e Formation and State Decline
1 the Near and Middle East

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The first Arabic Empire and Modern Scholarship, 622–661

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The standard account about the first Arabic state is generally known. In the year 622, the Prophet Muhammad left his native town Mecca and migrated to Medina, where he founded a polity. After his death, three of his successors, commonly known as the rightly guided caliphs, maintained Medina as their capital, which they used as the basis for immense conquests. The fourth caliph ʿAlī *de facto* reigned in Kūfa, in Iraq. After his death in 661 the centre of gravity shifted to Damascus in Syria, where the Umayyad Muʿāwiya, who had already acted as a governor since 642, became caliph.

This extremely succinct survey is acceptable for both Muslim historiographers and traditional oriental scholars in the West. But can it be maintained in our days? In this paper I will not focus on the question whether this state of Medina can already be called Islamic,[1] but rather on the question whether that oasis, deep in the Arabian peninsula, indeed could act for some decades as the capital of a centralist and rapidly expanding empire. In those parts there had never been an independent state; how could there be one now?

In the Yemen (Arabia Felix) there had been states since two thousand years. This part of the peninsula has a relatively humid climate, so that regular agriculture is possible. Irrigation and terrace cultivation even require a centralist organisation: a state.

In the northern part of Arabia (Arabia Petraea) there had been some independent states for longer or shorter periods. I mention only Thamūd (ca. 715 BCE–600 CE), the Nabataeans (110 BCE–106 CE) and the short-lived expansion of Queen Zenobia in Palmyra (268–272). After that there had been two Arabic dynasties in vassal states: the Ghassānids (500–630), vassals to the Roman Empire, and the Lakhmids (266–602), vassals to Persia. Both Empires had been raided regularly by Bedouins. Neither of these superstates could fight these nomads successfully, because they retired quickly with their booty into the desert, where regular armies with horses or chariots had no access. Therefore, the empires had made friends with the Bedouins.

1 Islam as a religion and an institution of course was not 'finished' at the death of the Prophet. It had to develop. Modern scholarship hesitatingly begins to speak of Islam in connection with the erection of the Dome of the Rock in 691. And even then: the Umayyad design of Islam differs considerably from the later Islam of the 'ulamā', which is often immodestly referred to as 'Islam as we know it'.

They invested a clan chief as a king, gave him a crown, a robe, a palace and money to pay his soldiers, who in exchange no longer raided their benefactors, but rather the opposite empire. But Ghassān and Lakhm ceased to exist as soon as the Roman Empire and Persia no longer took care of them, i. e. ceased paying them, exhausted as they were by their endless warfare against each other.

In Central Arabia (Arabia Deserta) there had been only one entity that resembled a state: Kinda (325–528). This was a vassal state as well, subject to the Yemenite state of Ḥimyar. It sunk into oblivion as Ḥimyar collapsed. Only a vague remembrance of its kings remained, the most famous of whom was Imru' al-Qays.

There had been a state in Central Arabia then, but not an *independent* state. This situation changed in the seventh century with the unexpectedly successful attempt to unite some tribes around the oasis of Yathrib (Medina). For the moment, let us stick to the standard account: it was Mohammed who during his years in Medina (622–632) began to unite Arabic tribes under his banner and to build a state. When he died, he left what indeed may be called a state.

The standard Islamic account and the scholarly account differ somewhat on what happened after Mohammed's death. Islamic historiography describes it in religious terms: Mohammed had united the whole peninsula under the banner of Islam. After his death, many tribes apostatised and forsook Islam. In the so-called Ridda Wars (632–634), the generals of caliph Abū Bakr successfully brought the peninsula back to Islam. Scholarly historiographers assume that Mohammed's state was much smaller, but take it for granted that in the next few years Arabic tribes were successfully integrated into the new polity, not for the second but for the first time.

So far, the account of the new state is more or less conceivable. All oases have to be states in a way, were it only to organize the access to water and the distribution of it. Tribes along trade routes have to be brought and kept under control, lest a caravan would be unexpectedly deprived from access to water, food and fodder. Gradual expansion of this state in the rest of the peninsula is not completely implausible either, although it had never been seen before. But after the unification of the peninsula an immense, rapid expansion of this state began. In 635 Syria was annexed; in 634–642 Iraq and Western Iran were conquered, in 639–642 Egypt, in 640 Palestine and in 640–660 the whole of Iran. In other words: within thirty years the whole Persian Empire and half the Roman Empire became parts of the new Arabic Empire. Is it really conceivable that this empire for a period of three decades had its capital in such a remote place as Medina? To answer this question, we should consider at first what an empire needs and which of these needs were fulfilled in Central Arabia. I thought of the following imperial 'must haves':

- A large territory
- A population
- A central authority, agents, civil servants
- Fast and reliable lines of communications
- Agricultural surpluses

- A regular income from taxes
- A standing army under a central command, and the money to pay it
- Legitimacy of government

Which of the requirements of an empire were fulfilled in the case of the Medinan caliphate?

A **territory** was there, vast and ever expanding. If this empire ever had a territorial problem, it was perhaps the lack of a boundary, but that is not relevant here.

What **population** was there? As the conquests started, a small number of warriors from Central Arabia and some more from the destitute Yemen must have nearly drowned in an ocean of Non-Arabs. In the beginning there was not much mingling of the occupied peoples with these few Arabs yet; in fact this was to remain a problem for over a century. But in Antiquity, apparently one could rule large areas with a handful of soldiers, and the Arabic Empire did not much differ in this respect from that of Alexander or the Eastern Roman Empire, where a handful of Greek speaking Romans successfully dominated their provinces. Most helpful must have been the long-time Arabic presence in Syria and Western Iraq.

Of course there were millions of non-Arabic subjects in the occupied territories: Syrians, Persians and Egyptians and others. They may have been not too negative about the new rulers, who initially left many of the old structures of administration and taxation intact. But could the Arabs rely on them? To give an example: in 646 a naval expedition against Cyprus was undertaken. The participating soldiers were Arabs, allegedly 12.000 in number, but all sailors on the 200 vessels were native, non-Arab Syrians. In this case apparently everything went well. But during a naval attack on Constantinople even as late as 717, with vessels from Egypt, the sailors suddenly realised that they were in Christian territory now and deserted to the Roman side. Why indeed should the subjects be loyal to the Arab master people?

The **central authority** was supposed to be the caliph in Medina, who ruled the vast empire *from there*. The first caliphs hardly ever left the capital; only 'Umar is known to have paid a short visit to al-Jābiya, the old Ghassānid capital on the Golan Heights, the headquarters of the Arab conquest of Syria. The number of Arabic agents (governors, tax gatherers, secretaries, judges) was very limited: this empire was incredibly understaffed. Outside Arabia proper, the civil servants of the previous empires mostly remained in service, because their expertise was needed urgently. Albrecht Noth already in 1973 showed that a centralist government, with the caliph sitting in Medina like a spider in his web, organising and arranging even the smallest details, was impossible for mere logistic reasons. Government by correspondence, in which Arabic historical sources want us to believe, is a literary fiction, to comply with a later centralist ideal of the caliphate. Or perhaps it was an ideal that was inherited from Antiquity. Diodorus Siculus wrote around 50 BCE about the kings of Ancient Egypt:

> 'For instance, in the morning, as soon as he was awake, he first of all had to receive the letters which had been sent from all sides, the purpose

> being that he might be able to despatch all administrative business and perform every act properly, being thus accurately informed about everything that was being done throughout his kingdom.'

It is far more likely that the military commanders in the far away territories acted independently and played it by ear, the central government remaining merely an ideal orientation point.

Land roads: Large empires, as e. g. Achaemenid Persia, had been governed by virtue of a highly efficient postal and intelligence system, mainly with the help of horses, but also of camels and mules where the topography required it. Apart from that, there were systems of fire and light signals. From the capital Persepolis, postal routes stretched to Asia Minor, to India, to Afghanistan and beyond. Every 15 or 20 miles there was a relay station where horses or couriers could be refreshed and a modest garrison and treasury were stationed. Average travellers needed ninety days for the 2200 miles from Persepolis to the Aegean coast, but couriers could do up to 200 miles per day, which shortened the stretch to a fortnight. Alexander the Great took over this system. The Roman Empire had also had postal systems: the *cursus publicus*, chains of light signals and doves, by which e. g. a military command could be transferred over hundreds of miles in one day.

On the eve of Islam, both the Persian postal system was in decay, and the Roman systems hardly functional at all. The Umayyads were to take them over, but they needed some time to understand and repair them. Before the Umayyads they were not in use, or at best on a local scale, and they certainly did not cover the Arabian Peninsula. Medina was in a very disadvantaged position. In Arabia horses could not be used for long distance travel, since water and appropriate fodder were lacking in many places. A camel caravan needed 30 days from Medina to the outskirts of Syria or to Iraq, and that was only where the inhabited world *began.* Of course single riders could move fast on a camel, but there was no *system* of mail and intelligence whatsoever.

Sea Roads: For Constantinople, maritime traffic was important, but for Medina it was no option at all. Around 600 the main shipping routes went along the African coast, Adulis being the main port. Ethiopians had taken over the notoriously difficult navigation of the Red Sea from the Greeks. The traffic from India to Europe hardly touched Arabia; only the port of Aden was used. From Medina to its seaport al-Jār it took three days over land; the sea route from there to the North was bothersome. This had been one reason for the Romans to prefer Egyptian Berenice to North-Arabian ports. Red Sea maritime traffic cannot possibly have played an important role in keeping the empire together. The sea route from Southern Iran to Aden or vice versa could be used for imperial purposes, as the Persians had shown when they had occupied and held the Yemen for about half a century from 570 onward, but for Medina this route was of no use.

Agricultural surpluses, and a tax system in connection with them. A state normally needs storable quantities of staple foods, like wheat, rice or the like. In the traditional view, the Arabian Peninsula had no agricultural surplus at all to levy taxes on, but was very much a subsistence economy, and a pretty poor one too.

This is corroborated in the pre-Islamic poetry. Cattle was wealth (*māl*), wealth was cattle. While there was a modest surplus in cattle, the necessary grains, clothes, weapons and luxury goods had all to be imported. But this picture must be revised since we are aware that gold and silver was mined in Arabia. The image of brave but poverty stricken desert-dwellers is too romantic.

Apparently the first Arabic Empire could do without agricultural surpluses for some time. In the early days, state income was generated in another way. The state owned mines and the treasury gathered masses of booty in the conquered territories, be it land, cattle or money. Payments and favours could be given out as landed property thousands miles away. According to the later Islamic legislation, one fifth (*khums*) of all booty accrued to the state. Since when this was the case and how much movable booty actually landed in Medina is not known. But after a while there was enough to create a boom and a sense of the high life in Medina. Only during the very beginnings of the conquests, state income must have been relatively meagre but enough for a start, and apparently the prospect of booty was enough to keep the army going. As soon as the conquests had met with success, plenty of taxes came in as booty, so that the peninsula switched to a rentier economy.

A **standing professional army** under a strong centralised command was lacking in the initial stage of the Arabic empire, whereas both the Roman and the Persian Empire had such armies. The Arabs initially had a popular, not a professional army. But its very lack of organisation and classical discipline made it flexible, which contributed to its military success. The commanders must have acted independently.

The eagerness to fight may have differed greatly. The Bedouins had always liked fighting, but only in their own well-understood interests. The owners of plantations in Medina or Ṭā'if no doubt were more reluctant than the inhabitants of the impoverished Yemen, who may have seen in warfare a chance to get out of misery. The *Sīra* mentions prospective warriors who did not want to enlist because it was harvest time; according to the Koran, some complained about the heat or had other excuses (9:38, 42, 81). Apart from threats with Hellfire (9:81), social pressure and/or the promise of booty may have persuaded them to change their attitude. Regular military salaries ('*aṭā*') were paid only from 640 onward.

Money, be it gold or silver, always comes in handy when building or maintaining an empire. It facilitates keeping up a standing army, makes it possible to bribe or buy allies and keeps the governors in the provinces happy. The treasury of Persepolis had kept the Persian armies and even the oligarchies in the city-states of Asia Minor loyal to the Empire; the gold of Thracia had enabled Alexander to pay the army that conquered half the world.

What did the allegedly poverty-stricken Arabia have to offer in this field? A regular levy of taxes, paid in cattle or dates, may have taken place on a small scale; moreover, extracting taxes from Bedouins was never easy. However, G.W. Heck pointed to the fact that gold was found and mined, so that the peninsula was not so poor at all. Quraysh trade in gold an silver. Among the owners of gold mines were the Banū Sulaym, but also Abū Bakr, who was indeed known for his riches. This gold — not in the shape of coins, but in bullion — may have helped to keep soldiers

active in the difficult first stages of the conquests. The promise of rich booty must have done the rest.

Legitimacy of government. In this early period, 'Islam as we know it' certainly did not yet exist. But there can be no doubt that there was an ideological or indeed spiritual impulse, supported by sacred texts, that made Arabs give up fighting each other and fight others together. Their common cause we may call proto-Islam. Whatever it was, it worked overwhelmingly well and gave plenty of legitimacy to the growing empire, at least in the eyes of the Arabs. Difference of opinion among them surfaced only at the end of the first three decades under discussion. The opinions of the new subjects did not count in this period yet.

The peninsula, then, fulfilled some of the requirements for an empire, but not many. Doubts remain about those first thirty years. An Arabic empire was growing, no doubt. Initially it must have been difficult to mobilise the warriors, but as soon as the booty began to flow, or even the rumours about booty were heard, the soldiers came by the thousands. What remains difficult to swallow is the centralist character of this state and poorly connected Medina as its capital.

And there is another consideration. As for the life Muhammad, in our days most non-Muslim scholars tend to agree that we know very little about the Prophet. And yet, the events in the years immediately after his death would all have happened in the full light of history, and all sources are to be taken at face value? That is difficult to believe.

What did scholars make out of this period?

In the 19th century the sources were mainly Islamic texts in Arabic. Most non-Arabic texts and the archaeological evidence became known, roughly speaking, only in the second half of the 20th century.

The earlier oriental scholars followed the traditional Islamic account in outline. Of course they were scholars, they used their power of reason, they applied a source critical method. As Gustav Weil put it around 1850, the aim was: 'to examine the material thoroughly and to extract the naked historical truth from this fabric of blindness and lies.' That sounds drastic, but the results were generally rather meek and not very different from the traditional Islamic historiography. It is remarkable how in the 19th century the Jewish and Christian foundation myths were analysed to pieces, whereas at the same time, the Islamic one was kept nearly intact, and often enough by the same scholars, as e. g. Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918).

From 1905 onward, Leone Caetani made an extensive survey in Italian of all sources of early Islamic history, in which he juxtaposed and compared all texts he could find on event after event after event. This activity raised doubts of a more general nature, when he noticed that the same anecdote was told about different events, and that the chronology often enough apparently had been added much later and rather arbitrarily.

The Jesuit Henri Lammens (1862-1937) was even more skeptical. He considered the whole *sīra* dependent on the Koran and therefore historically unreliable. A novelty in that period was Lammens' being driven by contempt and hatred for Islam; a phenomenon that was to resurge a century later.

The two world wars in Europe seem to have killed the critical spirit in oriental scholars. For a long time nothing happened, but then in the nineteen-seventies a new wave of criticism and scepticism came up. I name two, or rather three representatives here: the already mentioned Albrecht Noth, and Patricia Crone and Michael Cook.

Noth (1973) set out to re-read the historical sources critically, with a keen sense for the realities of the period and area described. His greatest contribution was that he had an open eye for the *literariness* of the historiographic sources. Literary studies entered the field. Noth discovered narrative structures, patterns and *topoi* that came back everywhere in the sources, which made them less reliable as historical sources.

Hagarism

As a bombshell came the book *Hagarism* by Crone & Cook in 1977. Two angry young people, apparently fed up with that half century of standstill. To my impression the main target of their anger was established scholars like R. B. Serjeant and Montgomery Watt; the latter had written in the fifties an ambitious scholarly biography of Mohammed .

In *Hagarism* nothing remained as it was. Islam did not originate in Mecca and Medina at all, but rather in Northern Arabia; there was not even Islam. The Koran was to be dated much later than the seventh century, and Mohammed: well, hardly anything was known about him, but he was sort of a John-the-Baptist for 'Umar, whose nickname was Fārūq (Aramaic *parūqā*, 'redeemer'). The so-called early Muslims were rather a mixture of Arabs and heretic Jewish messianists, who tried to reclaim the Promised Land from the Eastern Roman Empire. Muhammad and his followers were called Hagarenes or Mahgraye, or in Arabic *muhājirūn* (Emigrants). The *hijra* was not to Medina but to Jerusalem.

The book was vehemently criticised by a host of scholars, many of who were truly outraged. How did the authors dare to cry havoc in the comfort zone of oriental studies!? The critics were emotional, but they had strong counterarguments as well, and not much was left of the theses of *Hagarism.* Patricia Crone silently and implicitly revoked the book in an Internet article of 2006, in which she more or less proclaimed the traditional view on the prophet, about whom we now are supposed to know quite a lot. Fortunately Crone wrote on early Islamic history two other books and many articles. Her study of *Early Meccan Trade*, which challenged the hitherto unquestioned image of Mecca as a sort of World Trade Center, still stands, as do her works *Slaves on Horses* on the Umayyad Empire and *God's Caliph* on the beginning and the meaning of the caliphate.

Books like *Hagarism* are useful and should by no means be thrown away with contempt. This work woke up the sleepy scholars and had a lasting impact on the study of early Islam. It reopened a long overdue discussion and opened the eyes for

at least a number of things: the relatively late breach of the early Islamic movement with the Jews and/or the Christians of whatever kind, and the value of non-islamic sources, which the authors had emphatically put to use. What also remained was the interest in the literary character of the Arabic sources, and the facts of geography, which had been Noth's point shortly before.

In the wake of Hagarism

In the meantime, serious scholarly research continued, more or less according to the old patterns. For the moment, however, I will concentrate on some studies that were inspired by the wilder sides of *Hagarism*.

Koren and Nevo

The Israeli Yehuda Nevo (1932–92) was an archaeologist without much knowledge of the written sources, his partner Judith Koren specialised in informatics. Yet in their *Crossroads to Islam* they venture an all-encompassing theory. Muhammad was not a historical figure. The Koran dates from the 8th century. Syria was never conquered by the Arabs, since the Eastern Roman Empire had already *voluntarily* retired from a province that was considered no longer profitable. The so-called Muslims, who were pagans, just had to fill the gap. They came from what is now Southern Jordan and Israel. Only in the conquered territories they adopted a vague Judeo-Christian monotheism, which developed much later into Islam. Forget about the first caliphs altogether: the real ruler in Syria was Mu'āwiya, otherwise known as the first Umayyad caliph, who indeed was governor in Syria from 642 onward.

Inârah

Then there is the world of the so-called Inârah group, named after the Inârah Institute in Saarbrücken and the six volumes the members hitherto produced (2005–2012). Leading scholars in this group are K.-H. Ohlig, Gerd R. Puin and Volker Popp. Chr. Luxenberg found a home here and contributed his theory that the Koran should be read as a text in Syriac, and that it says quite different things than everybody had thought. Also Claude Gilliot joined the group for a while.

These scholars felt the need to rewrite early Islamic history more radically than ever before. I try to summarize: The Koran is an originally Christian text, written in Syriac (Luxenberg's contribution). As a source for early Islam it is useless. The biography of the prophet was concocted after 800; Ibn Isḥāq never existed. Real sources are inscriptions and coins and Christian texts. Mohammed is not a proper name, but an adjective, that was applied to both Jesus and 'Alī. As a historical figure Muhammad never existed. The religion of the Arabs that ruled Syria in the seventh century was not Islam. Islam was brought into being by the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik around 700, who introduced the so-called koranic movement from Central Asia to Syria and Palestine. It had grown on the soil of a strong Arabic pre-Nicaean

Christianity that had survived in Central Asia, somewhere around Marw, as a result of Sassanian deportation of the Christians of Hatra in 241.

The proofs for all this are so shallow that one hesitates to consider such articles as scholarly. Yet it cannot be denied that there are some serious contributions in these works, a. o. by Gerd and Elisabeth Puin on the Koran, by Gilliot on hadith scholars, and some thought-provoking lines of thought generally.

The contributors to the Inâra publications form a rather heterogeneous group that seems to share two aversions: one for modern Islam and one for traditional Oriental scholars. Whereas the young Crone and Cook mainly battled against their orientalist masters, most Inârah articles have an Islam-debunking paragraph. From an Islam-hating point of view, it might be convenient to have a seventh century without Muhammad, without a Koran, with no conquests and no Islam at all. But such wishful thinking is not a useful starting point for scholarly activities.

Mainstream research continued

In the meantime research on the base of the standard account was continued in peace and quiet. I will mention here only three works as well.

Hugh Kennedy wrote a quiet and very readable book on the conquests, which is nevertheless not lacking in results of new research, also of his own.

Michael Moroney worked on Iraq after the Arabic conquest. His book does not focus on Medina, but goes into detail about the government and every day life in one of the most important provinces of the Arabic Empire.

For two reasons Michael Lecker's *Muslims, Jews and Pagans*, deserves a special mention here. Firstly because the author concentrates on Medina; he even offers historical and geographical close-ups of the uplands (*'awālī*) of Medina during and shortly after Mohammed's time. Secondly he is extremely faithful to the standard account. His book is highly meritorious and far more scholarly than the post-Hagaristic works described above. Yet it leaves me with that uneasiness about Medina, although Lecker describes it into great detail. What amazes me is his reliance on ancient genealogies, as well as the ease with which he declares a book of the *fifteenth* century by Samhūdī a major source for the history of Medina in the seventh century.

Countercaliphate

But although I cannot follow the wildest theories of revisionist research, some elements I do appreciate. Notably the emphasis on Syria, where considerable parts of the population were Arab, where Mu'āwiya became caliph only in 661, but where he factually reigned since ± 642. And I still feel uneasy about Medina as the first capital of the Arabic empire.

My own contribution to the research will remain modest. I just would like to point to a hitherto neglected chapter of history that may have influenced our sources

considerably, especially in its aftermath. I mean the countercaliphate (680–692) of
'Abdallāh ibn al-Zubayr and the writings of his brother 'Urwa.

After the death of the Umayyad caliph Mu'āwiya in 680, some weak or short-lived
caliphs were reigning in Damascus. They were the offspring of the old pre-Islamic
elite, which had converted rather late and according to some opportunistically to
the new movement that was to be called Islam. They felt at home in Syria and
Palestine with its Christian civilisation.

These Umayyads had to cope with various rebellions: Shiites, Kharijites, and also
the dangerous countercaliphate of 'Abdallāh ibn al-Zubayr in Mecca and his brother
Muṣ'ab in Iraq. The rebels were the offspring of the first 'Islamic' elite: Moham-
med's comrades of the first hour, the oldest adherents of the new movement that in
their view had been hijacked by these Umayyads. Instead of a Syrian-Palestinian
orientation, they preferred the Arabian peninsula. The countercaliphate lasted twel-
ve years and caused a nasty rift in the Arabic Empire. Not only the peninsula, but
also large parts of Iraq and Iran followed the Zubayrī brothers. Other provinces
hesitated; in certain years only Syria remained loyal to the Umayyad caliph.

For twelve years the Umayyads did not succeed in putting an end to this counter-
caliphate. But as soon as the strong caliph 'Abd al-Malik had taken over, the end
came quickly. 'Abdallāh was killed in 692, Muṣ'ab had already fallen shortly before
and the countercaliphate vanished into thin air. Umayyad power was restored by
military force.

'Urwa ibn al-Zubayr (± 643–711)

The interesting survivor is 'Urwa, 'Abdallāhs much younger brother and the intellec-
tual of the Zubayrī family. He had not been militarily or politically active, although
he had chosen his brothers' side in the rebellion. He lived mostly in Medina, where
he studied and taught the biography of the Prophet, as well as hadith and law.
Immediately after 'Abdallāh's death he hurried to Damascus to pledge allegiance to
caliph 'Abd al-Malik. This was a bold venture, for 'Urwa had compromised himself
deeply in the rebellion, but it met with success. The caliph, who already strategi-
cally had proclaimed public mourning for his brother Muṣ'ab, refrained from killing
'Urwa and decided to put him to use instead. He allowed him to go back to his
estate in Medina and asked him a bit later to write down the history of early Islam.
'Urwa did so and a great deal of his letters (*rasā'il*) is still extant.

'Abd al-Maliks clemency is understandable. He must have been aware that 'Ur-
wa's account was to be a peninsular series of narratives that had developed in
Medina before and during the countercaliphate, far away from Syria: an account
that favoured the group of the earliest converts and their offspring. But he was also
aware of the disruptive forces that had threatened the empire during the civil war.
He now intended to reunite it, to cement it by a new state ideology and to pacify
his rebellious subjects by allowing them a foundation myth that was more purely
Arabian than ever before. Earliest Islam, with its orientation toward Jerusalem,
must have been a predominantly Syro-Palestinian affair. The Dome of the Rock in

Jerusalem, a *rotunda* that was completed in 691, was the apogee of 'Syrian' Islam,
but also its final point. In fact the building is a message to the Christians, from
whom nascent Islam now took distance. Goldziher once suggested that the Dome of
the Rock was built since Mecca was inaccessible during the countercaliphate. But
it was rather the other way round: by the turnabout of 692, Mecca obtained its
predominance in Islam *for the first time*, while the Dome on the Rock was degrad-
ed to a sanctuary of the second category, however new it was. A change of *qibla*,
one might call it. After this had been achieved, the arabisation was continued and
increasingly Christian and Jewish materials (*isrā'īliyāt*) were banned from both
narrative accounts and genealogy.

'Urwa's *rasā'il* and orally transmitted lectures may well have played an important
part in this 'arabisation' of Islam. He wrote the letters for the court, but he com-
posed many other texts, mainly about the Prophet, but also about the Ridda-wars
and the subsequent decades, which he taught to his pupils. He was the purveyor of
the most important chapters in the biography of the prophet. They were transmit-
ted mainly by two persons: his son Hishām and the well-know scholar al-Zuhrī (d.
742). Ibn Isḥāq's *Sīra* contains many of 'Urwa's texts, but so does the collection of
Ma'mar ibn Rāshid (714–770). Most of the letters are very concise. 'Abd al-Malik
did not like long texts and abhorred the loquacity of the 'story tellers' (*quṣṣāṣ*).
An example of 'Urwa's personal input in the earliest Islamic historiography is the
prominence he gave in several texts to first caliph Abū Bakr and his family. Abū
Bakr was 'Urwa's grandfather, since his mother was Asmā', daughter of Abū Bakr.
Another daughter of the caliph, Muḥammad's wife 'Ā'isha, was his aunt. In 'Urwa's
narratives on Muḥammad's Emigration (*hijra*) and his deathbed, as well as in his
defence of 'Ā'isha's chastity when she was accused of having been with another
man, he emphatically places to the forefront the acts and positive qualities of Abū
Bakr and as many of his family members as he could squeeze in. It is obvious that
'Urwa had his very personal reasons for his bias towards the first caliph. Would he
not have equally diligently enhanced the importance of Medina and Mecca in his
other accounts? I would not wonder if 'Urwa's texts about the earliest caliphs would
reveal a sturdy Medinan patriotism.

My proposal for future research on the first Arabic Empire is taking into ac-
count the countercaliphate and the subsequent change in attitude, as well as paying
attention to the role that 'Urwa played in inventing the earliest Islamic history.

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