Chapter 22

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. 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 ṭālib, which is intended to discredit a skeptical position on the transmission of material in Prophetic biography. 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.

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 ṭālib, 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).\(^3\) 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 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.\(^4\) 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.\(^5\) That scholarship is inflected by political culture is a truism, of course;\(^6\) 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-


\(^4\) “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*.