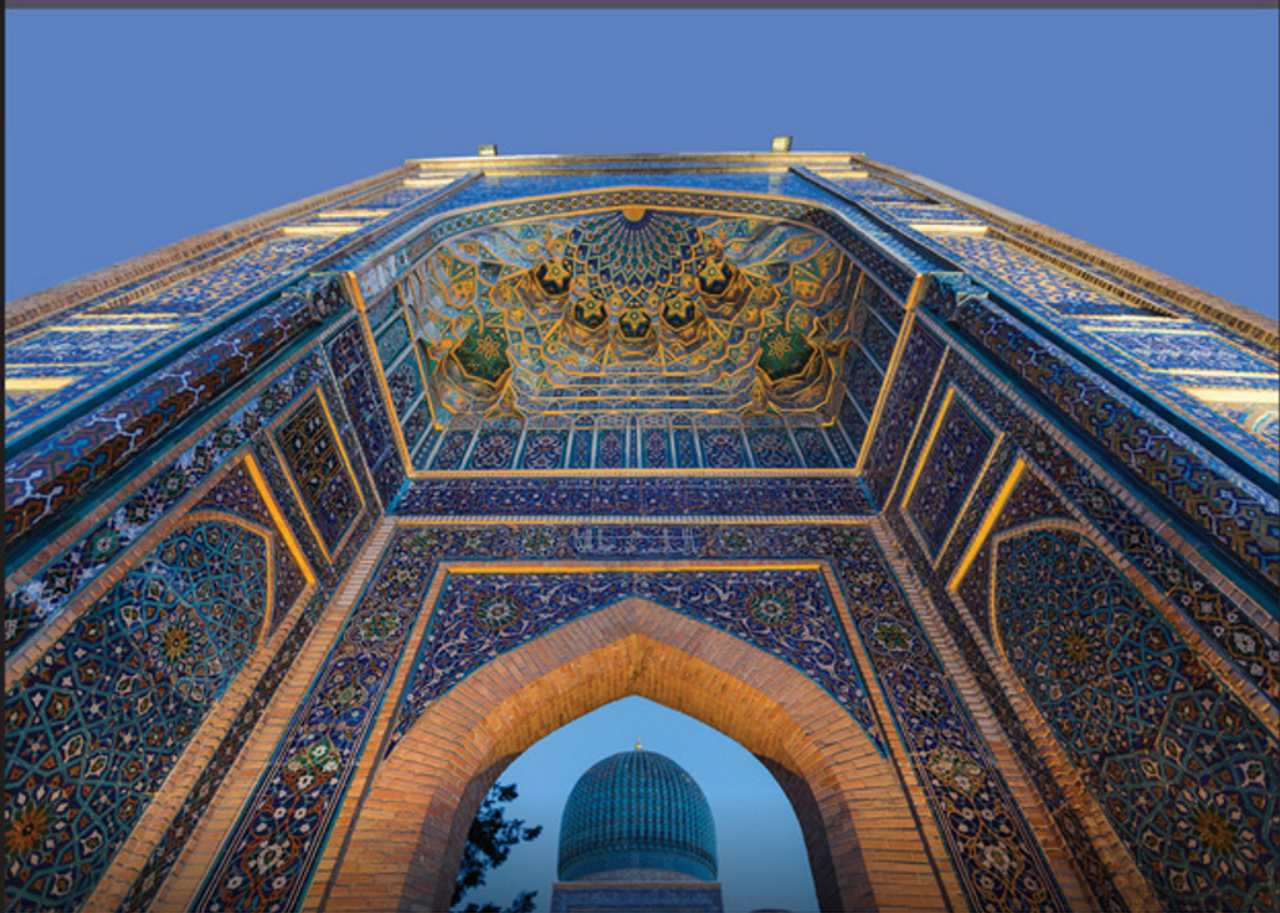


The Wiley Blackwell History of ISLAM

Edited by Armando Salvatore

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Preface

The Wiley Blackwell History of Islam is a collective project whose beginnings go back to the Summer of 2008, when I received an invitation to provide a proposal for such a volume to Wiley Blackwell. Ever since, the project has required an ongoing exchange with a variety of scholars of Islam with diverse disciplinary backgrounds. From the beginning, both the publisher and I shared the goal of providing a reference work based on fresh scholarly findings, while taking into account relevant research traditions and their underlying, if contended, scholarly approaches. The outcome of almost a decade of work and exchange is a volume addressed to a composite academic audience, ranging from advanced undergraduates to professionals who aspire to acquire a knowledge on the history of Islam which is comprehensive, up to date, and manageable. Yet the volume might also contribute to scholarly debates not confined to Islamic Studies: most notably through the analysis of the transformations that marked the transition of the Islamic ecumene from premodern to modern sociopolitical conditions.

Published histories of Islam are either single-authored studies that reflect the author's individual approach or collective works with an encyclopedic ambition and/or a multivolume range. They therefore risk overstating either the unity or the diversity of Islamic history. This volume is a cohesive collective undertaking based on an originally unitary yet articulate conception. This has been executed through distributing the task of dealing with discrete aspects and periods of Islamic history among a selected group of intellectually motivated scholars within history, Islamic Studies, and historical sociology—both within the English-speaking academia and outside of it—who share the need for reasonable conceptual innovations. Our goal has been to strike a balance between older and younger scholars and to achieve a fair degree of geographical distribution, with one third of the contributors (and one of the main editors) coming from non-Anglophone institutions. This diversity was also achieved in response to a specific request by the publisher, back in 2008, to provide a comprehensive representation of scholarly traditions in the study of Islam. This also includes the self-renewal of the time-honored continental orientalist 'schools.'

This is why *The Wiley Blackwell History of Islam* can help absorb and redeploy basic analytic concepts which are mostly taken for granted by both the specialist and by a larger academic audience. We provide a well-studied selection of key topics that are neither confined to the taste and skills of a single author nor reflective of the encyclopedic ambition of covering the entire ‘world of Islam.’ We have addressed the unity and diversity of the history of Islam, both as a religious tradition and as a civilizational process, by blending historical analysis and theoretical reflection. Our main goal has been to help our readership to understand a complex tradition-*cum*-civilization the knowledge of which is essential for making sense of the wider transcivilizational dynamics of the Afro-Eurasian hemisphere—including the far western exceptionalism of the ‘Occident.’

Against the background of teleological assumptions concerning why the Islamic civilization finally succumbed to the hegemonic power of the ‘West,’ the book illustrates the distinctive Islamic (and Islamicate) unfolding of the dialectic of ‘commoners’ and elites across urban, agrarian, and nomadic milieus. It shows how the related patterns of life conduct were shaped in connection with highly variable and often flexible institutions of governance. The particular key to presenting an articulate yet cohesive history of Islam consists in consciously focusing on the ongoing dynamics linking religion and culture to power and civility. This focus puts a premium on a rather transcivilizational approach, whereby the Islamic ecumene is seen both in its internal articulations and in its external openness and permeability, rather than through the lens of a more narrowly conceived area study perspective.

The volume consists of seven parts. Part I deals with Islam’s overlapping, relevant ‘beginnings’ out of the older and wider dynamics of the Irano-Semitic civilizational area. Part II covers the classic era of the caliphate from the middle of the 7th to the middle of the 10th century CE: this epoch played a formative role especially in setting the terms of the future continual interaction between the *shari’a* tradition (oriented to life conduct and juridical regulation) and the *adab* culture (radiating from the courts of the rulers and able to shape the character of statecraft and administration, but also decisively influencing the enactment of cultured life forms): they interacted and competed in shaping key notions of the Islamicate order, ranging from the subject to the state. Part III embraces the formative epoch of what comparative civilizational analysts have called the “ecumenic renaissance” occurring throughout the Afro-Eurasian landmass during the early second millennium CE, within which the expanding Islamic ecumene played a crucial role, notably through the spread of Sufism (from the collapse of the power of the caliphate in the middle of the 10th to the wave of Mongol conquests in the middle of the 13th century). Part IV deals with the renewal of the expanded Islamic ecumene from the Mongol capture of Baghdad of 1258 until the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople of 1453. Part V encompasses the early modern period, lasting until the end of the 17th century and the Battle of Vienna. Part VI covers the 18th and most of the 19th century, an epoch coinciding with the global rise of European

powers, during which Islamic movements of revival and reform saw the light. Part VII explores the era of anti-colonial resistance and postcolonial reorganization carried out by sociopolitical (including “Islamist”) movements and new elites, animated by a variety of patterns of mobilization and organization (both national and transnational), up to the present era.

This chronological subdivision represents a partial revision of the approach of the most important work in the history of Islam to date by Marshall G.S. Hodgson (see the Introduction to this volume) and of other conventional periodizations, in that it shifts the beginning and end of some epochs and intervenes in the overall logic that delimits and connects successive eras. It particularly suggests a tripartition of the larger epoch we identify with modernity into an early modern yet largely precolonial era, a colonial period, and a long (yet ongoing) phase of exit from colonial domination toward problematic attempts to reconstruct sociopolitical autonomy in the era of postcolonial nation-states, culminating in their crisis between the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. Similarly, the unity of the seventh period cuts through the late-colonial and postcolonial phases (a type of labeling that, if taken too literally, along with the underlying periodization, is too blatantly modeled on the Western trajectory of colonial modernity) and envisions a rather unitary epoch of movement-based resurgence and corresponding attempts to build independent states—a period that has been increasingly characterized by centrifugal processes, especially from the 1970s until today. This tripartition of the modern age has the merit of rejecting the still dominant narrative postulating the existence of a Western monopoly on the birth of modernity from its inception, and which is based on reductive and homogenizing assumptions about linear alignments of Reformation, Enlightenment, and the commercial and industrial revolutions of Northwestern Europe.

Each of the seven parts consists of four chapters that cover the more strictly geopolitical and the wider civilizational dimensions of Islamic history, as well as the theological-juridical field, more exclusive forms of elite culture, and the fundamental dimension of Sufi and ‘popular’ traditions and practices: sometimes representing the ‘lines of flight’ from the consensus but more often reinstituting it in new ways. This assortment is necessary to provide systematic unity to the materials, though it has been obviously molded by the specific orientations of the chapter contributors. While in some cases a certain amount of background knowledge by the reader can be assumed, the chapters are generally written to be accessible to broader audiences. Each author treats a given topic from a specific perspective, allowing a modest overlap among chapters on dealing with key events, characters, or themes. The intention has been to strike a suitable balance in preserving the scholarly autonomy of each author and chapter while guaranteeing a degree of cohesion to the volume as a whole which aims to improve on what we can find in comparable collective works, however excellent their scholarly quality.

After my proposal for the book was approved by Wiley Blackwell in late 2008, I started inviting contributors from different backgrounds, and in the years 2011

and 2014, respectively, I asked Roberto Tottoli and Babak Rahimi to collaborate in the editorship. I am grateful that they accepted and also joined the task of inviting contributors, winning over to the project a pool of authors whose chapters play a particularly critical role in the balance of the entire volume, most notably with regard to the highly contentious fields dealing with early Islam and early modernity. In the distribution of preliminary editorial work, Roberto took care in particular of Parts I and II, Babak of Parts V and VI, and I dedicated myself to Parts III and VII, while Babak and I collaborated on Part IV. On the latest stage of work, which started around 18 months ago after Roberto Tottoli had collated and ordered the individual chapter drafts, I took over the entire manuscript anew and submitted it to substantial, yet sustainable revisions.

It goes without saying that without Roberto's and Babak's contributions to the editing work, this volume would have never seen the light. Qualitatively, the editorship of this volume is theirs as much as it is mine, while I tried to preserve and nurture, through several ups and downs, a sense of continuity, purpose, and standard from those increasingly remote beginnings of the project. This endeavor also entailed keeping fidelity to the project as originally discussed with the publisher and further channeled by four anonymous reviewers, to all of whom I owe thanks. In the final phase I particularly benefited from an intensive six-month collaboration with M. Fariduddin Attar and Naznin Patel at McGill University, where we all received the graceful and constant support of Professor Daniel Cere, Director of the School of Religious Studies. Farid's and Naznin's sharp acumen in reading and commenting on all chapters helped me in particular with the work of conceptual and architectural homogenization of the volume. Last and really not least, I have immensely benefited from the continual advice of the leading comparative historical sociologist and social theorist Johann P. Arnason, whose co-authorship of the Introduction only partly reflects his essential contribution to shaping the volume.

Armando Salvatore
Utrecht, June 2017

Introduction: The Formation and Transformations of the Islamic Ecumene

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and Roberto Tottoli

The Notion of a Transcivilizational Ecumene

The particular complexity of the historical study of Islam is nowadays a given for scholars in the broader field. This acknowledgement contrasts sharply with crass generalizations in public and media discourse on Islam, not only in the West. The project underlying this volume, belonging to the *Wiley Blackwell History of Religions* series, explores the diverse ways through which the undeniably religious dimension that is at the core of Islamic traditions (or simply Islam) innervates a distinctive type of ‘civilizing process’ in history. This process crystallized in institutional forms at a variety of levels: broadly social, specifically religious, legal, political, cultural, and, transversally, civic.

No doubt the scholarly interest in studying this expansive civilizing process has acquired a new boost due to late 20th-century developments associated with what has been roughly called a “re-Islamization process” occurring in the context of the most recent wave of globalization, whose beginnings should be traced back to the 1970s. Debates on globalization did not always take a historical turn, but when they did, the question of earlier globalizing waves—including premodern ones—was bound to be posed, and the exceptional success of the premodern Islamic expansion stood out as a prime example. Correspondingly, the applicability of modern concepts to the macro-civilizational formation created by this process could be considered.

Apart from a relatively brief early stage, the Islamic ecumene was not a unified empire, and it never became a world economy. It was always to some or to a large extent intertwined with multiple economic worlds, centered on the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, and Central Asian trade routes. But the notion of an Islamic world system *sui generis* has been suggested (Voll 1994) and several elements seem to speak in its favor: an exceptional importance of international trade, high geographical mobility, a notable degree of legal uniformity, and widely shared cultural codes. Several such trends have been the object of study of a historically and theoretically informed sociology of Islam (Turner 1974; Stauth 1993; Salvatore 2016), a field of research taking shape in the wake of the intellectually most challenging yet comprehensive single-authored oeuvre within the field to date. This work was produced precisely at a time, in the late 1960s, when the complexity of the wider field of Islamic Studies started to be recognized through an increasingly diversified set of investigations (Donner 2010: 641–2). I am referring to Marshall Hodgson's posthumously published three-volume *The Venture of Islam* (Hodgson 1974, I–III). Hodgson was Professor of World History and Chair of the prestigious interdisciplinary Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago.

In his scholarly career Hodgson interacted closely with representatives of both world history and modernization theory and his approach clearly transcended the conceptual limitations of Islamic Studies. A retrospective reading of key motives from his oeuvre has been recently facilitated by its reception among historians, historical sociologists, and civilizational analysts within a broader comparative perspective. Particular attention has been devoted to how religious traditions are supposed to feed into the broader civilizing process through which societies and states take form. Moreover, Hodgson can be credited for anticipating interpretations that only became familiar to a larger academic public from the late 1970s onward, ranging from the critique of the bias of orientalist worldviews to a pluralizing approach to the issue of modernity. In spite of writing during the zenith of modernization theory between the 1950s and 1960s, Hodgson warned us of the dangerous extent to which concepts applied to Islam and its history came to depend on the hegemony of Western modernity.

References to Max Weber, few in number but contextually significant, show that Hodgson was aware of classical social theory as well as of the need to go beyond such references, although in his work there is no trace of contact with the sociological debates that toward the end of his life and career were beginning to significantly alter received understandings of Weber's work. Hodgson's own reasons for being enticed to take into account sociological concepts were directly related to the broader historical setting within which he wanted to situate the Islamic "venture." His starting point was namely a perceived shortcoming of scholarship dealing with "pre-modern citted societies ... from Sumer to the French Revolution" (Hodgson 1974, I: 31). As he saw it, anthropologists had developed a systematic framework for the study of premodern non-citted communities, and sociologists had done something comparable for modern

societies; but apart from exceptions like Max Weber, he lamented that the long period in-between had not been tackled on that level. For Hodgson, a systematic approach to the premodern citted world would, first and foremost, have to account for the structures and dynamics of world history, and in the first instance those of the Afro-Eurasian macro-civilizational area. His idea of civilizations and their ongoing processes linking urban centers to rural and nomadic sectors needs to be understood in this context, as referring to units partly demarcating themselves, but also, and most importantly, interacting with each other and developing innovative capacities within an encompassing and ultimately global space. Thus, even if he never used the concept of civilizing or civilizational process, civilizations were conceived by him very much in process-like terms.

Let us take stock on analyzing this civilizational approach. Hodgson begins with a definition of “culture ... as a pattern of lifeways received among mutually recognized family groups.” In a more explicitly historical perspective, this pattern represents “a relatively autonomous complex of interdependent cumulative traditions, in which an unpredictable range of family groups may take part” (Hodgson 1974, I: 32). A civilization then appears as a “wider and more rarefied level” (Hodgson 1974, I: 33) of cultural identity. Civilizational patterns depend on “dominant lettered traditions,” whose cultural imprint tends to be accompanied by a continuity of social institutions. Yet, as Hodgson stressed, “each civilization defines its own scope” (Hodgson 1974, I: 33), so that the interconnections of cultural and institutional factors will differ in both degree and kind. Further warnings against reading too much into a general concept of civilization follow from reflections on its interpretive and explanatory reach. The ways of demarcating and understanding a civilization “must differ with the grounds for singling it out” (Hodgson 1974, I: 34); Hodgson’s prime example of such variations is the case of Byzantium, widely seen as a distinctive civilization but also as a phase in the history of Hellenic culture or part of a wider Christian world. This is not to suggest that no demarcation is more appropriate than other possible ones; to stay within this thematic range, the idea of three civilizations emerging from the transformation of the Roman world—Western Christendom, Byzantium, and Islam—has decidedly proved more fruitful for comparative research than the notion of one monotheistic complex.

If long-term civilizational patterns have a role to play, that role must be defined according to Hodgson within this perspective: “Historical change is continuous and all traditions are open and in motion, by the very necessity of the fact that they are always in internal imbalance. Minds are always probing the edges of what is currently possible” (Hodgson 1974, I: 37). Hodgson’s most basic working hypothesis for comparative studies thus follows: “The difference between major traditions lies not so much in the particular elements present within them, but in the relative weighting of them and the structuring of their interplay within the total context” (Hodgson 1974, I: 37). The next point to note is the connection between the above claims and the specific features of the “venture of Islam,” to

the extent Hodgson saw the latter as a creative transformation and integration of multiple legacies. This is where a clarification of Islamic variations on this theme is needed, drawing on Hodgson's insights but moving toward a more explicit theoretical and comparative stance. One obviously distinctive feature of the Islamic experience is the very close interconnection between the "internal imbalance" (Hodgson 1974, I: 37), which Hodgson sees as a reason for openness and ongoing change, and external dynamics.

This is due to the fact that the unfolding of Islamic civilization to an exceptionally sustained record of expansion requires paying due attention to different aspects of that process: religious, imperial, and civilizational. The expansive process involved multiple encounters with other civilizations, with varying outcomes on institutional as well as regional levels. The changing balance of expansion and interaction also set the scene for internal differentiation, as between the permanently shifting patterns of a quite open-ended relation between political and religious authority. This is not to deny that the Islamic forms and directions of the religiopolitical nexus are distinctive, but they have to be defined in terms of historical trajectories. Their specific features are due to the characteristics of the religious message (as it developed during the formative periods), the successive phases of expansion, and the encounters with other civilizational trajectories.

This realization clashes against orientalist bias envisioning this relation as particularly rigid, due to Islam's putative 'origins.' Long before Edward Said, Hodgson was critical of unexamined orientalist generalizations. As summarized by Edmund Burke III, "Marshall Hodgson clearly saw that Islamic history was a strategic point from which to undertake a critique of the discourse on Western civilization" (Burke III 1993: xv). To mark both the idiosyncratic and the shared elements characterizing the rise to hegemony of the Islamic ecumene at the very center of the Afro-Eurasian civilizational landmass, Hodgson's idea of a civilizational "Islamdom" distinct from Islam proper, that is, as a religious tradition, contributed to open the way to transcend the static idea of Islam as a monolithic civilization developing the themes of its origins between Mecca and Medina. Islamdom effectively described the unstable yet creative crystallization of an ecumene comparable in principle with Latin Christendom but actually deploying much more fluid and malleable civilizational characteristics. Islamdom was kept distinct from Islam by Hodgson for a variety of reasons, but most notably for its potential to create synergies among previously distinct cultural worlds and religious traditions. For Hodgson, it represented the specific "complex of social relations" or "the milieu of a whole society" embodied by Islamic civilization, being the perpetually shifting outcome of complex interactions with Islam's core religious traditions (Hodgson 1974, I: 58).

Thus the nature of Islamic civilization appeared to Hodgson as *sui generis*, if compared with China, India, or the West, precisely for being able to trigger off a new type of synthetic, even transcivilizational dynamics across the Afro-Eurasian depths. He never used the term "transcivilizational ecumene" or any equivalent one, but his emphasis on Islamdom's unprecedented ability to impose a significant

degree of cultural unity across regional boundaries, and to expand to the Eastern and Western extremities of Afro-Eurasia, points in that direction. Alternatively, if we follow Shmuel N. Eisenstadt in theorizing modernity as a new type of civilization, distinguished—among other things—by a very high capacity to transcend regional origins and formative contexts (Eisenstadt 2004), Islamdom was in this regard indisputably its most significant predecessor. For much of the “Middle Millennium” (Zedar and Wiesner-Hanks 2015: 667), as the editors of the fifth volume of the *The Cambridge World History* call the period from 500 to 1500 BCE that saw the unfolding of a “proto-globalization” (Olstein 2015), the “centrality of Islamic civilization” (Cook 2015) was a basic fact, which started to change, and only slowly, during the early modern era.

The uniqueness of this proto-global centrality of Islamdom was rendered by Hodgson in terms of transcivilizational circulation, cosmopolitan opening, and institutional flexibility. According to him, the civilizational complex of Islamdom innervated by Islamic traditions inherited and creatively recombined the cultural characters and the political specificities of a vast and more ancient geocultural region that he called the “Irano-Semitic” civilizational area. Prior to the rise of Islam this region embraced rather heterogeneous religious communities sharing ideas of prophetic monotheism but divided by a long history of competition and conflict. The civilizing process occurring within Islamdom inherited and brought to a common denominator both the religious characteristics of the Irano-Semitic area and their impact on the management of the worldly realm. For Hodgson, “[t]he Irano-Semitic prophets analyzed neither the inner self nor the outer world”; they “summoned the personal conscience to confront a cosmic moral order, which expressed itself in the contingencies of social history” (Hodgson 1974, I: 117–18).

In other words, the rise of Islam brought to the Irano-Semitic multi-traditional constellation an unprecedented input from the hitherto peripheral Arabian Peninsula (including a language that became a key bearer of lettered traditions), and centered the whole process on a new religious vision. A markedly pluralistic background thus entered into the making of new civilizational patterns. To sum up, thanks not only to the emergence of Islam but also to the unfolding of Islamdom, “the post-Cuneiform Irano-Semitic tradition between Nile and Oxus, from Syria to Khurasan,” brought prophetic monotheism “to a certain culmination,” also by exalting the “communal articulation” of the town commoners most exposed to its message, “while overcoming its divisiveness” (Hodgson 1993: 107).

In parallel to acknowledging unambiguously that the new venture of Islam had been long in the making via monotheistic traditions in different Semitic and Iranian manifestations, Hodgson also stressed the increasingly self-assertive strength of urban, and in particular mercantile, groups. At the confluence of such combined trends, Islam infused Islamdom with a strongly egalitarian social ethics (Arnason 2006: 32). Thus, rather than the Hijaz (the narrow region of the Arabian Peninsula where Mecca and Medina are located), the cradle of Islam and the platform from which its hemisphere-wide expansion started should be, according to

Hodgson, identified with the wider “Nile-to-Oxus” region. He unabashedly stated that “when Islam was announced there, the new doctrine did not seem strange,” since it was quite well aligned with earlier developments of the Irano-Semitic realm (Hodgson 1993: 105). The new call met the aspirations of townspeople facing agrarianate dominance over societies strongly stratified in classes or castes.

Further developing Hodgson’s vision of Islam’s venture requires nowadays a concerted scholarly engagement on a quite broad scale, entailing more than simple interdisciplinary collaborations, namely the adoption of a transdisciplinary perspective matching history with theory. The present volume, building on the strengths of Hodgson’s approach, intends to accomplish a step in this direction requiring in some cases a distancing from Hodgson and the exploration of alternative interpretive paths, among those the increasingly diversified and methodologically reflexive field (rather than discipline) of Islamic Studies has produced over the last four decades.

I. Late Antique Beginnings (to ca. 661)

There are various keys that may help us to decipher the intricate process that generated the seeds of the Islamic ecumene in the Near East during Late Antiquity (ca. 200–600), a label coined by Peter Brown (1971) which has helped to recontextualize several strands of historical research on the Euro-Mediterranean and West-Asian regions. The interpretive questions here at play concern the economic, cultural, and political developments of the 5th and 6th centuries CE in the Arabian Peninsula and in the wider area, and more particularly the early 7th century in the places where Muhammad’s prophecy met with success. Hodgson’s contribution highlighted the need for elaborating an adequate approach to the plurality of intervening factors. His simultaneous focus on the region’s empires and on the characteristics of the new call of Muhammad placed the late antique beginnings of Islam firmly within the longer-term dynamics of the Irano-Semitic civilizational area.

It is fair to say that the almost simultaneous new approach inaugurated by Hodgson in the study of Islam and the coining of the category of Late Antiquity by Peter Brown and his students, especially Garth Fowden (2013), have profoundly changed an earlier, paradigmatic assumption according to which Islam emerged as if in a vacuum. Based on the combined perspectives of Brown and Hodgson, the rise of Islam should be seen as the latest momentous development in the spread of an increasingly universalizing monotheism, which had already seen the birth of Judaism and Christianity in the region, but also of Manichaeism and other less fortunate ventures. Islam succeeded in the creation of a new commonwealth or ecumene which was able to provide cohesion to the “Nile-to-Oxus” region and

well beyond. It rapidly doubled up as Islamdom, the increasingly mature social engine and civilizational process reflecting a new historical momentum. At the same time, political changes followed the social dynamics of a regional pattern that was already connecting the Mediterranean to the Eastern provinces of Iran (Hodgson 1974, I).

In a world already reflecting—as from the 5th century—significant changes in the production of wealth and in the balance between agricultural organization and trading activity as well as in the specific dynamics of sedentarization and nomadism, the emergence of Islam did not constitute a sudden change but provided a new powerful catalyst to the genesis of a new social order, aligned within the longer-term evolution of the Irano-Semitic civilizational area but also able to potentiate and transcend them. The urbanization process and the new social transformations ignited by the policies of the agrarian Roman/Byzantine, Himyarite, and Sasanian empires were matched by the nomadic-sedentary dynamics that characterized the Arabian Peninsula. The epoch witnessed, if not the ‘ethnogenesis’ of the Arabs, at least the consolidation of Arab tribal communities as polities through accelerated interaction with the above-mentioned expansionist empires. The social and economic background provided by the Byzantine and Sasanian empires in the north, the historical reality in the African Horn, and the Arabian pre-Islamic lore and sociocultural dynamics were equally fundamental in influencing what was to become in the course of few generations a new ecumene linking China and India to the Atlantic Ocean.

Notwithstanding the multiplicity of historical factors and the questions of historicity concerning Islam’s canonized narratives of origin, it was Muhammad and the memory of his prophetic mission as attested in the Qur’an and the recordings of his deeds and sayings which triggered the new extraordinary venture. However, the Islamic ecumene as the dynamic interaction of Islam and Islamdom is not only the result of Muhammad and his companions’ actions but also of several other factors. Muhammad’s exceptional re-forming capacity embraced images and symbols of cosmic and social order that were widespread within the Irano-Semitic civilizational area. They underwent an intense process of recombination and reconstruction on the semi-periphery of the big empires that encompassed multiple brands of Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism, including several heterodox manifestations and challenges, some of which synthesized the heritage of those religious traditions. In the context where the final (yet almost prototypical) prophet Muhammad operated, such ideas were not just up for grabs and free-floating, but already integrated, to a significant extent, in institutional frameworks.

The Qur’an hints at the events in the life of the Prophet receiving it, and given the results of the recent researches on Qur’anic codices demonstrating beyond any doubt its origin in the 7th century, it must be considered a unique document on the early emergence of Islam in the Hijazi milieu. Further, several authors, and in

particular Angelika Neuwirth (2010), have attempted to read the Qur'an as a testimony of late antique currents and contentions, thus simultaneously reflecting, on one hand, the specific revelation received by a new prophet talking to localized audiences, and on the other hand, the religious sensibility and cultural attitudes of a much wider region. Consequently, what was to become the Qur'an includes these early texts that the community a short time later collected and ascribed to the mission of Muhammad, thus building on it both a scriptural canon and a community.

Islam appears as emerging out of a complex combination of phenomena within sedentary societies that responded to changing economic conditions and were torn apart by nomadic waves crossing from the South to the North of the Arabian Peninsula. It seems clear that the long phase of crystallization of the initial teachings of Islam produced a rather continuous dynamic of state formation that calls for some caution in identifying a full-fledged "early Muslim state," as mentioned in the title of the last chapter of the first volume of Hodgson's trilogy (Hodgson 1974, I: 187; Arnason 2006: 34). From the chapters of Part I in this volume we can access key parameters to connect the variety of interpretations (and the new findings on the beginnings of Islam's venture into history) to a long-term trajectory that, far from singling out a 'golden age' of Islam from its alleged later decay, came to full fruition only in the subsequent epochs. In other words, whatever the controversies on Islam's 'origins,' they did not rigidly predetermine the rich and highly differentiated history of the Islamic ecumene.

In Chapter 1, George Hatke focuses on the pre-Islamic, Irano-Semitic civilizational area throughout Late Antiquity and explores the interaction among various socioeconomic sectors: agrarian, commercial, and pastoralist. He shows how the Irano-Semitic area constitutes a spectrum rather than a sharp divide corresponding to the political frontier between the Roman/Byzantine and Sasanian domains. Not only does the distinction between Semitic and non-Semitic realms have scarce significance in the late antique context, but one should also consider the shared experience of Hellenism intended as a cosmopolitan outlook which took Greek culture as its point of reference but coexisted and interacted with local Near Eastern cultures. Once the commonalities of the Irano-Semitic sphere are recognized, the political and military rivalry between the Roman and the Sasanian empires appears as one among several components of transregional interactions within this sphere. This acknowledgment opens the way to appreciate the socioeconomic dimension of late antique life shared by the two empires as well as by those polities with which they interacted.

The chapter shows how throughout the epoch the rival empires also competed in investing into the agricultural potential of the Fertile Crescent by making new areas available for farming and settlement. At the same time, they sought political leverage over nomadic and semi-nomadic Arabian tribal networks and the support of client formations. Although the Arabian Peninsula had a significant nomadic population, textual and archaeological evidence indicates agricultural activities

there as well. Sedentary and nomadic communities were sometimes at loggerheads, yet they relied on each other for various products and services. Significant in Hacke's analysis is that agriculture and pastoralism reflect practices displaying a variety of attitudes in relation to cultural positions and beliefs. The extent to which pastoralism entered a tense relation with commercial flows did not hinder most regional actors from continuing to trade and develop multiple connections among themselves. The Arabian Peninsula was not a background stage to these dynamics, but rather a permanent and often silent source of connectedness which ended up providing a type of regional coherence imprinting the lines of development of the entire late antique Near East.

Hatke shows how an original Arab, both urban and nomadic, tradition ranging from the South to the North of the peninsula has conceived of itself as a specific culture in relation to the other known cultural areas, but, at the same time, has expressed continuous relationship to this 'other' outside the inner peninsular core and with the ancient Near East and Eastern Mediterranean. Economic ties connected a peripheral or semi-peripheral to a central late antique world in terms of close otherness, thus affecting at the same time the political and religious spheres. The Arabs appear increasingly as both close observers and key actors within the historical culmination of a variety of late antique trajectories, with which they had sufficient familiarity and on which they were able to intervene.

In Chapter 2, Isabel Toral-Niehoff deepens the study of the aspects of Late Antiquity on the eve of the advent of Islam which concern the involvement of North Arabian sociopolitical dynamics in the antagonism of the Roman and the Sasanian empires: a process that connected key Arab power formations to the centers of the Irano-Semitic area and their religious traditions. The two groups of Northern Arabs playing such a key role were namely the Ghassanids (also Jafnids), as military allies of the Romans, and the Lakhmids (also Nasrids), as proxies of the Persians. They both acted as cultural mediators and commercial agents, while also being the target of competing missionary efforts.

The chapter comparatively explores how the two groups mediated at various levels between the world of great power competition and the concerns and strategies of the Arabs living in the Arabian Peninsula on the eve of Islam, thus playing a role in the shaping of the Qur'anic milieu in the Hijaz.

Toral-Niehoff concludes by showing that the two North Arabian kingdoms contributed key innovations both on a political level, by legitimizing within wider Arab milieus notions and practices of political authority aligned with late antique patterns, and within the cultural sphere. They promoted standards of literacy favorable to the scripturalization of Arabic and matching the concepts of prophethood, revelation, and holy script which they entertained as part of their sharing in the late antique cultures of the Irano-Semitic area.

Chapter 3, by Mohammed A. Bamyeh, shifts the attention toward the society and culture of West Central Arabia, the cradle of Islam, before and around its dawn. It focuses on how early Islam was both rooted in and diverged from the

pre-Islamic sociocultural environment of the region. It deepens the analysis of the tension between nomadic and sedentary ways of life and the role of world trade in fostering sedentary settlements. It also explores the way a particular combination of specific economic conditions, political structures, and patterns of solidarity gave rise to the type of spiritual experimentation that would culminate with the advent of Islam.

The rise of Mecca, Bamyeh argues, should not be measured in terms of its prominence in trade, which is difficult to corroborate, but through its centrality in the circulatory character of the regional market. Circularity is defined by him in terms of the periodicity determined by an annually renewable routine, represented by the pilgrimage, which preexisted the dawn of Islam and provided a cyclical culmination to the trading process across the peninsula, with Mecca as its hub. This model shows that both the sociopolitical organization and the religious practices of the trading networks went well beyond the teachings and patterns absorbed from the neighboring imperial centers. They decisively reflected the experience of more dynamic and less controllable nomadic and semi-sedentary Arab peninsular circulatory networks.

The chapter finally traces the fortunes of a few pre-Islamic experiments in giving shape to a new and broader concept of cohesive sociopolitical formation upon which the edifice of the Islamic ecumene was eventually built. The longer-term genesis of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula is therefore addressed as a cluster of cultural, social, and political forces that crystallized in such a way as to blend earlier popular traditions (both 'polytheist' and 'monotheist') into the consensus materials of a new, originally Arab transtribal culture, before assuming ever more global and complex forms.

Chapter 4, by Anna Ayşe Akasoy, starts from acknowledging that the life of Muhammad remains a highly controversial topic among historians. Yet alongside the Qur'an, the document traditionally known as the Constitution of Medina is largely accepted as a reliable historical source from which to reconstruct Muhammad's leadership and prophetic calling. This document can be taken as defining a new order relying on a fresh religious vision well-grounded in the late antique context and representing an original reading of a wider prophetic tradition well-rooted in the Irano-Semitic civilizational area.

Muhammad's preaching, along with its prophetic impetus and monotheistic message, fits particularly well into the late antique patterns of the holy man, while his prophetic leadership reflected in the Constitution of Medina delineates the political implications and specificities of his religious call. While making frequent references to Qur'anic passages to trace out the emergence of his prophetic mission and the early events in his life, the chapter addresses what today represents a sort of minimal common consensus on the first steps of a movement reflecting and remolding the religious sensibilities and the social ethics of the era and the region. The process led to the establishment of the early Muslim proto-state, if not an anti-state, compared with the leading, hierarchical regional empires. Therefore