated in (and by) the Islamic historical tradition. The reconstruction has enjoyed little popularity – and not just because it was an unfamiliar argument expressed in a peppery style; it can also be said to have substituted a large corpus of late and tendentious literary representations with a small corpus of early, but manifestly polemical literary representations.<sup>29</sup> R. B. Serjeant may have been amongst the most patronizing of the work's critics, but in both method and conclusions the book was widely panned by the Orientalist establishment.<sup>30</sup>

In pairing *Hagarism* with Wansbrough's *Quranic Studies* – the two were "foaled in the same stable," as he evocatively puts it – Serjeant was probably the first to express what has since become a common misunderstanding, viz., that "revisionists" or "skeptics" are more or less all of a piece,<sup>31</sup> or belong to the same "school." Of course Crone and Cook owed a deep debt to Wansbrough's thinking, but Wansbrough himself made his own views clear about *Hagarism*,<sup>32</sup> and, more generally, about the prospects for historical reconstruction, Hagarene or otherwise: they were very dim indeed, the relevant accounts being "incarcerated in a grammar designed to stress the immediate equivalence of word and world," as he so memorably put it.<sup>33</sup> His was a textual austerity that rejected the conventional relationship between signified and putative referent, and so

28 Serjeant in his review in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 76–8.

29 A fair-minded recapitulation (and rejection) can be found in Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*, 47–59.

30 As Donner understated it 30 years later (in the *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*, 197–9), the book "came as a very loud wake-up call to the then rather sleepy field of early Islamic studies and, like most wake-up calls, its arrival was not exactly welcomed."

31 The collapsing of diverse hermeneutic attitudes into a single "skeptical" or "revisionist" position is a chronic source of confusion; for one discussion, see Robinson, "The Ideological Uses of Islam," 205–28.

32 Where he takes the authors to task for their "methodological assumptions, of which the principal must be that a vocabulary of motives can be freely extrapolated from a discrete collection of literary stereotypes composed by alien and mostly hostile observers.": see Serjeant's review of *Hagarism*, 155–6.

33 Wansbrough, "Res ipsa loquitur: History and Mimesis," which is reprinted in *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History*, 162.

had little in common with Crone's (and Cook's) pragmatic skepticism. For her part, Crone was to make equally clear her objections not only to Wansbrough's most notorious argument for the late crystallization of the Qur'ānic text,<sup>34</sup> but also to his exiling of Islamic origins from an Arabian setting.<sup>35</sup> The question of when the Qur'ān achieves agency upon the law is one thing;<sup>36</sup> but that it provides for Crone reliable information about the religious and social setting of Arabian Muslims can hardly be doubted.<sup>37</sup> In sum, anyone who thinks at all deeply about Wansbrough's work will recognize how distant his interests lay from Crone's, especially as her ideas evolved during the 1990s.

An obvious source of this and other confusion is *Hagarism's* terseness – sometimes even its gnomic quality. Opening the book is akin to entering a conversation *in medias res*: the historiographical assumptions that undergird the argument, forged in Bloomsbury in the early 1970s, were only fleshed out in subsequent works that appeared in the 1980s, especially *Slaves on Horses* and *Meccan Trade* in Crone's case, *Muhammad* in Cook's.<sup>38</sup> There (and elsewhere) no room is left for doubt. "The entire tradition is tendentious, its aim being the elaboration of an Arabian *Heilsgeschichte*, and this tendentiousness has shaped the facts as we have them, not merely added some partisan statements that we can deduct. Without correctives from outside the Islamic tradition, such as papyri, archaeological evidence, and non-Muslim sources, we have little hope of reconstituting the original shape of this early period."<sup>39</sup> Historiographic skepticism had been in the air, but never had it been delivered with such concussive force: *Hagarism*, *Slaves on Horses*, *Meccan Trade*, *Roman, Provincial and Islamic Law*, and *God's Caliph* hammered not only at the central planks of that *Heilsgeschichte*, but also the elaboration of the political and intellectual traditions in the eighth and ninth centuries, as we shall see.

Language, model, and evidence delivered the blows. Much could be said about Crone's style, particularly what might be called its "prosecutorial rhetoric." Question-posing is very common across academic prose, of course, but in her

34 Here it is worth noting in passing that Cook's reconstruction of the 'Uthmānic skeleton is hardly compatible with Wansbrough's model of gradual crystallization; see Cook, "Stemma of the Regional Codices."

35 See, for example, Crone, "Two Legal Problems," 16 (esp. note 48). Some of the landscape is concisely and accessibly surveyed by Donner, "The Qur'ān in Recent Scholarship."

36 Crone, "Two Legal Problems."

37 Crone, "How Did the Quranic Pagans Make a Living?"; Crone, "The Religion of the Qur'ānic Pagans."

38 Crone, *Slaves on Horses*, 3–17; Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 203–29; Cook, *Muhammad*, 61–76.

39 Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 230.



hands it is uncommonly potent, not merely inaugurating argument (especially by addressing the *status quaestionis*), but also propelling and steering it. “What was the nature of the early caliphate?”; “How much, and in what way, did the customary law of the pre-Islamic Arabs contribute to Islamic law?”; “How long did the Khārijites continue to call their imams *khalīfa* and *amīr al-muʿminīn*?”; “Having unlearned most of what we knew about Meccan trade, do we find ourselves deprived of our capacity to explain the rise of Islam?”<sup>40</sup> The question framed, the interrogation begins: witnesses (sources) are probed, stories are checked out, probabilities measured. A particularly good example of discrediting a witness appears in *Meccan Trade*, where she sets a jackhammer into the exegetical foundations of the *sīra*. The Qurʾān alludes to a journey in Sūrāt Quraysh, but what are we to make of the accounts that explain it? The answer is worth reproducing nearly in full:

The journeys, we are told, were the greater and lesser pilgrimages to Mecca: the *ḥajj* in Dhūʿl-ḥijja and the *ʿumra* in Rajab. Alternatively, they were the migrations of Quraysh to Ṭāʾif in the summer and their return to Mecca in the winter. Or else they were Qurayshī trading journeys. Most exegetes hold them to have been trading journeys, but where did they go? Then went to Syria, we are told: Quraysh would travel by the hot coastal route to Ayla in the winter and by the cool inland route to Buṣrā and Adhriʾāt in the summer. Or else they went to Syria and somewhere else, such as Syria and Rūm, however that is to be understood, or Syria and the Yemen, as is more commonly said: Quraysh would go to Syria in the summer and to the Yemen in the winter, when Syria was too cold, or else to Syria in the winter and the Yemen in the summer, when the route to Syria was too hot. Alternatively . . .

In short, the sura refers to the fact that Quraysh used to trade in Syria, or in Syria and the Yemen, or in Syria and Ethiopia, or in all three, and maybe also in Iraq, or else to their habit of spending the summer in Ṭāʾif, or else to ritual visits to Mecca. It celebrates the fact that they began to trade, or that they continued to do so, or that they stopped; or else it does not refer to trade at all.<sup>41</sup>

40 Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph*, 1; Crone, “Jāhili and Jewish Law: The *Qasāma*,” 153–201 at 153; Crone, “The Khārijites and the Caliphal Title,” 85–91 at 85; Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 231.

41 Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 205–9.

Cataloging the tradition's inconsistencies had never been carried out with such devastating results.<sup>42</sup> Imagery serves to rouse, rile, and provoke: early Islamic history is a "whirlwind," and what remains is "rubble," "dust," and "debris from an obliterated past"; the *Kitāb al-muḥabbar* "rank[s] with the *Guinness Book of Records* among the greatest compilations of useless information"; early Muslim lawyers suffer from "collective amnesia."<sup>43</sup> From this perspective, her prodigious referencing – those avalanches of notes that plow through conventional wisdom and anticipate counter-argument – serves not merely to document and substantiate in exhaustive detail, or surface problems and ventilate debates.<sup>44</sup> The notes are also the equivalent of the prosecutor's binders, thumping theatrically upon the courtroom table.

If the sources narrate *Heilsgeschichte*, the most salient features of which are the Arabian origins of monotheist preaching and the articulation of a proto-Sunni political order, how is one to write genuine history? Here it must be underlined that skepticism about the preservation of authentic, seventh-century material in eighth-, ninth- and tenth-century sources is not simply a matter of disposition or temperament. To be sure, Crone both reflected (and propelled) a trend discernible across several fields of pre-modern history towards accepting the limitations of evidence and deploring the hubris of historians who pretend that things are otherwise. "The natural vice of historians is to claim to know about the past,"<sup>45</sup> is how one western medievalist has responded to the paucity of contemporaneous evidence for regions of the post-Roman west. W. Raven puts it nicely, speaking of the *horror vacui* that leads some scholars, despite all the obstacles, to mine for facts in *sīra* and non-*sīra* material that stands at several generational, cultural, and geographic removes from Muḥammad's west Arabia.<sup>46</sup> This said, Crone's skepticism is grounded in a deeper critique of Orientalist positivism, especially its implicit

42 Cf. Kister, "The Expedition of Bi'r Ma'ūna," 346: "In summary, it may be said that the traditions about this expedition are contradictory as to whether the expedition was a peaceful one sent to teach Islam and the Koran, or a military enterprise; whether it was sent to the Banū 'Āmir or to Sulaim; whether the members of the expedition were slain by clans of Sulaim, by clans of 'Āmir b. Ṣa'ṣa'a, by clans of Sulaim led by 'Āmir b. al-Ṭufail; or by a man of Sulaim; whether the 'Āmir b. Ṣa'ṣa'a opposed the relations between Abū Barā' and the Prophet or supported it."

43 Crone, *Slaves on Horses*, 6–10; Crone, *Roman, Provincial and Islamic Law*, 98.

44 Thus *Slaves on Horses* features 91 pages of text, followed by 6 appendices (in 107 pages – entirely dominated by references), which are followed by no fewer than 711 endnotes spread across 70 pages. Cf. Crone, *Roman, Provincial and Islamic Law* (4 appendices, etc.).

45 Howe, "Anglo-Saxon England and the Postcolonial Void," 25–47.

46 Raven, "Sira," *EI*<sup>2</sup>.

exceptionalism, its imperviousness to model-building, and the insights (some obvious, some less) that come with understanding social change as the product of both the particular and the universal. "I have simply refused to treat the Arabs as an exception to the normal rules of history, and something is badly wrong in Islamic studies if I have to *justify* this procedure," she wrote in response to an especially offended member of the Arabist old guard.<sup>47</sup> It would be folly to try to encapsulate thousands of pages of scholarship within a single sentence, but this may be as close as one can come.

Strange as it may sound, to understand Crone's approach to Islamic history one is well advised to read what she has to say about non-Islamic history, especially about the state, politics and religion.<sup>48</sup> Doing so clarifies her terms of historical and sociological analysis (e.g., "barbarian," "religion"), as well as her materialism; perhaps even more important, it reveals a framework of understanding the patterns of pre-modern global history. What one also finds, *inter alia*, is an inversion of Orientalist presumptions: it is early modern Europe that presents the "oddity," the Islamic Middle East an elaboration of the norm.<sup>49</sup> From this perspective, the argumentative rhetoric of *Slaves on Horses*, etc., can be seen as an admonition that the field should be arguing about Islamic history not within its own terms, but as a series of problems that constitute one trajectory – the spread of a monotheist religio-political tradition within the late antique Middle East – that is itself one variation of pre-modern history. *Slaves on Horses* consigns Wellhausen's venerable *Das arabische Reich und sein Sturz* to obsolescence in part because it offers a better understanding of Umayyad factionalism (and the like),<sup>50</sup> but in larger part because it frames the Sufyānid-Marwānid-Abbasid narrative as an ongoing (and unsuccessful) set of solutions to the central challenge of early Islam: how, in the absence of sophisticated ruling traditions of their own, were Muslims to institutionalize God's dispensation without assimilating the traditions that they had replaced? This is why adducing Icelandic sagas (to take one of many examples) is not the performance of erudition,<sup>51</sup> although that erudition – or, more precisely, the combination of erudition and industry – is stupefying. (Surely I am not the only one to arrive at an article's end punch-drunk, or to have been dumfounded to

47 Crone, "Serjeant and Meccan Trade," 240.

48 Crone, *Pre-industrial Societies*.

49 See, for example, Crone, *Pre-industrial Societies*, 147.

50 Wellhausen, *Das arabische Reich und sein Sturz*, which is translated as *The Arab Kingdom and its Fall*.

51 Crone, *Slaves on Horses*, 8–9.

learn that her field of knowledge encompasses various species of baboons?)<sup>52</sup> Rather, such referencing is about drawing parallels and comparisons in order to isolate what is distinctive (sometimes even remarkable) in Islamic history.

What all this means is that reconstructing history is more than a matter of identifying what is reliable. A first step, of course, is controlling for date, provenance or perspective, such as by relying exclusively or chiefly upon the testimony of sources that provide alternatives to the Arabo-Islamic *Heilsgeschichte*, such as Syriac or Hebrew apocalypses, pre-canonical *ḥadīth*, papyri, coins, documents, and poetry, or, for that matter, traditions that lie outside of the Sunni mainstream.<sup>53</sup> But reconstructing history is also a matter of identifying the most promising fit between evidence and model. An egregious case of misfit, one in which bad evidence is imposed badly upon social setting, is Watt's interpretation of Muḥammad's program in the Ḥijāz: Watt was wrong not merely because he was reading the sources credulously, but because his model of west Arabian society was laughably anachronistic. "Watt's desire to find social malaise in the desert would have been more convincing if the Meccans had been members of OPEC rather than the *ḥilf al-fudūl*."<sup>54</sup> R. Dussaud may have thought the "problem of Muḥammad" solved by "les arabisants,"<sup>55</sup> but Crone knew that *historians* had scarcely addressed it as such, and so, in stark contrast to Watt's view, what is provisionally offered as a solution to the "problem" of Meccan trade seeks to align the available evidence, duly evaluated, with the appropriate model.<sup>56</sup> To make sense of the marriage of prophecy and conquest in early seventh-century Arabia, one should thus look to comparable moments of human history in which alien domination triggered primitive political action – that is, nativist movements.

Comparisons pay dividends. To my mind, *God's Caliph* is the most exciting and consequential work of early Islamic history written over the last half century, and it packs its extraordinary punch because it applies evidence to model so effectively. Of course Watt and Schacht (amongst others) had set the groundwork for challenging the classical Sunni view on the Umayyad and early Abbasid caliphate,<sup>57</sup> but it was Crone and Hinds who recognized how deeply

52 Cook, "Ibn Qutayba and the Monkeys," 66, note 97.

53 Such as in Crone and Zimmermann, *The Epistle of Sālim Ibn Dhakwān*.

54 Crone, *Slaves on Horses*, 209, note 71 (where Shaban is guilty of the same).

55 Thus his review of Blachère's *Le Problème de Mahomet*, 163.

56 Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 4.

57 Watt, "God's Caliph: Qur'anic Interpretations and Umayyad Claims," which is reprinted in Watt, *Early Islam: Collected Articles*; Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*.

the jurists' and traditionists' views had misrepresented things, especially by denuding legislating and salvific caliphs of their religious authority. As they show in exacting detail, documentary, numismatic, and literary evidence, all of which can be dated to the seventh and eighth centuries, documents a pre-classical conception of God's Deputyship rooted in (and legitimated by) Muḥammad's indivisible authority.<sup>58</sup> What results is a genuinely radical revision of the state's governing institution,<sup>59</sup> along with a striking recasting of early Islamic religious history, in which the genealogies of orthodox and heterodox positions are re-mapped: the Sunni construction of the caliphate is shown to be a departure, the Imami conception an "archaism rather than an innovation."<sup>60</sup> Had Walter Bauer been an Islamicist, he might well have shown the same.

That the origins and evolution of early Islam *constitute problems* may sound banal, but as pursued by Crone they ramify in several main, sometimes intersecting, but always interesting lines of inquiry. One concerns how tribes relate to states, including how tribes turn into states;<sup>61</sup> in the case of the birth of Islam in its tribal environment, the work of "unlearning" initiated by *Meccan Trade* has now yielded to a re-appraisal of trade as a source of both wealth and information.<sup>62</sup> Another is about incorporation, especially the social practice and legal institution of clientage;<sup>63</sup> since the genesis of *walā'* is predictably murky, the inquiry necessarily leads to the vexing and controversial question of how Islamic law relates to pre-Islamic and contemporary legal traditions (Jāhili, Roman, provincial, and Jewish). A third addresses colonialism and how natives respond to it.<sup>64</sup> A fourth is about rulership and the law, both in theory and practice.<sup>65</sup> Still another, closely related in some respects, aims to describe

58 Whatever the ultimate inspiration for the idea may be; see Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph*, 111–15; and Crone, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought*, 40.

59 The caliphate would remain near or at the heart of future work on political thought; see below, note 63.

60 Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph*, 99.

61 Thus, for example, Crone, *Slaves on Horses*, 18; Crone, "The Tribe and the State"; Crone, "Tribes and States in the Middle East."

62 Crone, "Quraysh and the Roman Army."

63 Thus, Crone, *Slaves on Horses*, 49–57; Crone, *Roman, Provincial and Islamic Law*; Crone, "Mawālī and the Prophet's Family"; Crone, "The Pay of Client Soldiers."

64 Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 247–52; Crone, "Imperial Trauma: The Case of the Arabs"; Crone, "Post-colonialism in Tenth-century Islam"; and Crone, *Nativist Prophets*.

65 Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph*; Crone, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought*.

the evolution of religious ideas, especially by throwing into doubt orthodox truisms.<sup>66</sup>

In sum, behind the “combination of holy law and learned laity”<sup>67</sup> that may be said to characterize classical Islam lies a multitude of ideas, movements, practices, and institutions. Some were compelling only in the short term, others enduring; but in one way or another they were all formed by history, especially the articulation of an Islamic political order. One can agree or disagree with specific assertions or arguments, but there is no denying the overall impression created by her body of work: early Islam was more contentious, more controversial, and more creative than most Orientalists could ever have imagined.

### 3

This last point has obvious significance not just for reconstructing early Islamic history, but also for the present.

Things have changed over the last 40 years or so. As is well known, across the humanities and social sciences, all manner of literary and cultural critiques have thrown into doubt a wide range of certainties, both methodological and substantive (if one is allowed to posit such a crude dichotomy). Meanwhile, in our networked and globalized world, digital technology now narrows to seconds and minutes the time between event reported (or book published) and opinion voiced, creating a virtually infinite public sphere for scholarly and cultural debate. In the case of Islam and the Middle East, the debates have been driven mainly by state and non-state violence, demographic change within Europe (especially resulting from Muslim immigration), and the emergence of new varieties of Islamic political thought, some still theoretical, some finding application in Middle Eastern states. Sometimes the debates are sterile or substantive, still other times even existential. What will become of the “West” if its religio-cultural-legal traditions fail to withstand the effects of Muslim immigration? How does one engineer an “Islam” that will prosper in multicultural and democratic societies, especially given the rise of conservative, even militant Islamism? Since past practice is commonly adduced to answer these

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66 Of several examples, an especially good one is Crone, “The First-Century Concept of *Hijra*.”

67 Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*, 30.

and other questions, it is little wonder that Islamic history matters more and more.<sup>68</sup>

The demand for information and understanding having grown so, supply has accordingly adjusted; and the stakes being so high (at least for some), the din of polemics has risen as well. In some respects, these are the best and worst of times for Islamic studies. At their worst, the polemics recycle perennial aspersions: Muhammad did not exist or is an imposter;<sup>69</sup> the Qurʾān is a sham text.<sup>70</sup> Islam discredited, the West is best, or so we are supposed to conclude. On the other hand, more scholars and students study early Islam than ever before, accessing online tools and data that used to be the preserve of graduate seminars. Debates about Qurʾān manuscripts, once limited to Orientalists' correspondence and the like, now appear in mass-market magazines and newspapers.<sup>71</sup> In the early 1970s, an unlikely argument about the Christian origins of the Qurʾān was ignored outside of a small circle of scholars;<sup>72</sup> by the early 2000s, a pseudonymous book, also on the Christian origins of the Qurʾān, could generate multiple editions, a translation, and a collected volume, not to mention innumerable blogs, all in a matter of a few years.<sup>73</sup> In 1961, with Watt's biography still casting a long shadow, Rodinson looked across about 25 years of scholarship on Muḥammad, and thought eight monographs worth mentioning.<sup>74</sup> Over the last four years or so alone one can count many more than that, some proposing radically new views,<sup>75</sup> others holding to fairly conventional lines.<sup>76</sup>

68 Thus An-Naim (*Islam and the Secular State*, 45), where he sets out to show that his "proposal for a secular state is more consistent with Islamic history than is the so-called Islamic state model proposed by some Muslims since the second quarter of the twentieth century."

69 Spencer, *The Truth about Muhammad*, and his *Did Muhammad Exist?*

70 For example, Ibn Warraq, *Virgins? What Virgins?*

71 Lester, "What is the Koran?"; Lester, "The Lost Archive."

72 Lüling, *Über den Ur-Qurʾān*: a revised version and translation appeared 30 years later as *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation: The Rediscovery and Reliable Reconstruction of a Comprehensive Pre-Islamic Christian Hymnal Hidden in the Koran under Earliest Islamic Reinterpretations*.

73 Luxenberg, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran: ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache*, 4th ed., which is translated as *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran*, and debated in C. Burgmer (ed.), *Streit um den Koran*.

74 Rodinson, *Muhammed*, 343–6.

75 Thus Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet*; Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*; and Powers, *Muḥammad is Not the Father of Any of Your Men*.

76 Thus Nagel, *Mohammed*, which is translated as *Mahomet*; Jansen, *Mohammed: Eine Biographie*; Lo Jacono, *Maometto*; Peters, *Jesus and Muhammad*; Brockopp (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Muḥammad*.

These and other signs of the efflorescence of Islamic studies are difficult to imagine absent the critical turn effected in the 1970s and 1980s. A generation ago, the essential soundness of the early Islamic historical and biographical traditions was self-evident, and at the center of the Orientalist tradition such criticism as took place amounted to little more than filtering obvious anachronisms, and reconciling or harmonizing inconsistencies and contradictions. It is testimony to the persuasiveness of the revisionist critique that writing Prophetic biography in a conventional sense – that is, by re-narrativizing *sīra* episodes – no longer occupies the center of the field; it is left to popularizers or scholars writing in a popularizing mode. As far as the historiography of early Islam is concerned, the burden of proof has shifted decisively: what was once effortlessly assumed is now painstakingly documented.<sup>77</sup> In fact, much of what was radical in the 1970s and early 1980s is now middle-of-the road, the radical fringe now occupied by those who deny what so-called revisionists freely concede, e.g., that Muḥammad existed or that the conquests took place.<sup>78</sup> It is largely due to the skeptical turn that the once-sleepy field of early Islamic historiography has changed beyond recognition,<sup>79</sup> and so, too, the study of early Islamic documentary and material culture (e.g., archeology, epigraphy, papyrology, and numismatics). It is upon the basis of such sources that matters once settled (such as the nature of the earliest Islamic state) are now subject to stimulating controversy.<sup>80</sup>

Needless to say, some of what is written about Islam has created more heat than it has light. To serve a broad audience of non-Islamicists Crone has

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77 For examples of the painstaking work now being undertaken in the hope of establishing the authenticity of *sīra* narratives, see Motzki, “The Murder of Ibn Abī l-Ḥuqayq”; Schoeler, *The Biography of Muḥammad*; Görke and Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte über das Leben Muḥammads*. That such attempts are successful should not be taken as granted; for one set of recent criticisms, see Shoemaker, “In Search of ‘Urwa’s Sira.”

78 For an early example, Koren and Nevo, “Methodological Approaches to Islamic Studies”; for a recent one, Popp, “The Early History of Islam.”

79 For years the standard had been Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*; an incomplete list of recent monographs focusing on the early period includes Duri, *The Rise of Historical Writing*; Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*; Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*; Schöller, *Exegetisches Denken und Prophetenbiographie*; and Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*.

80 The bibliography is huge, but two complementary examples are Johns, “Archaeology and the History of Early Islam,” and Hoyland, “New Documentary Texts and the History of the Early Islamic State.” The intra-Islamicist kerfuffle about the Nessana evidence should now be evaluated in the light of Ruffini, “Village Life and Family Power in Late Antique Nessana.”



written online and commissioned works of *haute vulgarisation*,<sup>81</sup> thus implicitly or explicitly arguing against ignorance, willful or otherwise. She has always been as generous as she is uncompromising in her comments on the work of students and colleagues,<sup>82</sup> but it is tempting as well to infer from the sparer prose and lighter referencing in some of her more recent work an attempt to deliver sophisticated Islamic history to non-Islamicists curious about the pre-modern background to contemporary events. This is explicitly the case of *Medieval Islamic Political Thought*, which, tracing a 600-year evolution from Muḥammad to the Mongols, is something of a summa of 30 years' work. Accommodating "political thought" in an expansive sense so as to include sectarianism, politics, political theory, law, theology (and much more besides), it subsumes an extraordinary array of sources and problems, and traces the contentious but nearly always consistent attempt to engineer a theocracy that expressed Muslims' possession of both "truth and power."<sup>83</sup> As much as *Slaves on Horses* made Wellhausen's work on the Umayyad caliphate obsolete, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought* is the first sustained study that makes political, religious, and ideological sense of Islamic history. The book's implications for modern Islamic thinking are not inconsiderable, and so leave no doubt that the present converses with the past.

What, then, is the responsibility of the scholar, especially one who claims to know a distant and seminal past? Liberal societies require "truthful inquiry," as B. Williams reminds us, which can take "myths to pieces."<sup>84</sup> One answer that she gives is to insist on the primacy of evidence and the difficulty of reaching conclusions. We might well wish the early Islamic community to have been ecumenical, but that does not make it so.<sup>85</sup> We might wish to prove that the leather trade was key to Qurashī wealth, but at present the model is better than the evidence.<sup>86</sup> Another, perhaps less obvious answer issues directly from the historicizing project itself. For the scholar, what better way to reduce the "tension" between "historian and believer" than to highlight the constructed

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81 Crone serves as General Editor of the "Makers of the Muslim World" series of biographies (Oneworld); for a list of published volumes, see <http://www.oneworld-publications.com/series/makers-of-the-muslim-world>.

82 Everyone has a story, and mine, which is typical, has her responding to a long and undisciplined draft article within 36 hours – with three single-spaced pages of comments. Much to my embarrassment, she understood my intended argument better than I did.

83 Crone, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought*, 16.

84 Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, 265.

85 As she argues in her review of Donner, *Muḥammad and the Believers* at <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/42023/among-the-believers>.

86 Crone, "Quraysh and the Roman Army."

and contingent nature of orthodoxy in general and the Sunni synthesis in particular?<sup>87</sup> Here it should be recalled that the process of harmonizing inconsistencies and contradictions that produced the master narrative of Islamic history, more-or-less faithfully recapitulated by the majority of Western historians until a generation ago, was fundamental to Sunni success, not least of all because it was so radical. For not only was controversy to be forgotten and the process that created consensus obscured by the onset of “collective amnesia”;<sup>88</sup> it is also the case that hermeneutical techniques were put in place to routinize the harmonization of contradictions and inconsistencies, such as the imposition of Tradition upon Scripture.<sup>89</sup> History as description is one thing, and history as prescription something else; when the two are confused, sometimes it takes a correspondingly radical reappraisal to set things right. And Crone’s contribution – that ongoing project of comprehensive disambiguation – aims at precisely that.

So more than any other scholar, it is thanks to her that historians are finally doing their subject justice. We may – or *should* – disagree about the precise causes and vectors of change, but one can hardly disagree with P. Brown that early Islam constituted “the last, most rapid crisis in the religious history of the Late Antique period.”<sup>90</sup> Highly controversial, inventive and experimental, the project that Muslims set for themselves was as ambitious as it was unimaginable. How is one to make sense of it or draw proper lessons from it without asking fundamental questions about how it came to be?

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87 This highlighting project cuts across virtually the entirety of her published work; for “tension,” see Crone, “No Compulsion in Religion,” especially at 162.

88 As good an example as any being the so-called “four-caliph thesis,” which not only went some way towards reconciling Sunni and Shi’ite views, but also defanged God’s caliph; see Crone, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought*.

89 Crone, “No Compulsion in Religion,” 164–5.

90 Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity, AD 150–750*, 189; cf. Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis*, where the debt to Brown, Crone, and Cook is made explicit.

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