
This collection of ten articles, together with two introductory chapters by the editor, forms the bulk of the 129th volume of the Revue des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerranée and are offered as a Festschrift for the late French Arabist and historian Alfred-Louis de Prémare (1930-2006). Having conducted most of his early research on the history of the Maghrib and al-Andalus, de Prémare later, especially over the last couple of decades, turned his attention increasingly to the early Islamic period and the history of the Qurʾān. His interest in this field resulted in several important studies—in particular Les Fondations de l’Islam: Entre Écriture et Histoire (Paris: Seuil, 2002), and Aux Origines du Coran: Questions d’Hier, Approches d’Aujourd’hui (Paris: Téraèdre, 2004)—and it is to this aspect of de Prémare’s work in particular that most of the studies gathered here are addressed.

After an excellent introduction by Antoine Borrut (17-30) that situates the ideas and arguments of the ten articles within the current state of the field, there comes a chapter by Claude Gilliot (31-56) in which the latter elaborates upon an idea that he has already developed in several earlier studies, that at least portions of the text of the Qurʾān (with an upper-case ‘Q’) as we have it may be the result of a collective enterprise working with parts of an earlier lectionary (a Qurʾān with a lower-case ‘q’, or ‘le Coran avant le Coran’). This, Gilliot suggests here, would have been an exegetical translation work essentially similar to that undertaken by the creators of the Aramaic targums or the Syriac Diatessaron, situating the Qurʾān even more fully within a late antique milieu.

The next chapter by Frédéric Imbert (57-77) convincingly demonstrates how useful the Arabic graffiti of the first century AH are for the history of the earliest Muslims’ expressions of their faith and suggests a relative chronology of these graffiti based on their contents, which—if, of course, it is correct—can show how public declarations of religious belief evolved in the period before the more famous epigraphic evidence dating to ‘Abd al-Malik’s caliphate.

Fred Donner then (79-92) seeks to demonstrate that there was an increasing tendency in the Marwanid period to re-name key institutions with words taken from the Qurʾān. Although Donner here builds upon his controversial idea that Muḥammad’s earliest followers and successors are
best conceived of as a community of ‘believers’ rather than Muslims, it is not necessary to accept that thesis to agree with the general impression of a propensity to make more use of specifically Quranic vocabulary from ‘Abd al-Malik’s (r. 685-705) time onwards (although, it has to be noted that a few of his examples are much less convincing than the others).

The next four chapters deal with the ways in which some of the events of the 6th-10th centuries have been dealt with by later historians. Christian Robin (93-116) does this by comparing how one particular event in early 6th-century south Arabia—the destruction of the church in Zafār by the partisans of the Jewish ruler Yūsuf As’ar Yath’ar (or Dhū Nuwās to later Arabic sources) (r. c. 522-525)—is presented in three contemporary Sabaic inscriptions and in four well-known later Syriac and Greek texts which dealt with the martyrs of Najrān, and demonstrates that it is actually the earliest and least reworked of these four texts that disagrees most significantly with the data provided by the inscriptions.

Étienne de La Vassière (117-123) highlights the fact that on at least a couple of occasions the evidence of Arabic narratives on the conquest of Central Asia can be corroborated by contemporary documents. Viviane Comerro (125-137) investigates the depiction of the Companion Ibn ’Abbās in the so-called Akhbār al-dawla al-ʿabbāsiyya, which is rather different to that found in other sources. Most interestingly (for this reviewer at least), Comerro uses the discrepancy to suggest that since a text such as this preserves a number of different viewpoints across the various akhbār, ‘On ne peut, par conséquent, réduire les ADA [i.e. the Akhbār al-dawla al-abbāsiyya] à une « histoire officielle » et il faudrait aussi nuancer le jugement selon lequel l’écriture de l’histoire en Islam est étroitement associée aux besoins de légitimation du pouvoir politique’ (135).

Gabriel Martinez-Gros (139-152) then reminds us that the process of rewriting early Islamic history is, of course, by no means a premodern phenomenon alone and shows how much the 19th-century recreation of the early 10th-century Andalusī anti-Umayyad rebel Ibn Ḥafṣūn (d. 917) as a bandit owes to the characters, political ideologies and cultural assumptions of José Antonio Conde (1766-1820) and Reinhart Dozy (1820-1883).

The final three chapters turn from the writing of history towards questions of canonisation. Anne-Sylvie Boisliveau (153-168) investigates some of the ways in which the Qur’ān consolidates its own position as an ‘Écriture révélée’ and suggests that this self-pronounced authority preceded the various efforts to fix the Quranic text.