THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF ISLAM

VOLUME 2A

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VOLUME 2A

THE INDIAN SUB-CONTINENT, SOUTH-EAST ASIA, AFRICA AND THE MUSLIM WEST

EDITED BY

P. M. HOLT

Emeritus Professor of Arab History in the University of London

ANN K. S. LAMBTON

Emeritus Professor of Persian in the University of London

BERNARD LEWIS

Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton

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PREFACE

The aim of these volumes is to present the history of Islam as a cultural whole. It is hoped that in a single concise work the reader will be able to follow all the main threads: political, theological, philosophical, economic, scientific, military, artistic. But *The Cambridge history of Islam* is not a repository of facts, names and dates; it is not intended primarily for reference, but as a book for continuous reading. The editors believe that, while it will not be despised by the expert orientalist, it will be useful to students in other fields of history, and particularly to university students of oriental subjects, and will also appeal to those who read history for intellectual pleasure.

A standardized system of translation has been employed for proper names and technical terms in the three principal Islamic languages—Arabic, Persian and Turkish. Some anomalies have, however, been inevitable, and place-names which have a widely accepted conventional spelling have been given in that form. Dates before the nineteenth century have normally been given according to both the Islamic (*Hijrī*) and Christian eras. Footnotes have been used sparingly; principally to give references for quotations or authority for conclusions in the text. The bibliographies are not intended as an exhaustive documentation of the subjects to which they refer, but as a guide to further reading. For this reason, and to avoid extensive repetition of titles, many of the bibliographies have been consolidated to cover two or more related contributions.

The editors are responsible for the planning and organisation of the work as a whole. They have tried to avoid gaps and overlaps, and have given general guidance to contributors, designed to secure some consistency of form and presentation. The individual authors are, of course, responsible for their own opinions and interpretations.

The editors wish to express their thanks to all who have assisted in the preparation of this work. They are particularly grateful to those who undertook the translation of contributions or gave advice and sub-editorial assistance, especially Mr J. G. Burton-Page, Professor C. D. Cowan, Dr J. F. P. Hopkins, Dr A. I. Sabra, Professor H. R. Tinker, Col. Geoffrey Wheeler and Dr D. T. Whiteside. They would also like to thank members of the staff of the Cambridge University Press for their invariable patience and helpfulness.

THE EDITORS

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INTRODUCTION

P. M. HOLT[1]

A reader taking up a work entitled *The Cambridge history of Islam* may reasonably ask, 'What is Islam? In what sense is Islam an appropriate field for historical enquiry?' Primarily, of course, Islam is, like Christianity, a religion, the antecedents, origin and development of which may, without prejudice to its transcendental aspects, be a legitimate concern of historians. Religious history in the narrow sense is not, however, the only, or even the main, concern of the contributors to these volumes. For the faith of Islam has, again like Christianity, been a great synthesizing agent. From its earliest days it displayed features of kinship with the earlier monotheisms of Judaism and Christianity. Implanted in the former provinces of the Byzantine and Sasanian empires, it was compelled to maintain and define its autonomy against older and more developed faiths. Like Judaism and Christianity before it, it met the challenge of Greek philosophy, and adopted the conceptual and logical tools of this opponent to expand, to deepen, and to render articulate its self-consciousness. In this connexion, the first three centuries of Islam, like the first three centuries of Christianity, were critical for establishing the norms of belief and practice, and for embodying them in a tradition which was, or which purported to be, historical.

The Islamic synthesis did not stop at this stage. The external frontier of Islam has continued to move until our own day. For the most part, this movement has been one of expansion—into Central Asia, into the Indian sub-continent and south-east Asia, and into trans-Saharan Africa—but there have also been phases of retreat and withdrawal, notably in Spain, and in central and south-eastern Europe. But besides this external frontier, which has largely been the creation of conquering armies, (although with important exceptions in Central and south-east Asia and Africa) there has also been throughout Islamic history an internal frontier—the invisible line of division between Muslim and non-Muslim. Here also over the centuries there has been an expansion of Islam, so that, for example, in the former Byzantine and Sasanian lands the Christian and Zoroastrian communities were reduced to numerical insignificance, and became minority-groups like the Jews. This two-fold expansion has brought new elements into the Islamic synthesis,

[1] I should like to thank my co-editors, Professors Lambton and Lewis, for reading and commenting on this Introduction in draft.

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some permanent and widely accepted, others more transient or local in their effects.

The process of synthesization has not gone forward in a political vacuum. Unlike the early Christian Church, the Islamic *Umma*, or community of believers, achieved political power from the outset, and was organized for mutual support in the maintenance of the faith. This concern of the community for the faith survived the break-up of the caliphate and the emergence of new and often transitory régimes. It has taken various forms. Two of the principal institutions of Islam, *Sharī'a* and *Jihād*, the Holy Law and the Holy War, are expressions of the concern in its conservative and militant aspects respectively—aspects moreover which are not wholly distinct, since the Holy War is fought in defence of the Holy Law against its external and internal enemies. In political matters as in others, Islam adopted and incorporated contributions from many sources. The successors of the Prophet as heads of his community drew on the customs of Arab tribal leadership, as well as the usages of the Meccan trading oligarchy. They inherited the legacy of Byzantine administration, as well as the traditions of the Sasanian monarchy. Later rulers were influenced by other political concepts: those brought into the medieval Islamic world by Turkish and Mongol immigrants from the steppes, and in the latest age the constitutional and legal doctrines of liberal Europe, followed by the seductive panaceas of totalitarianism.

Islam, then, as it will be examined in the following chapters, is a complex cultural synthesis, centred in a distinctive religious faith, and necessarily set in the framework of a continuing political life. The religion, the culture, and the political structures alike present many features which seem familiar to an observer whose own background is that of Christian Europe. It could hardly be otherwise, since elements derived from Judaism and Hellenism are common to both the Islamic and the Christian syntheses; since, furthermore, the histories of the Islamic community and of Christendom have touched so often and at so many points. But consciousness of the similarities must always be balanced by an awareness of the characteristic and substantial differences. Like Christianity, Islam is a monotheism with an historical founder and a sacred book; although its theology in regard to both differs essentially from Christian theology. There is also a perceptible difference in the criteria of membership of the community. Whereas in Christianity acceptance of the catholic creeds has been the basic criterion, in Islam credal theology has been of less relative importance; adherence

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to the Holy Law is the characteristic manifestation of faith, and hence orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy has been the usual token of membership. Another difference is that Islam has no equivalent to the Christian sacraments (although certain practices, notably the Fast of Ramaḍān and the Pilgrimage, appear to have an unacknowledged quasi-sacramental character), and no priesthood, although the *'ulamā'* (the religious scholars) and the leaders of the Ṣūfī orders (two groups at some times and in some places closely interconnected) have often played a part in Muslim societies analogous to that of the clergy amongst Christians. The absence of a sacerdotal hierarchy, or of any conciliar system, to define the faith, linked with the primacy ascribed to orthopraxy, has made Islam more tolerant of variations of belief than Christianity. It is in general true to say that heresy (to use a term not quite appropriate in Islam) has been repressed only when it has been manifested as political subversion: it is also true to say that, since Islam is both a religious and a political community, the distinction between religious and political dissent is not clearcut.

Another question which the reader of this work may ask is, 'What are the sources on which knowledge of the history of Islam is based?' The Islamic civilization of the first three centuries (in this as in other respects the seminal period) evolved two characteristic types of historical writing. The first of these was the chronicle, of which the outstanding classical example is that composed by al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923). But behind the chronicle lay diverse historiographical elements—the sagas and genealogies of the pre-Islamic Arab tribes, the semi-legendary narratives of the Persian kings, and, serving as the central theme to which all others were subservient, the career of the Prophet and the vicissitudes of the *Umma* which he founded. The early historians were primarily religious scholars: the traditions which they recorded were in part Traditions in the technical Islamic sense, i.e. *Ḥadīth*, the memorials of the alleged acts and sayings of the Prophet, as transmitted by a chain of informants. There was no formal distinction between the historical *Ḥadīth* and the main body of Traditions which formed a principal element in the elaboration of the Holy Law; indeed it is clear that many items ostensibly of an historical nature had in fact legal and social purposes. There is also a fundamental problem of criticism; namely, the difficulty of establishing how much of this copious *Ḥadīth* material is a veritable record of Muḥammad's activities, and how much is of subsequent and extraneous origin, assimilated in this form into Islam. The

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early Muslim scholars were keenly aware of the problem, although the criteria they adopted for discriminating between the authentic and the feigned Traditions seem artificial and insufficiently rigorous by modern standards of historical investigation. The whole subject is highly controversial at the present day, with, on the whole, non-Muslim scholars adopting a more radical, and Muslim scholars a more conservative attitude in *Ḥadīth* criticism.

Thus the motive which led to the development of Islamic historiography was primarily religious. In nothing does Islam so clearly demonstrate its kinship with Judaism and Christianity as in its sense of, and attitude towards, history; its consciousness of the existence of the world under a divine dispensation, and its emphasis on the significance of human lives and acts. Muḥammad saw himself as the last in a sequence of prophets who were God's apostles to mankind. The Qur'ān abounds in references to sacred history. Hence Islamic historiography assumes as axiomatic the pattern already evolved in Judaeo-Christian thought: a succession of events in time, opening with the creation, culminating in a point of supreme divine revelation (when, in effect, there is a new creation of a holy community), and looking prospectively to a Last Day and the end of history. In this connexion, it is significant that, in spite of the contacts between Islamic and late Hellenistic civilization, and of the Muslim reception of much of the Graeco-Roman cultural heritage, the Islamic historians were almost totally uninterested in their Classical predecessors, whether as sources of information, or as models of historiography. The Roman Empire played no part in the *praeparatio evangelica* for Islam as it did for Christianity.

This conception of Islamic history as sacred history was a factor in the development of the second characteristic type of historical writing, a type original in Islam—the biographical dictionary. The earliest of these to survive is a collection of lives of Companions of the Prophet, and, in the words of Sir Hamilton Gibb:

> it is clear that the conception that underlies the oldest biographical dictionaries is that the history of the Islamic Community is essentially the contribution of individual men and women to the building up and transmission of its specific culture; that it is these persons (rather than the political governors) who represent or reflect the active forces in Muslim society in their respective spheres; and that their individual contributions are worthy of being recorded for future generations.[1]

[1] H. A. R. Gibb, 'Islamic biographical literature', in *Historians of the Middle East*, ed. B. Lewis and P. M. Holt (London, 1962), p. 54.

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Although both the chronicle and the biographical dictionary changed and developed as, after the third Islamic century, historical writing ceased to be the special field of the religious scholars, as the caliphate was fragmented, and as new states and dynasties arose, the two persisted as the standard forms of historical writing until recent times. From Arabic they were carried over into the Persian and Turkish literatures, and from the heartlands of the Middle East to the fringes of Islam. Only during the last century, and partly at least in consequence of the reception of Western historical objectives and techniques by Muslim scholars, have they become moribund.

One important class of source-material, familiar to the student of Western history, is almost completely lacking for the history of Islam—namely, archives. Certain documents are to be found transcribed in chronicles, as well as in collections of model letters and the encyclopaedic handbooks written for the guidance of government officials, but these are at least at one remove from their originals, and as isolated pieces are of diminished evidential value. Climatic conditions in Egypt, and chancery practice in Europe, have preserved some documents, more or less at random, but only with the records of the Ottoman Empire does a rich and systematically maintained government archive become available. With the nineteenth century, archival material increases. As in other fields of historical study, important contributions have been made by the auxiliary sciences of archaeology, epigraphy, palaeography, diplomatic and numismatics.

The modern study of Islamic history goes back to developments in Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Throughout the previous millennium, the peoples in the lands of Western Christendom and Islam had remained in almost total ignorance of each other's history; but whereas the Muslims almost without exception chose to ignore events which seemed to them extraneous and irrelevant, the Christian writers elaborated what has rightly been called a 'deformed image' of Islam and its founder.[1] In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this came to be challenged. The contacts of trade and diplomacy were increasing between Muslim and Christian states. The study of Arabic was established in European universities for a variety of reasons, not least that it was seen to be the key to the writings of the Muslim philosophers and scientists, hitherto known only in imperfect medieval Latin translations. A knowledge of Arabic was also important in the

[1] See N. Daniel, *Islam and the West: the making of an image* (Edinburgh, 1960).

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study of the Hebrew Bible—a study which flourished in the age of the Renaissance and the Reformation. During the same period in Western Europe, the foundations of critical historical enquiry were being laid: ancient texts were being published, old documents were being brought out of neglected archives. The motive behind much of this activity was ardently polemic; nevertheless, controversialists both in Britain and on the Continent were fashioning the instruments and devising the methods of modern research.

A new approach to the study of Islam was one aspect of this 'historical revolution', as it has been called.[1] It was demonstrated in two principal respects. The first of these was the publication of texts. Here the initiative was taken by Dutch scholars, Erpenius and Golius, in the first half of the seventeenth century, to be followed shortly by the Englishman, Edward Pococke (1604–91). The greatness of Pococke, however, lies mainly in a second respect. He had for his time an unrivalled knowledge of Muslim history and Arab antiquities, of which he gave an exposition in a short but very influential work, *Specimen historiae Arabum* (1650). The book remained authoritative for a century and a half, during which time it served as a quarry for a succession of writers. Resting on an encyclopaedic range of Arabic sources, the *Specimen*, implicitly by its scholarship, as well as by the occasional explicit comment, prepared the way for a more accurate and dispassionate view of Islam than the 'deformed image', which was still commonly accepted—and indeed lingered for two centuries. A later generation of orientalists extended the new understanding of Islam, and, by writing in modern languages, conveyed it to a less academic readership. Three highly important works in this connexion were the *Bibliothèque orientale* (1697) of Bartholomé d'Herbelot, *The history of the Saracens* (1708, 1718) of Simon Ockley, and George Sale's Preliminary Discourse to his translation of the Qur'ān (1734). Besides the information thus made available on the Islamic (and especially the Arab) past, there was in the same period a growing body of literature on the contemporary Muslim powers, especially the Ottomans and the Safavids. Through such publications, as well as others which were works of controversy rather than of scholarship, Islamic history became more familiar to educated Europeans, and was established beside ancient and modern history as an accepted field of study. This expansion of the world-view of European historians is

[1] See F. S. Fussner, *The historical revolution: English historical writing and thought, 1580–1640* (London, 1962).

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demonstrated by Edward Gibbon, who, in his *Decline and fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88) devoted nine out of seventy-one chapters to Islamic history, ranging from Arabia in the time of the Prophet to the Mongol and Ottoman conquests, and viewed its course with the same ironical detachment as he did the establishment of Christianity and the barbarian invasions of the West.

In the space of nearly two hundred years that have elapsed since Gibbon wrote, the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Enlightenment have themselves passed into history, and new forces have emerged in the development of European society. Political, social and economic change, the new ideologies of liberalism, nationalism and Marxism, have contributed to form the outlook and to define the preoccupations of historians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At the same time, the methods of historical study have continued to evolve. The source-materials available for research have immensely increased, and the range of techniques at the historian's disposal has been extended. The aims of the historian have changed in response to both of these factors. Where the pioneers in the field sought primarily to construct, from the best sources they could find, the essential framework of political history, and to chronicle as accurately as possible the acts of rulers, historians today are more conscious of the need to evaluate their materials—a critique all the more important in Islamic history since the control supplied by archives is so largely deficient. They seek to penetrate the dynastic screen, to trace the real sites and shifts of power in the capitals and the camps, and to identify, not merely the leaders and figure-heads, but the ethnic, religious, social or economic groups of anonymous individuals who supported constituted authority or promoted subversion. It is no longer possible, therefore, to segregate the political history of Islam from its social and economic history—although in the latter field especially materials are notably sparse over wide regions and long periods. As the study of Islamic history is now developing, many of the apparent certainties of the older Western historiography (often reflecting the assertions and interpretations of the Muslim traditional historians) have dissolved, and it is only gradually through detailed research that a truer understanding of the past may be attained. At the same time, the range of investigation has been extended from its older foci, the heyday of classical Islam, the great dynastic empires, and the areas of confrontation with Christendom, to other periods and regions, which as recently as ten or twenty years ago aroused little interest among serious historians.

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The Cambridge history of Islam cannot therefore pretend to supply a definitive conspectus of its field: it seeks rather to offer an authoritative guide to the state of knowledge at the present day, and to provide a sound foundation on which to build. The majority of its chapters are devoted to political history—this is inevitable in view of the relative abundance of source-material, and of the comparatively large amount of work that has been done here. Similar reasons explain the generous proportion of space allotted to the Muslim lands of the Middle East—which were, moreover, the region in which the classical Islamic synthesis evolved. Yet the picture which the work as a whole seeks to present is of the great and diversified community of Islam, evolving and expanding throughout thirteen centuries, creating its characteristic religious, political and social institutions, and making through its philosophy, literature and art a notable contribution to civilizations outside its own household of faith.

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