Bulletin critique


There is no doubt that the emergence of Islam in the seventh century (Hijra, AD 622) was one of the more remarkable expansions witnessed by mankind, spreading over an area that by 711, less than a century after the death of the Prophet, extended from Spain (Andalusia) to Uzbekistan, near China. The received understanding is that a new language spoken by a people hitherto confined to the Arabian peninsula and adjoining areas, spreading the ideas of a new religion, recreated the world.

The present book proposes a ‘new’ cultural interpretation to this expansion. The common theme uniting the 11 articles is that Islam became Islam only with the advent of Abbasid rule in 750.

The scholarly basis of this important proposal resides on the one hand on the observation that there is a striking lack of original written material which attests to the doctrine that we know today as Islam, from this early pre-Abbasid period. On the other it is underpinned by detailed study of the textual material which does derive from this era, as well as careful interpretation of the many written sources which become available after the beginning of the Abbasid ascendancy.

However, if Islam during this era did not resemble what we know it as today, what was it? On this point the authors break unity, some giving bold, alternative interpretations, others working at the question from detailed, nuanced angles. Thematically the book can be broken down into four categories.

In the first are those which interpret the early textual evidence in a specific historical framework. At the one extreme, as it were, is the article by Christoph Luxenberg interpreting the famous inscription on the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (qubbat al-salh, Felsendom), the oldest sacral inscription related to Islam (72/694), (“Neudeutung der arabischen Inschrift im Felsendom zu Jerusalem”). This inscription is particularly interesting as most of its passages also appear in the Qurʾān, e.g. šahida allāhu annahu lā ilāha illā huwa, Koran 3:18. These correspondences can be interpreted in two ways. The traditional view is to assume they have been taken from the Qurʾān itself.1 The alternative favored by Luxenberg is to see these as proto-ingredients which, when the time was right, were incorporated into what was to become the Qurʾān, but which in 694 did not exist. The proto-ingredients themselves are embedded on the one hand in

a unitarian Christian religious practice with eastern Christian Arian and Nestorian roots which holds that Jesus is incarnate. These two doctrines, though outlawed by the council of Nicaea in 325 and the council of Ephesus in 431 (respectively) in favor of trinitarianism, continued to live on among Nestorians found among the Sassanids, and in subtle ways in an eastern ‘Syrian’ church. On the other hand the linguistic elements are derived to a considerable degree from an Aramaic linguistic matrix. Aramaic in 694 was of course the *lingua franca* of much of the Middle East, and as a language in which the Bible had already been translated, one which could later provide religious templates for the development of Islam.

Luxenberg’s is also the position favored explicitly by Volker Popp in a long overview of the early numismatistic and inscriptional evidence, “Die frühe Islamgeschichte nach inschriftlichen und numismatischen Zeugnissen”. The article gives a detailed overview of the numismatic state of the art in the Umayyad period, which again have standard Islamic appellations, for example *muhammad rasūl allāh*, first attested in 66/685-6 from a coin in Iran. Popp agrees with Luxenberg in interpreting *muhammad* as “the praised one” rather than a personal name, as a reference to Jesus. Popp also gives of a broad interpretation of the Umayyad period as one which continues the age-long conflict between western Byzantium and eastern Sassanid Iran. The Umayyads are not so much Arabs coming out of Arabia, as Arab successors to the defeated Sassanid empire, who took over the mantle of opposition to the Byzantines from the Sassanids.

Two other contributors in this first set take a more agnostic view to the person of Muhammad, tending to assume the historical status both of the Prophet and of the early, pre-Abbasid Qur’ān. Alfred-Louis de Prémare (“ʿAbd al-Malik b. Marwān et le processus de constitution du Coran”) argues that the compilation and editing of the Qur’ān was still in full swing during ʿAbd al-Malik’s reign (685-705), against the traditional ʿUtānī Codex account of the Qur’ān (as well as against Burton).2 He notes, for instance, that verses which in the Ibn Muğāhid compilations are found in “al-Nisāʾ” are referenced in a Greek text from about 730 as being a part of “al-Baqara”. While not saying that there was no Qur’ān at this point,3 it was a work still in progress.

Claude Gilliot (“Zur Herkunft der Gewährsmänner des Propheten”) provides further evidence of likely Christian and Aramaic influence on the Prophet through a characteristically detailed and erudite reading both of the classical sources (e.g. exegetical, historiographical), as well as western scholarship. Not only were Christians and Jews present in Mecca and Medina, they are in the classical texts reported to have instructed the Prophet about their religious texts.

A second set of four articles concentrates on linguistic and philological issues. Pierre Larcher examines the concept of Classical Arabic (“Arabe préislamique—arabe coranique—arabe classique : un continuum ?”). He begins by summarizing the quite exiguous early sources at our disposal (pre-Islamic inscriptions, among which he includes, somewhat problematically, languages like Thamudic customarily considered North

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