

The Nature of Early Islamic Sources and the Debate Over their Historical Significance⁽¹⁾

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This paper approaches issues pertaining to the Arabic/Islamic texts which have been foundational to the early history of Islam. Crucially, these sources cannot be defined as primary sources—they largely started to be written 150 years after the incidents they narrate. Further, there is a lack of archaeological evidence or independent archival records to corroborate these narratives. Nonetheless, there is a wide variety of sources for early Islamic history, which are narrative, literary, theological and geographical in nature. The sources further span books of Hadith as well interpretations/commentaries (exegeses) of the Koran. Scholars, and particularly orientalists, are divided over the merits of such texts as historical documents on which the history of early Islam can be based.

The author of this paper will both survey this dispute between scholars and seek to resolve it. To do so, this paper visits the various methodological approaches adopted by academic historians towards the texts of early Islamic history beginning in the nineteenth century: the descriptive, critical, skeptical approaches, in addition to a school of thought which relies entirely on foreign language sources—particularly Syriac/ Aramaic and (archaic) Greek sources — despite the fact that these latter sources face the same issues which the Arabic sources do.

Early Islamic History

Orientalists

Documentation

Historical Approaches

Islamic Sources

The history of any geographical region, during any epoch, requires a reliance on a wide range of sources. A search for the sources available covering the earliest Islamic period show that there is a lack of any kind of official record; contrary to what most non-specialists living in the Muslim world might think, the resources available on the dawn of Islam are abundant and varied. The sources in question also vary in terms of their quality and in their significance. A coherent reading of these sources is impossible without cross referencing sources such as the Koran, the *Hadith*, exegeses of the Koran and biographies of the Prophet Mohammed as well as books covering the various Muslim sects, sources of Sharia legalistic rulings and books on governance. Even works of poetry and collections of aphorisms are of value in that regard. One helpful approach is to divide the various sources into the time periods in which they were written.

The earliest do not transcend the 4th Hijri century/ 10th Century AD. A second group of early Muslim historical sources however proliferated beginning in the 7th Hijri century/14th Century AD. One of the noticeable advantages which the earlier group of texts have is that they reflect a wider variety of voices and are more detailed in their records of incidents. Yet this should not diminish the value of the latter texts, which occasionally contain valuable insights which may have been overlooked by the earlier group of texts. In parallel to the temporal categorization of these early Muslim historical texts, scholars must also distinguish between texts which adopt a Sunni perspective, those which can be traced back to the Kharijites and those with Shia origins. The differences in recording and narrating events between these various schools of thought, as recorded by the varying written sources they left, grew starker with time.

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The Islamic sources which chronicle the foundational period of Islam are certainly diverse. Yet, their material is unbalanced regarding the periods and events covered. This is traditionally illustrated in how the records relating to the Prophet Mohammed's life in Medina are more numerous than texts which chronicle the Prophet's life in Mecca. Similarly, the texts surrounding the Arab-Muslim conquest of Iraq far outnumber the texts covering the conquests of either North Africa or South Asia.

The variation in the level of texts is also characterized by a high level of variation in complexity and intricacy. For example, in one historical source, which describes the manner in which the second Caliph to the Prophet Mohammed distributed fiefs of land in a recently conquered Iraq to the believers, it is not clear if priority in the receipt of land was based on kinship with the Prophet Mohammed, seniority in Islam or in recognition of suffering during the *jihad* to capture the new lands. Indeed, an exploration of all the relevant texts makes it unclear if the newly

conquered territories were to be shared as a commons for the entire Muslim community of the time or restricted as a commons for those who took part in the actual conquest. If the latter, then along what lines would the distribution of property take place? More generally, there is a group of texts concerned with the simple, grander narratives surrounding, for example, the major events of the Muslim conquests, the succession of the various Caliphs and the numerous "civil wars" within the Muslim community. Yet even here, a deeper investigation of the texts reveals a layer of otherwise unseen complexity and intrigue.

Further to these previously described specificities of the texts of Islamic history, there is also the question of the nature, or "essence," of these texts. This has led scholars to debate the value of each of the sources, and to arrive at differing conclusions. How do scholars evaluate these sources as texts for a history of early Islam? What do scholars regard to be the ultimate essence of these texts?

On Early Islamic Texts

The texts generally accepted as sources for Islamic history fall into either primary or secondary sources. Primary sources include material written documents as well as inscriptions (on clay or other hard materials) and minted coins in addition to architectural relics and religious sites as well as masonry and ceramics. They also include written materials later contained in national archives or in private collections. This category covers official epistles, truce agreements, directives, ownership deeds and even memoirs. Secondary sources are generally founded in manuscript or printed form: serving as reinterpretations of earlier sources, they do not serve as chronicles contemporaneous to events as they took place. Almost all Islamic sources fit into this latter category: with the exception of a few scattered coins, found in museums scattered around the world, some inscriptions, the remains of Umayyad-era palaces and fortresses and some miniature manuscripts, almost nothing remains of the earliest Islamic period. The lack of material relics from the earliest Islamic period—between the age of the Prophecy and the beginning of the Umayyad period—is mirrored also in the lack of written materials from that same period.

Later sources describe letters sent by the Prophet Mohammed to the Arab, Persian and Byzantine rulers in surrounding territories. Similarly, there is indirect evidence of the Truce at Hudaibia and the proto-constitutional text *Watheeqa* drafted in Medina. One compendium which collects these and similar documents is Mohammed Hameedallah Hyderabad's *Collection of Political Documents from the Prophetic Era and during the Reign of the Righteous Caliphs* (Hyderabad 1985).

At first glance, scholars may assume that the Pakistani author of this text managed to examine and evaluate a number of original documents before releasing them in book form. Contrary to appearances, however, Hyderabad could only find secondary sources and based his tome on works written in the third century of the Hijra. These included the *History* of Tabari, the genealogical works and chronicles of conquests of Balathri and the *Tabaqat* of Ibn Saad. None of the sources which these books in turn relied on were written prior to the middle of the second century of the Hijra.

Many of those sources, written in the second and third centuries of the Hijra, dealt extensively with the truces concluded by Muslim rulers and the peoples whom they conquered during the period of the Righteous Caliphs and later in the Umayyad era. When narrating the anecdotal evidence being reported as history, the authors of these works often rely on the account of an individual who claims to have “seen with my own eyes” the events which reportedly took place. Yet this declaration itself is a clear indication of the need for a kind of verification and authenticity which can not in any way be guaranteed—in other words, these are secondary sources the veracity of which is not firmly established.

The secondary sources described here also provide a rich source of information on the Scribes’ Institution (*Diwan al Inshaa*) established by the Umayyads in Damascus. Yet all of these official epistles from Umayyad institutions in Damascus and across the Muslim Empire cannot compete with the larger trove of papyri to be found in Egypt, a collection which dates back to the early days of the Arab-Muslim conquest. As for the rest of the official epistles, presumed to account for tons of folios, we have access to only those which were rewritten in sources subsequent to the Umayyad era..

It should be made clear at this stage that the chronicling of the events of what the author calls here the “early Islamic period,” and its recording into various separate sources, only occurred in the middle of the second century of the Hijra. A historical reframing occurred in the third century which led to all of the original contents of second century works being lost; an exception is the work by Nasr Bin Muzahem of the *Safeen* incident which was recorded in Hijri year 160.

The emergence of a vibrant, officially sanctioned movement aimed at the recording of early Islamic history during this period raises a question: did earlier Muslim generations exclusively transfer knowledge orally? Or was there a combination of oral and written transmission which allowed those earlier Muslims to record their own histories?

Historians and other experts are divided on this question. Many believe that the literary and historical works dating to the third century of the Hijra in particular were exclusively oral histories and accounts handed down generation to generation by the earlier Muslims for two centuries. Lammens, Sauvaget, Blachere and Caetani are proponents of this view; in addition to more recent orientalists like Wansbrough, Cook and Crone. Aloys Sprenger was another European orientalist who, beginning in 1855, promoted the notion of an early recording of Islamic history sources. During the nineteenth century AD, Sprenger argued persuasively against the idea that the *Hadeeth* had been preserved entirely as an oral tradition during the earliest Muslim periods and even provided some texts in this regard⁽³⁾. Similarly, in 1927, Horovitz, who was deeply interested in the biographies of the Prophet Mohammed, had also discredited the idea that the earliest Muslim histories were based on oral accounts—showing, instead, that the histories of the Muslim community written during in the third century of the Hijra were in fact reconstructions of what had been written, textual sources that had been reclaimed, partially or in full, at a later time and reinvented⁽⁴⁾. This group was joined by Fouad Suzkin, who pointed out that a tradition of the oral transmission of written texts in Arabia had pre-dated Islam, thus demonstrating that the earliest Muslim texts were based on written documents⁽⁵⁾.

Shakir Mustafa, another authority on Islamic history suggests that the transmission of knowledge in the era which predated formal, written recorded history can be divided into three successive steps. In the first, individuals would commit to memory those events they were witness to. This was a purely oral/memory-based process. The second stage was a combination of both oral and written transmission: not only were the memories of this first generation of witnesses carried over by word of mouth, there was also the personal recording of these events in personal documents. The third and final step in this process is in turn another oral transmission to a further generation of individuals. According to Mustafa, the misgivings which many scholars have about Islamic history

3 Sprenger, Aloys. “On the origin and progress of writing down historical facts among the Musulmans.” *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 25 (1856):303-329.

4 Horovitz, Josef. *The Earliest Biographies of the Prophet and Their Authors* (Arabic translation). Translated by Hussein Nassar. Cairo (Arabic Edition): Khanji Publishers, 2001.

5 Suzkin, Fouad. *The History of Arab Heritage* (Arabic translation). Translated by Mahmoud Fahmy Hejazi. Saudi Arabia: Ministry of Higher Education, 1983.

are rooted in a failure to distinguish between these three distinct stages, and their inability to accept that written records have any part to play at all throughout this process⁽⁶⁾.

Suzkin was another observer who sought to explain why historians, and especially orientalist, have been quick to mistakenly judge Islamic narratives. These narratives had a unique and distinct style which borrowed its transmission style from the pre-Islamic lyrical poetic tradition of Arabia, where books of poetry were narrated orally despite being written and recorded. It is also likely that the companions of the Prophet narrated his letters the same way and this may also be true of the caliphs' orders to the governors⁽⁷⁾.

Widad Al Qadi, in turn, has turned her attention to documenting the various official decrees and truces signed by the leaders of the proto Muslim state during the first century of the Hijra. The documents and decrees fall into three separate categories: administrative, "political" and theological. The theological documents referenced here are attributed to Hassan Al Basri, Hasan ibn Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyyah and Omar Bin Abdulaziz. In general, these theological tracts address the questions of fate and destiny⁽⁸⁾. These theological texts are beyond the scope of this work.

As for the administrative texts, their authenticity is corroborated by the nineteenth century discovery of a large trove of papyri in Egypt. These Egyptian papyri, examined by Napier Abbot, Adolf Grohmann and Karl-Heinrich Beker are a benchmark for accepting documents claiming to date to the Umayyad era or earlier, in particular they are used to date documents that purport to date back to the rule of Abdulmalek Bin Marwan or later. The political texts are the most numerous, accounting for most of the documents which claim to have been written during the earliest Islamic period. While verifying the authenticity of such documents has proven difficult, it is not impossible⁽⁹⁾.

Al Qadi set out by compiling the official pronouncements from the court of Muawiya Bin Abi Sufyan. She also used the operating assumption that it would be possible to arrive at "original" versions of the documents issued by Muawiya's Court, despite the fact that war and destruction to afflict the Umayyad state in its later period was likely to have damaged or destroyed many documents in the Umayyad "center" surrounding Damascus. While it was also likely that these documents have left the hinterland relatively untouched—indeed, the Egyptian papyri discovered more than a thousand years after they were composed attest to the fact that documents in the Umayyad periphery were (more) likely to survive intact⁽¹⁰⁾. In order to ascertain the veracity of the peace treaties attested to in texts of Islamic history and the bounties

paid, Al Qadi followed one of two approaches:

- 1) The first approach deployed by Al Qadi is borrowed from Noth. It is a method dependent on a stylistic comparison of the writing styles of various documents claiming to have been composed by "eye witnesses" to the events in question. Purportedly first-hand accounts of Umayyad peace treaties can be found in the works of Abi Ubaid Bin Sallam, Balathri, Ibn Atham Al Kufi and Ibn Asaker. By reviewing these sources and defining them as "authoritative," Noth was able to define a style used to judge the authenticity of a given text claiming to belong to the Umayyad era. Through this process, Noth was able to determine that while these texts do not represent a literal transcript of the original one's of the covenants concluded at the time of conquest, they were not in principle deliberate frauds, but rather that the narration of these texts took place orally long after they were written and thus a number of common errors can be found in texts.. One common example is that misidentified texts often

6 Shakir Mustafa, *Arab History and its Historians*. (Beirut: Dar al Ilm Lalmalayeen, 1983).

7 Suzkin, *History of Arab Heritage*, 5-8.

8 Widad Al Qadi, "Introduction to the Study of Truces in the Era of the Islamic Conquests." *The Fourth International Conference (Second Seminar) on the History of Greater Syria: Greater Syria in the Umayyad Era*. Amman, 1987.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

exchanged one phrase or term for a synonym, reflecting the more recent transcription of a text that had been passed down partially orally. Another common error was the dropping of a single word or phrase from the text of a peace treaty. From these, one can come to a conclusion about what would be the defining characteristics of an Umayyad peace treaty, albeit in broad terms⁽¹¹⁾.

- 2) The second approach was one innovated by Al Qadi herself, based on her own personal reading of peace agreements. Specifically, Al Qadi has arrived at a system of comparing the Umayyad peace treaties with the text of papyri from Egypt. While the Egyptian texts date from a relatively later part of the Muslim conquests, between 81 and 110 after the Hijra—slightly later than the rule of Muawiya—they can nonetheless be used to determine the authenticity of the Umayyad texts (Al Qadi, *Introduction to the Study of Truces in the Era of the Islamic Conquests* 1987, 203). Al Qadi used this approach to conclude that the Umayyad peace treaties being studied were fairly authentic, and that they resembled the features of an agreed on defining set⁽¹²⁾.

In other words, these approaches by a number of historians have demonstrated that readers today do indeed have reliable versions of peace treaties and similar texts dating back from the earliest Islamic period. Contemporary readers can be confident that, despite the fact that the transcription of Islamic histories did not begin in earnest until the third Hijri century or, at the earliest, the mid-second century of the Hijra, that the documents available today are reliably similar to the originals and can be used as historical materials.

While many have worked exhaustively to prove the veracity of different texts chronicling the early history of Islam, Hichem Djait took a slightly different approach. Djait sought to demonstrate the debt to

some of the early chroniclers of Muslim history, such as Abi Mukhnif (d. 157 Hijra) who was one of the earliest to commit oral histories to writing. It was the work of the earliest chroniclers such as Abi Mukhnif who made possible the foundational historical texts of Tabari and Balathri⁽¹³⁾.

For Djait, the pressing question was not a question of the point at history at which Muslim oral histories were recorded, but rather the question of a continuous historical legacy. Specifically, Djait describes a historical trajectory that ignited interest in Islamic history and its significance following what he termed the “Second Great Fitna” (or “discord, a reference to the conflicts that would eventually lead to the rise of Shi’a Islam). It was the birth of a class of what he termed “professionals of collective memory”. This first group would give rise eventually, in 80 AH and 100 AH during the second century AH, to a new generation who would commit these histories and accounts to written records in their private journals. This style was transferred to those who were active between 100 AH and 401 AH, many of whom documented the news in personal journals without reaching the historical documentation phase that began with Abu Mikhnaf who died in 157 AH and was followed by Sayf ibn Umar (200AH/815AD), al-Waqidi (207AH/832AD) and al-Madā’inī (228AH/843 AD). In this manner, the materials that were used by the historians of the third century AH already existed in written form. By the third century AH also, these collected encyclopedic works had become so dominant that earlier written versions were becoming extinct. Exceptions in the shape of books continued to exist, such as the chronicle of Safeen, written by Naṣr bin Muzāḥim (212 AH/827 AD).

To summarize the above, the writings of the early Islamic period that have survived can be considered a culmination of the trajectory of producing historical materials, which contain many elements that can be relied upon without contradicting the standards of historical writing. These elements can be summarized as follows:

- 1) The earliest written records—including truces, pronouncements and epistles—which have in the

11 Ibid, 202

12 Ibid, 205-206

13 Hichem Djait, *La Grande Discorde: Religion et politique de l’Islam des origines*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1989) 170.

main been lost in their original form, nonetheless survive albeit in slightly (but not substantively) altered form in the contemporary world. These alterations are mainly related to vocabulary used and not so much the meaning of the words. The same applies to the chronicles recorded during the first century of the Hijra and the beginning of the second century through ad-hoc, personal efforts—albeit piecemeal—before transforming by middle of the second century AH into an all-encompassing cultural movement towards the documentation of history. At that stage, some of the giants of Islamic history—Abu Mukhnif, Saif Bin Omar, al-Waqidi and al-Madā'inī—worked tirelessly to produce sift through, collate and discern their way through texts to formulate an image of the past. These historians did not seek to create a mental image of their own times, but rather that of an era which predated them by a century, reflecting a genuine “historical imagination”⁽¹⁴⁾.

- 2) Then comes the role of the “collective memory professionals,” as Djait describes them (or the “practitioners of collective memory”) who set about working in earnest in the aftermath of the second fitna. The resulting texts appear to indicate that these practitioners had all passed through a special training regimen before they began committing these accounts to history, thereby allowing them to memorize long texts in great detail. According to Jawad Ali, the earliest Muslims took great pride in being able to rely so exactly on their memories without having to turn to written materials⁽¹⁵⁾.
- 3) Similarly important is the adoption by the early Muslims of a process of rhetorical, polemical falsification as a means of refining the texts before them. Nonetheless, according to Ayman Fouad Al Sayyed, this was not undertaken as a means of discerning false accounts until the first schisms to rip through the Muslim communities⁽¹⁶⁾. This meant that the earliest Muslims could not narrate what they wanted without any restrictions and adjustments because if they did not abide by the

terms narrating a historical event, their credibility would be damaged, accused of weakness and confidence would be withdrawn from their narration of events.

- 4) The chroniclers of the episodes of Islamic history spent what must have been the majority of their lives travelling from one location to the next in an attempt to find first-hand accounts of critical events in the history of Islam. The way that these texts are written suggests that much of these accounts were to be found in written form, at least partially.

In sum, a range of opinions exists on the value of the corpus of received texts on Islamic history, particularly those which are secondary sources. The only point of consensus among scholars is that the temporal delay between the recording of these texts and the events they record means that they do not constitute “primary sources”. This paper argues that the contention surrounding the way these documents were classified is a legacy of the linguistic differences between Arabic and the Romance languages. To take the example of French: *document*, traditionally translated into Arabic as *wathīqa*, is a term that can be applied to any argument, piece of evidence or information. Additionally, the word *document* can be modified in French (as well as in other Romance languages) to describe exactly which type of document is intended. Modifying words used include *d'archive*, *epigraphique*, *juridique*, *epigraphique* and *litteraire*.

Arabic, however, operates slightly differently with sources being divided into two broad categories: archival sources and narrative writings, the latter subgroup including literary, theological, geographic and other texts. According to Djait, the former category were merely an unplanned by-product of the human experience, while the second type of document was a deliberate production aimed at leaving an account of the events which are being described⁽¹⁷⁾. Seen from this vantage point, readers can deduce that the “original” texts which define Islamic history are *not* primary sources, having been written decades, or even centuries, after the events they chronicle.

14 Ibid, 172

15 Ali, Jawad. “The Sources of Tabari’s History.” The Journal of the Iraqi Academic Society, 1 (1950): 154.

16 Sayyed, Sayyed. Unclear. (Baghdad: Unclear, 1900)

17 Hichem Djait. “Les sources ecrites anterieurs au XVeme siecle, Histoire Generale de l’Afrique (“Written Sources of History prior to the 15th Century”).” Jeune Afrique 118 (1980).

Scholarly Approaches to Muslim Sources and the Writing of Early Islamic History

Mirroring the diversity of scholarly opinion on the value of various sources of Islamic history, scholars of Islam have varied in their approach to the history of early Islam itself:

Glorification

A majority of Muslim historians especially approach the history of the early Muslim community from this stand point of glorification, insisting that the recorded history of the early Muslim communities is unassailable and can never be made subject to scrutiny. For the historians in question, the texts of Islamic history narrate sacred facts, not historical processes open to enquiry and skepticism.

The Descriptivist Approach

In this sense, “descriptivism” is a term applied to the scholarly approach which adopts the texts of early Islamic history without subjecting them to critical scrutiny. This typifies Arabic language sources on the history of early Islam since the middle ages and continues today. The writing style of historians who fit in this school is generally captivating to readers; notable examples of the group include W. Muir, V. Grunbaum, H. Kennedy and W.M. Watt as well as Abdelhay Shaaban.

Alongside these two, a third group, made up mostly of orientalist emerged, one which was focused largely on casting doubt on the contents of the texts of early Islamic history. Some of these have taken skepticism to extremes, seeking to undermine the authenticity of the texts available to contemporary scholars. It serves us well to acknowledge the debt owed to orientalist scholars in revealing the sources which historians today believe to be crucial to an understanding of early Islam. The intense debates which today animate both Muslim and Western/orientalist scholars of Islam would not have been possible without the advances in knowledge made through the orientalist project.

“The Skeptics”

This group is willing to cast doubt on the authenticity on all accounts of early Islam. Widad Al Qadi attributes this to the deeply entrenched “uncertainty” which, in her words, “continues to plague the recording of history in Arabic”⁽¹⁸⁾. This unwillingness to accept early Islamic sources reached a crescendo at two pivotal moments in time. The first of these was at the end of the nineteenth century, and is due to the writings of the German orientalist Goldziher, who, as Suzkin put it, “was adamantly convinced that Arabic historical writing was exclusively oral”⁽¹⁹⁾. The second can be traced to the 1977 publication of *Quranic Studies* by John Wansbrough who cast doubt on all ancient Arabic works, including the Koran itself. In the same year, Patricia Crone and Michael Cook published *Hagarism* in which the authors described all Arabic language historical materials as unreliable, insisting that one had to turn to non-Arabic sources to have a true understanding of early Islam and its roots. Crone and Cook insisted that only Armenian, Greek and Syriac/Aramaic sources could be relied on for a clear picture of the early Muslim community⁽²⁰⁾. This group also sought to discredit orientalist of long standing, including Ritter, Madlung and Van Ess, who had sought to ascertain the historicity of early Islamic texts dating back to the first century of the Hijra⁽²¹⁾. Goldziher’s writings typify the writings of the two periods during which the authenticity of Islamic historical sources were brought into question. A case in point is Goldziher’s article on Al Tabari in the French language *Encyclopedie de l’Islam*, where the orientalist claimed that Al Tabari (d. 923 AD) would have borrowed from a combination of oral and written sources to complete his work⁽²²⁾. Sauvaget, meanwhile, insists that all of the Islamic history

18 Al Qadi, “Towards a Suitable Methodology”, 127

19 Suzkin, *History of Arab Heritage*, 3

20 Ibid, 127-128; Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: the Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing*. (Princeton, New Jersey, USA: The Darwin Press, 1998).

21 Michael Cook, *Early Muslim Dogma*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980).

22 *Encyclopedia of Islam*. “Al Tabari.” *Encyclopedie de l’Islam*. Leiden: Brill, 1975, 608

texts at the disposal of modern scholars were reliant exclusively on oral sources⁽²³⁾, leading the writer to discard the entirety of these sources. In a similar fashion, Blachere disregarded the output of two of the great linguists of the Arab-Islamic medieval period Al-Mufaḍḍal al-Ḍabbī (168 AH/784 AD) and Abu Abdallāh, bin al-al-A'rabi (231 AH/844AH)⁽²⁴⁾.

The increasing skepticism of orientalist towards specific points of the canon of Islamic history provided the groundwork for a number of highly valuable research papers which created the critical approach to Islamic history. Some of the notable contributors to this include M.J. De Cojoe and Julius Wellhausen writing at the end of the nineteenth century, as well as Leone Caetani, Henri Lammens, Joseph Schacht and Robert Brunschvig who wrote in the early part of the twentieth century. Donner provides a discussion of these various orientalist and their contributions in his *Narratives of Islamic Origins*⁽²⁵⁾.

In the earlier wave of skepticism of Islamic texts, dating from the nineteenth century, the aim—seemingly—of the scholars leading this wave was to arrive at a more rigorously critical and academic understanding of the proto-Islamic community. They had hoped to be better able to discern genuinely historical texts, and differentiate them from purely mythological legends, which might have been later embellishments added for reasons of religious, social or political expedience. This is a perfectly reasonable intention in a complex and pluralist society.

The second, latter period of skepticism took root in the Anglo-Saxon world; its stalwart pioneers included John Wansborough, Michael Cook, Patricia Crone, Gerald Hawting, Moshe Sharon, Judith Koren, Yehuda Nevo, Norman Calder. The commonality running throughout this work is a desire, not only to scrutinize Islamic historical texts, but do discredit all Arab-Islamic historical sources. In lieu of these, they propose to rely exclusively on non-Arabic sources, particularly those written in Syriac and Greek, as a source for the early history of Islam.

The risks inherent in this latter trend are twofold:

There is no value to studying the history of a given religious community by relying exclusively on what are “foreign” resources. Given that there are extant Arab-Islamic resources, the use of non-Arabic sources in the compilation of Arab-Islamic history would have been beneficial but purely as a means to enrich understanding.

Non-Arab sources are not even existent for a number of regions over certain periods of time. The exemplar here is North Africa, where only Arabic sources exist for the first two centuries AH. It cannot be that contemporary historians must simply disregard the history of these regions during periods for which only Arabic sources exist on the grounds that these Arabic sources do not bring us any closer to “the reality of what took place”⁽²⁶⁾. Notably, this heavily positivist approach to history has been surpassed by other trends; Western historiography has moved on to other concerns.

The Critical Approach

The scholars skeptical of the authenticity of early Islamic sources owe a large debt to critical scholars. This was a trend which itself emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century, around the same time as the birth of the positivist school in Europe. The momentum behind this new movement was founded on two distinct observations. The first of these was the possible corruption of the narratives that could take place as information was passed from one individual to the next. This risk was particularly true for those narrators who lived in later periods and who were likely to have been influenced by the state of ideological/theological strife which gripped the early Muslim community. A second defining feature of the Critical School is one it shares with the Descriptivists. Namely, proponents of both of these schools agree that the Hadith are more or less tangential to the history of Islam, that they are instead purely religious/spiritual works rooted in the Koran. Donner's work, cited earlier, also provides a survey of the scholars who contributed to this school, in particular De Cojoe, Wellhausen and Caetani. Donner exhaustively retraces the criticisms which these writers have of

23 Jean Sauvaget, *Introduction à l'Histoire de l'Orient Musulman*, (Paris: Librairie d'Amerique et d'Orient, 1943).

24 Regis, Blachere. *Histoire de la littérature arabe des origines à la fin du XV siècle*, (Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1952).

25 Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*.

26 G. Martinez-Gros, “Mahomet, Prophète et Guerrier.” *Les collections de L'histoire* 30 (2006): 29-30.

the early narrators of episodes of Islamic history, especially their critiques of Ibn Ishaq and Al Waqidi (for De Cojoe) and Saif Bin Omar (Wellhausen). Notably, neither of these two authors addresses the

life of the Prophet Mohammed directly, arguably because neither of them had much confidence in the Hadith as historical material⁽²⁷⁾.

The Summation

In seeking to overcome the long-standing dispute between various scholars over the authenticity or otherwise of early Islamic sources and whether or not their usefulness as historical sources can be taken for granted, it's useful to note that the skeptical school benefitted from the school's that adopted a critical approach to Islamic sources and the Hadeeth which developed in the late 19th century until the end of the first half of the twentieth century.. Yet despite the efforts of proponents of the critical schools of thought in bringing to attention a number of fantastical, mythical stories, they never did refute the idea of the existence of authentic Islamic historical sources to begin with, one which could be arrived at and ascertained through hard scrutiny. This is in contrast with the Skeptical School which held that it was impossible to rely on the purported original Arabic sources on the early history of Islam. Some, like Crone and Cook took this to mean that one should look instead for alternative, non-Arabic sources (read: Greek, Syriac and other) sources on the early history of Islam. While others, like John Wansbrough, held instead that any meaningful knowledge of the early history of Islam was entirely impossible.

The conclusions arrived at by the Skeptics led created a sense of commotion within the Western academy. Christian Decobert provides an overview of this in his reviews of the works by Crone and Cook and by Wansbrough⁽²⁸⁾.

Crone and Cook's work, which takes shape in the book *Hagarism*, the main thesis of which can be summarized in the idea that what we now call "Islam" is in reality the consequence of a convergence of the influences of existing religious sects, partially Christian and, especially, Jewish, which had coalesced in the Arabian Peninsula at that time. According to the

authors of *Hagarism*, such a confluence of religious motifs could only have taken place in Syria and not, as Muslim sources assert, in the Hijaz. For his part, Wansbrough, the author of *The Sectarian Milieu* and *Quranic Studies* holds that the impossibility of creating an accurate picture of the history of early Islam results not from a dearth of information—Wansbrough accepts that Arab-Islamic sources are indeed information rich, but that these represented a selective, delayed reading of the narration of the past.

Decobert portrays the texts⁽²⁹⁾ written by the Skeptics as "extreme" in their content, suggesting that the sources presented as an alternative to Arab-Islamic historical texts and on which *Hagarism* is based are in turn severely flawed. As for Wansbrough, his reckless discrediting of any and all Arabic language sources on early Islam serves in itself to bring his later scholarship into question, as does his completely unfounded suggestion that the earliest Muslim theologians were in fact "Judaized" Mesopotamians.

Although Decobert tends to downplay the influence and value of the work of the Skeptics named above⁽³⁰⁾, he nonetheless accepts that they did offer an important service in highlighting some of the long-standing misunderstood, opaque or left open issues in early Islam. Most prominently, there is the question surrounding the rise of Islam itself as a religious movement in Arabia. In turn, scholars of Islam are left with no choice but to either rely entirely on non-canonical resources (such as artifacts and non-Arab literary texts) or turn their scrutiny to the existing Arabic historical texts. What Crone, Cook, Wansbrough and others have failed to do is to understand the nuances and the need to clearly delineate the differences between various types of sources.

27 Michael De. Cojoe, *Memoire sur la conquete de la Syrie*. Leiden: Brill, 1900; Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena zur altesten Gechichte des Islam*, (Berlin: Reimer, 1899).

28 Christian Decobert, *Le Mendiant et le Combattant: L'institution de l'Islam*, (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1991), 35-53.

29 Decobert, *Le Mendiant et le Combattant*, 30-31

30 Ibid, 31-32

Meanwhile Donner holds the view that an accurate understanding of the history of early Islam can only be attained through the texts—whether complete or incomplete—which have been left by the earliest Arabic chroniclers of Islam, dating from either the third century of the Hijra or later⁽³¹⁾. This is a view shared by Djait⁽³²⁾, who was able to make use of some of the great historians of early Islam. The rich biographical detail found in the works of Al Waqidi, Al Saeb Al Kalbi, Saif Bin Omar, Abi Mukhanaf and al-Madā'inī leaves careful readers transfixed, convinced that one is almost living through the events being relayed.

De Premare takes a different view from either Djait, Donner or Decobert, instead using the preface to his *Les Fondations de l'Islam* to suggest reassert the main argument of the Skeptics, that there was a lack of any first-hand Arabic accounts of the earliest days of Islam⁽³³⁾. Still, De Premare does concede, albeit indirectly, that non-Arabic sources—whether Greek, Syriac, Coptic Egyptian or otherwise—could provide a total substitute for the non-existent Arabic records of the early days of Islam. According to De Premare, the information available through non-Arabic sources is insufficient to give a complete understanding of Islam: they simply do not contain enough detail about the pivotal events of Islamic history. Based on this, De Premare concludes that attempting to write the history of the early Muslim community and, particularly, the biography of the Prophet Mohammed, is a futile exercise. This bold conclusion never prevented the French orientalist from delving deeper into a number of salient historical themes: the history of commerce in pre-Islamic Arabia; on the settlement of Yathrib/Medina; the Hijra itself and the “constitution” (*Saheefa*) which bound the people of Medina together; as well as the Islamic raids which took place during the Prophet Mohammed's lifetime. In doing so, De Premare made use of a variety of historical sources, primarily Arabic also from other languages⁽³⁴⁾.

What is most striking in these debates over the authenticity of the original source material for early Islamic history is that the doubts over their veracity are due to the fact that they were composed in the latter history of early Islam. This should lead to contemplation.

The decision to avoid relying on Arabic language sources on early Islam because the authenticity of those sources is drawn into question, means non-Arabic sources—whether Greek, Syriac/Aramaic, Armenian or Coptic—offer no respite. These sources also suffer from the same problem of questionable authenticity and selectiveness. Indeed, just like the Arabic-Islamic sources which they purportedly replace, these non-Arabic sources have only become available to contemporary scholars following their repeated transmission and copying. The versions extant today are not “originals”⁽³⁵⁾. Reliance on these sources according to Tolan serves no aim other than feeding a sense of superiority felt by Christian commentators towards Islam since the birth of the latter religion⁽³⁶⁾. Indeed, as Febvre points out, the fact that the earliest Muslim sources were unwritten shares a lot with most of human history until the sixteenth century AD, up to which point “more people listened than read or wrote”⁽³⁷⁾. As for Wansbrough, the assertion that a history of early Islam is entirely impossible cannot be taken seriously; the arguments for such a position are deficient and inadequate.

Similarly, the declining importance of the positivist school of thought means that scholars can disregard the approach which refuses to acknowledge the historical value of ancient Arab-Muslims texts due to the lack of an official archive. Ultimately, the lack of archival records is a feature not only of Muslim sources, but also of Greek and Roman histories of the same region. As Djait makes clear, the Romans left no written records of their rule over North Africa despite their centuries old domination of the region⁽³⁸⁾.

31 Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 30-31

32 Djait, *La Grande Discorde*, 165-177

33 A. L. De Premare, *Les Fondations de l'Islam Entre Ecriture et Histoire*, (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2002).

34 Ibid, 469-492

35 Adel-Theodore Khoury, *Les theologiens byzantins et l'islam: textes et auteurs (VIII-XIII s.)*, (Louvain: Nauwelaerts, 1969), 49-55, 87.

36 John Tolan, *Les Sarrasins: L'islam dans L'imagination Europeenne au Moyen Age* (Paris: Flammarion, 2003), 18.

37 Mandrou, *Unclear*.

38 Hichem Djait, *The Formation of the Islamic West (in Arabic)*, (Beirut: Dar Al Taleea, 2004), 224.

Conclusion

Moving on from the above arguments, it can be demonstrated that the Skeptical school is excessive in its refusal to acknowledge any sort of authenticity for any Arabic language sources on the early history of Islam. This is particularly true of those attempts by the Skeptics to disentangle the history of Islam from the wider context of world history, suggesting that the problems which afflict Muslim historiography are unique to a specific civilization and that they are not similarly evident in the history of the Romans and Greeks, that Muslim civilization did not rise to the same level of the civilizations of the Ancient Greeks or the Romans, or to the Byzantines or of Western Christianity.

This is not to suggest that the accounts found in Muslim historical sources are not liable to scrutiny and

critique. Rather, this paper argues that contemporary scholars deal with the methodological problems presented by Arabic-Islamic historical sources in a manner analogous to how similar difficulties are overcome when addressing the history of other civilizations. With such an approach, Islamic history can be woven into the wider global frame⁽³⁹⁾: the only means enabling historians to approach truth and “objectivity”. The aim of this paper can thus be summarized as a call-to-arms to Arab and Muslim scholars who delve into the sources covering the early history of Islam to re-examine the methodological approaches which guide their treatment of those sources. Notwithstanding their refusal to engage with novel approaches, it is an invitation to them to find new ways of writing history; and the sources they rely on already invite plural readings and interpretations⁽⁴⁰⁾.

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39 Abdullah Laroui, *Islam et Histoire: essai d’epistemologie*, (Paris: Flammarion, 1999).

40 Houari Touati, “Les lecteurs des Chroniques Arabes”, *Colloque international lecteurs historiques des chroniques medievals*. (Damascus: Institut Francais du Proche Orient, 2003).

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