THE
MECCA
MYSTERY

Probing the Black Hole at the Heart of Muslim History

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Contents

Introduction

There is total silence in the mosque as the Imam begins his Friday sermon. Over the next few minutes he holds the congregation in breathless sway as he recounts the glorious occasion of the Prophet Muhammad entering Mecca, after years of struggle, at the head of a victorious army. You can almost feel the elation as the assembled believers hang on to every word of the preacher as he transports them to a time and place that are in some ways more real to them than their present surroundings. As they delight in their beloved prophet's victory in the name of Allah, at a location which some of them have visited in person, not a few of those present reflect on how very grateful they are that their faith is based on such a rock-solid historical foundation.

History. It underpins every aspect of the Muslim faith. From the descriptions of how a man named Muhammad was called from his humdrum existence to a life of prophethood, to blow-by-blow accounts of the major battles of the post-Muhammad conquests. Historical accounts are pervasive when it comes to Muslim self-understanding and these accounts act as the foundation for Islamic faith and practice at every turn. How could it be otherwise? Islam is based upon the fundamental idea that God intervened at a specific time, in a specific place and through a specific person to bring his message to an unbelieving world. It is, therefore, of the utmost importance that the historical record upon which Islamic teaching is based should be accurate and verifiable.

Most practicing Muslims would instinctively and passionately argue that this is indeed the case. As far as they are concerned, there exists an unbroken and impeccable historical record that links modern Muslims with the distant Islamic past; a past during which events played out exactly as

1

described in the countless biographies of the prophet and descriptions of the early Arab conquests that line the shelves of Islamic bookshops all around the world. A lot will depend on whether this is, in fact, the case.

In light of the above, it is of the utmost importance that historians honestly and seriously strive to get to the bottom of the questions relating to the origins of early Islam. A basic question to start with is: "*How reliable are the historical accounts upon which the faith of more than a billion Muslims rest?*" I fully realize that many people will see this question as verging on the nonsensical. It is, after all, common knowledge that Islam, as Ernest Renan memorably put it, emerged in the 'full light of history'.[1]

The problem is that the 'common knowledge' about Islam's origins rests, as is so often the case with common knowledge, on some potentially profound untested assumptions. Chief among these assumptions is the conviction that certain key historical documents, written hundreds of years after the time of Muhammad, are the most reliable window into the early origins of Islam that we have.

 The issue of the reliability of the Islamic historical record is too important to allow the mostly uncritical acceptance of certain entrenched positions to remain untested. The purpose of this book is, therefore, to pursue the following related lines of enquiry:

- Whether the classical sources underpinning Muslim history stack up as reliable records of the period and the events they seek to describe?

- Whether there are other reliable sources, perhaps largely ignored by those responsible for the traditional accounts, that provide alternative yet credible perspectives into the periods and events under discussion?

These are the type of questions that historians should ask as a matter of course when the history of any period is discussed, but the traditional version of Islamic history has largely received a 'free pass' when it comes to serious critical scrutiny.

The result is that documents claiming to shed light on the earliest years of Islam are often accepted as intrinsically trustworthy without even the most basic questions about historical accuracy or reliable transmission being asked. This happens despite the fact that the key texts of other major world religions have now been subjected to more than a century of the most searching investigations.[2]

There are several reasons behind the fact that Islamic sources have so far escaped thorough historical re-examination. Perhaps most significant is the simple fact that this is an exercise fraught with danger. Scholars in the Muslim world face the prospect of being branded as apostates if they are perceived to be deviating too far from accepted versions of Islamic theology and history. This can have very serious consequences. Throughout history, those who challenged Islamic orthodoxy from within the bosom of Islam quickly discovered that this is not something to undertake lightly. The fact that this is not an observation that only applies to the distant past (e.g. the slaughtering of Mutazalite[3] scholars in 10th century Baghdad[4]) can be seen in the case of Muhammad Taha, who was executed by the Sudanese government in 1985 for proposing a re-evaluation of the way in which the Qur'an is interpreted.[5]

The fear-factor and the sheer ubiquity of the traditional sources means that very little is happening inside the Muslim world itself as far as a critical re-evaluation of the history of the earliest years of Islam are concerned. The handful of scholars who are working in this field are mostly doing so at Western universities and publishing their findings in obscure academic journals or very expensive scholarly texts.[6] All of this means that there is very little public consciousness, either in the Muslim or Western world, of the myriad of serious questions that are being asked about the early origins of Islam.

This book is a modest attempt to address this situation by providing an accessible overview of the state of research in this crucial area. In the process, I will be interacting with the work of a wide range of scholars. Such a discussion could potentially become very technical very quickly and this is precisely what I would like to avoid in this volume. Readers should, therefore, view this as a two-level work. In the main text, I will

endeavor to keep things as readable, accessible and non-technical as possible. This does not mean, however, that I will simply make a series of untested claims. Those who would like to dig deeper, or who would like to verify the accuracy of my interaction with the sources that I refer to, are encouraged to consult the detailed notes and bibliography that are provided at the end of this work in order to identify resources for further reading and in-depth research.

Although I will be making extensive use of the work of other scholars, it should be noted that all views expressed are my own, except of course where the views of others are directly quoted or referenced.

With a project like this, there is a huge temptation to move too quickly from *'There are questions to be asked about a specific historical period'* to *'This is what actually happened'*. I am going to do my best to avoid that temptation (although it is obviously a great way to gain an audience, just ask Dan Brown[7]) by probing deeply into the problems with the traditional account of Muslim history and entering only lightly into possible alternative histories.

The reason for this is simple. Any alternative reading of history will, barring stunning archaeological or documentary discoveries to confirm it, necessarily operate in the realm of speculation and conjecture. This means that works asking significant questions about the history of Islam have in the past been all too easily dismissed by those who were able to poke holes in the alternative histories that were proposed. Critics then felt able to ignore the basic fact that there are significant problems with the traditional account itself. Let's be clear, the fact that alternative interpretations can be challenged does not automatically validate the traditional account as a kind of 'last man standing'. The questions remain.

I do realize that I will not be able to completely avoid the need to present some views on why the Islamic tradition developed as it did. I will, therefore, present some statements in Chapter 8 that will outline some of my views as far as an alternative understanding of Islamic origins is concerned. Please understand, however, that these are offered as rather tentative conclusions and that my views in this area should not be seen

as the most important part of this book. The focus should remain on the questions that should be answered before we can declare that Islam was indeed 'born in the full light of history'.

The questions to be discussed in this book must necessarily be approached from a variety of angles. The following topics will be covered:

- Some basic principles of historiography (e.g. the scientific methods underpinning historical research and writing), especially as they apply to the topic under consideration

- The sources behind the traditional Islamic historical account and an evaluation of their reliability

- Pre-Islamic Arabia (i.e. the period before Muhammad) and how Muslim historians view this era

- The historicity of Mecca and its position in Muslim history

- The data surrounding the life and public ministry of Muhammad

- The history and composition of the Qur'an

- The early Islamic conquests

- The early development of Muslim faith and practice, including a discussion of non-Muslim primary sources

As mentioned before, I will contribute my own views as far as an alternative understanding of early Islamic history is concerned towards the end of the book. It should, once again, be emphasized that these views are tentative and should not be seen as the major focus of this work.

It is probably inevitable that the material presented in this work will be labeled as 'revisionist'. Revisionism can be defined as the critical re-examination of accepted historical accounts and the sources upon which such accounts are based. Revisionist projects are sometimes all too easily

dismissed as foolhardy and quixotic. However, to reject revisionist questioning out of hand is to state that we should simply uncritically accept generally established historical convictions. Without the willingness, and in fact the duty, to question received wisdom, the task of the historian is reduced to simply finding ever more entertaining ways to tell the 'same old story'. Few, if any, historians would find this an appealing prospect. We should instead, in line with one of the most cherished convictions of the Western intellectual tradition, be willing to follow the evidence wherever it may lead. Even if it means tipping over a few sacred cows in the process.

Thank you very much for taking the time to investigate the crucially important questions of the historical reliability of the generally accepted accounts of Islamic origins.

Please note that this book will be quite narrowly focused on the issue at hand (i.e. Islamic history). For a more general critique of the truth claims of Islam, please see my book *'Questioning Islam – Tough Questions and Honest Answers about the Muslim Religion'* available at www.qi-book. com. For a discussion of the links between Islamic teaching and violence, please see 'Nothing to do with Islam? – Investigating the West's most Dangerous Blind Spot' available at www.ntdwi.com.

Peter Townsend
Sydney, May 2018

Navigating this Book

T he topic that we will be discussing may well be quite unfamiliar to many readers and there is a danger that some people may feel a bit overwhelmed by the material that will be presented.

To help readers keep track of our progress as we move through different topics, a short paragraph will act as our guide. This paragraph is a summary of traditional Muslim historical orthodoxy that will be thoroughly 'interrogated' as we go along. Here it is:

> *The classic Islamic sources tell us that the ancient city of Mecca was a site of immense spiritual and economic importance. However, by the time Muhammad was born (570 CE), it was adrift in a sea of paganism and barbarity that enveloped the entire Arabian Peninsula. Muhammad was a member of one of the most important tribes in Mecca, the Quraysh, and received a call from God to act as his prophet in a cave just outside the city. Acting upon this call, Muhammad received a series of revelations over a period of about twenty years, right up to his death in 632 CE. These revelations form what we now know as the Qur'an. After Muhammad's death, his followers burst out of the Arabian Peninsula in the name of Islam and conquered the Persian and much of the Eastern Roman Empire. The coming of Islam established the Muslim religion, with the message of Muhammad and the city of Mecca at its center, as the pre-eminent belief system from Egypt to Persia within 100 years of the death of the prophet.*

This summary paragraph will appear above every chapter with the part that is being investigated in that chapter in **bold type.** Hopefully this

will help orient readers in terms of exactly where we are in our investigation of Islamic history.

Every chapter will also end with a summary of the main points that were discussed.

Full references are provided at the end of the book. In cases where the Qur'an and traditions (*hadiths*) are quoted, these references will refer to versions that are available online so that readers can confirm that they have been accurately quoted.

A Brief Geographical Orientation

Throughout the course of this book I will be referring to a range of locations in what we now know as the Middle East. This is a region that many people do not know very well, beyond perhaps a few major cities, in terms of its contemporary geography. To complicate matters further, we will mostly not be looking at contemporary geography, but rather at on-the-ground realities during the period of Late Antiquity[8] (roughly the 4th to the 7th centuries CE). It would, therefore, be good to take a bit of a tour through the area while referencing some geographical features as they existed back then. A major focus of this tour will be an attempt to relate some of the names and features that existed during this period to modern realities.

It may be best to begin with the Roman presence in the Middle East. The Roman Empire, although it still gloried in its Roman heritage, was by the 3rd century not headquartered in the Eternal City (Rome) anymore. During the reign of the Emperor Constantine (272-334 CE), the capital was moved to a city which he, never one for modesty it seems, named after himself (i.e. Constantinople, the modern Istanbul).[9] Historians often refer to this phase of Roman history as the coming of the Byzantine Empire[10] (after the name of the town that originally stood on the site where Constantinople was built), although this term was not in general use in the period we will be studying. Most people still simply referred to the empire governed by the successors of Constantine as 'Roman'. The move towards the east, and away from Rome in the West, was in many ways a strategic one as it brought the heart of Roman Imperial power closer to the center of the empire. All the better to keep a wary eye on the Persian threat to the east.

As far as the Middle East is concerned, it can be stated that in general the Roman Empire controlled (in the immediate pre-Islamic period) the areas now taken up by Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine and Jordan. This vast area was not administered as a single province while under Roman rule. Roman governmental demarcations and arrangements changed over time, but the most enduring of these arrangements was the division of what we now generally refer to as the Middle East into three Roman provinces. They were:

Syria: Roman Syria[11] was one of the most important, richest and influential of all the provinces of Rome. Its capital Antioch (now the Turkish city of Antakya) was the third largest city (after Constantinople and Alexandria) in the Eastern Roman Empire. Antioch was furthermore also a very important city in Christian history and over the centuries played host to intense debates between different Christian traditions. Another Syrian city which will loom large in our narrative is, of course, Damascus. This city, holding the distinction of being one of the oldest continuously inhabited settlements on earth, also came in time to be one of the jewels in the crown of early Arab rule. The importance of Syria was not only to be found in its wealth, but also in its strategic position very near to the frontline of the enduring Roman-Persian conflict (more about this below). When thinking about the ancient province of Syria, we should try to banish the boundaries of the modern state of Syria from our minds. The Roman province was much bigger than this, stretching into areas now occupied by Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq. It should also be noted that the cultural influence emanating from Roman Syria spread way beyond the province itself. Religious, cultural and linguistic (through the Syriac language) ideas from Syria put down deep roots in neighboring Roman provinces as well.

Palestina (Judea): The Roman Province of Palestina[12] covered much of the territory now held by the modern state of Israel. This province went through a series of political up and downs. The Romans initially named the province Judea and tried to rule through local proxy-rulers, but eventually they decided to exert direct political control in response to two major Jewish rebellions (i.e. the Jewish Revolt 66-73 CE[13] and the Bar Khokba War 132-135 CE).[14] The Roman response to Jewish resistance

was so heavy handed that they even tried to erase the memory of Jerusalem from the map (they renamed the city Aelia Capitolina[15] and the province Syria-Palestina). This policy endured until the Christianization of the Roman Empire suddenly and unexpectedly thrust the Holy Land back into the spotlight. The establishment of Jerusalem as a major center of pilgrimage from the reign of Constantine onwards massively raised its prestige and importance as a Roman city. This led to the name Aelia Capitolina being quietly forgotten and even the term Judea making a comeback. Safeguarding Jerusalem and emphasizing its place in Christian history was viewed as a priority, especially given the fact that Roman imperial authorities increasingly saw themselves as the guardians of Christian theological orthodoxy. One implication of this was that they had to ensure that the expressions of Christianity in Jerusalem, a major site of pilgrimage after all[16], aligned with their understanding of the faith. This approach necessitated much tighter control of the area and, over time, led to an influx of Christians from all over the Roman Empire.

Roman Arabia[17] (Arabia Petraea): The Romans also controlled parts of what is now Jordan, Egypt (the Negev Desert) and northern Saudi Arabia. This was known as Roman Arabia or Arabia Petraea. Roman dominance of this area came about after the Roman army conquered the Nabataean Empire in 106 CE. This empire, centered on Petra, was one of the major sources of the Arabic language as well as cultural and religious ideas. By the 6th century effective Roman control of much of Roman Arabia was significantly diminished, with the task of securing this part of the empire mainly outsourced to Arab tribes. These tribes were mostly settled in garrison cities on the edge of the provinces of Arabia and Syria.

The Syro-Arabian Borderlands: This is a term that will be employed throughout this book. It refers to territories on either side of the borders of the Roman Provinces of Syria, Palestina and Arabia. If this sounds a bit ambiguous, it is meant to be. The borders of these provinces were obviously not fixed lines, fences or walls, but most depended on a general understanding of how far Roman military power projected into the Arabian Desert. This means that there were many people on either side of the border who either accepted or rejected Roman rule and ideas. In the Syro-Arabian borderlands (between Syria and Northern Arabia),

many people identified with the developing Arab language and culture. Some of them could be described as nomadic Arab tribes (to whom the term 'Bedouin' is often applied). Others settled in towns and small cities associated with trans-Arabian trade or in Roman and Persian supported garrison cities. These were settlements set up to house Arab tribespeople in the employ of the two great empires of the day. The most important of these garrison cities were Jabiya, under the control of a group of Christian Roman aligned tribes known as the Ghassanids.[18] Much further east, inside the Sassanian (Persian) empire, there was Hira, controlled by a pagan Arab dynasty known as the Lakhmids.[19] It will become obvious as we go along that the Syro-Arabian borderlands played a very significant role in the development of Islam so we will have occasion to return to this region at several points throughout this book.

Central Arabia and the Hejaz: Central Arabia, which is mostly covered by the modern state of Saudi Arabia today, was mostly arid and devoid of large-scale settlements. The exceptions were oases (e.g. the ones at Yahtrib, later known as Medina, and Ta'if). These settlements were often closely associated with trans-Arabian trade as way-stations on the route. A very important part of this region for our purposes is the Hejaz[20], the region where the modern city of Mecca is located. According to traditional Muslim historiography, this area was right at the heart of trans-Arabian trade networks and also had immense religious importance. We shall see later in this book that these convictions are not necessarily supported by historical and geographical evidence.

Southern Arabia: This area is mostly covered by the modern state of Yemen and parts of Southern Saudi Arabia. It was known by the Romans as 'Arabia Felix'[21] (or 'Happy Arabia'). The reason for this was that it was exceptionally fertile, unlike most of the rest of the territories where Arabs lived. It was also the source of the many of the spices and especially the incense that powered the trans-Arabian trade. For much of the pre-Islamic ara this area was dominated by the Kingdom of Himyar.[22] The Himyarites had strong links with tribes and groups further north, especially through trade. These links were reflected in the fact that several of the kings of Himyar belonged to the Jewish religion. In the immediate pre-Islamic era, Himyarite domination of Southern Arabia came to

an end when Ethiopian armies, with Roman support, defeated the last Himyarite king in 527 CE.

The Arabian Peninsula: This is a catch-all term that I will use at several points throughout this book as shorthand for the territories with a significant Arab presence. It encompasses Southern Arabia, Central Arabia and into Northern Arabia (i.e. the Syro-Arabian borderlands).

Beyond the Arabian Peninsula to the West: In this part of the world, we need to briefly mention two geographical realities. The first is the Red Sea, which runs between the Arabian Peninsula and Africa. These days, since the opening of the Suez Canal, it is well-known as one the busiest shipping lanes on the planet, but this is not necessarily something new. It has always been much cheaper to transport goods by water than by land. This means that the Red Sea played a hugely important role in trade from southern to northern Arabia. A fact that we will revisit later. We also need to take note of the Christian Aksumite Empire of Ethiopia as one of the most significant pre-Islamic African entities, especially because of the links between this part of Africa and southern Arabia. Influence went both ways and had implications for political and religious life on both sides of the Red Sea.

The Sassanian (Persian) Empire: The Sassanian Empire[23] covered much of what we now know as Iraq and Iran and into parts of Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Central Asian republics. The heart of the empire could be found in the area known as Mesopotamia or the 'Land Between the Rivers'. The rivers in question were the Tigris and the Euphrates, and it was indeed between these rivers where some of the oldest traces of human civilization have been found. The capital of the empire in the immediate pre-Islamic period was Ctesiphon on the banks of the Tigris (about 22 miles southeast of present-day Baghdad), but there were also many smaller centers. Some of these cities could be described as garrison cities, while others were focused on scholarship. Zoroastrianism was the major religion of the Empire and the Sassanian Emperors were given special religious status within this religion. The Empire was also home to large communities of Jews and Christians. Many of the Christians in the Empire would have been regarded as unorthodox by the authorities

in the Roman Empire since they belonged to what became known as 'The Church of the East', which followed a doctrine known as Nestorianism. The Jewish presence in Mesopotamia went back to the time when both the northern (722 BCE) and southern (586 BCE) Jewish tribes were brought to this region as exiles. It was especially in the erstwhile Babylonian lands where Jewish culture and learning flourished. One expression of this was the Babylonian Talmudic Academies that were strung between the towns of Pumbedita (modern Fallujah) and Sura, farther south down the Euphrates. It would be hard to overstate the importance of these academies on the development of Judaism. This importance is reflected in the name of the Babylonian Talmud, a collection of writings that continue to guide and inform Jewish life to this day.

Pre-Islamic Arabia (circa 500 CE)
Peter Townsend ©
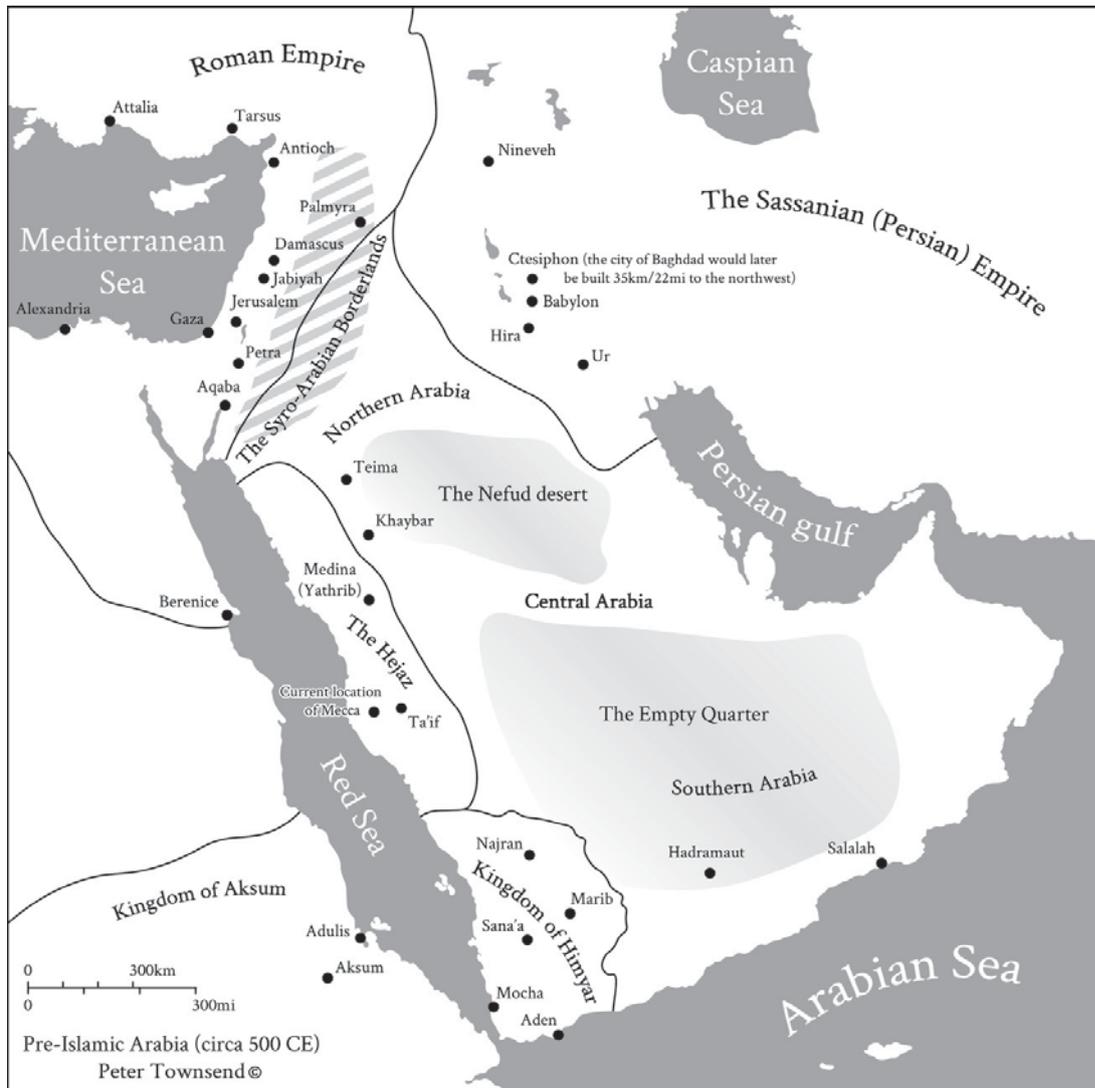
1.

What is the Basis for Traditional Beliefs About the Early Years of Islam?

*T**he classic Islamic sources tell us** that the ancient city of Mecca was a site of immense spiritual and economic importance. However, by the time Muhammad was born (570 CE), it was adrift in a sea of paganism and barbarity that enveloped the entire Arabian Peninsula. Muhammad was a member of one of the most important tribes of Mecca, the Quraysh, and received a call from God to act as his prophet in a cave just outside the city. Acting upon this call, Muhammad received a series of revelations over a period of about twenty years, right up to his death in 632 CE. These revelations form what we now know as the Qur'an. After Muhammad's death, his followers burst out of the Arabian Peninsula in the name of Islam and conquered the Persian and much of the Eastern Roman Empire. The coming of Islam established the Muslim religion, with the message of Muhammad and the city of Mecca at its center, as the pre-eminent belief system from Egypt to Persia within 100 years of the death of the prophet.*

1.1. The Past as a Battlefield

A particular interpretation of history can sometimes be so overwhelmingly presented as the accepted or canonical version that it is tempting to forego critical historical enquiry into whether the 'facts' that are presented are, in fact, anything of the sort. One of the central claims of this book is that the uncritical acceptance of supposed 'certainties' is a temptation that those writing about the early years of Islam all too often succumb to. The accepted narrative describing the early years of Islam have been retold in so many forms and formats over the centuries that there seems to be a kind of historical inevitability to them. Things had to have happened in this way, or so the argument goes, because so many people believe that it did. Needless to say, this is not a sufficiently solid foundation upon which to construct an entire historical edifice.

One of the most important insights that should underpin all historical research is the simple acknowledgement that the past can very often be contested territory. The identity of many groups around the world is quite explicitly based on certain interpretations of history, so much so in fact that it has often been stated that he who controls the past controls the present.[24] The usefulness of history as a tool with which to exert religious and political control is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than the use to which a particular version of early Islamic history has been put by Muslim religious leaders throughout the centuries since Islam was founded.

How is this control exerted? A major factor is that many Islamic teachings are supposedly based quite explicitly on the example of Muhammad and the first Muslims. In fact, the Qur'an calls Muhammad an 'excellent example' for those who hope to enter paradise (Qur'an 33:21).[25] In other words, if you can show that the prophet did or said something in the distant past, this is enough to, theoretically at least, settle the matter as to how modern Muslims should speak and act.

It should be blindingly obvious, in light of the above, that the temptation for early Muslim leaders to 'edit' Islamic history would have been almost overwhelming. Claiming to invoke the example of the prophet could potentially spur their followers into action in a way

that hours of attempts at persuasion or even threats of violence could not hope to do.

The fact that many early Muslim leaders consciously chose to back-project certain events and sayings onto Muhammad's life is amply demonstrated by the multitudes of *hadiths* (traditions) that have Muhammad saying precisely contradictory things at certain specific points during his career.

There are, for example, traditions in which Muhammad appoints his nephew Ali[26] as his successor and others where he bestows leadership of the community on his friend Abu Bakr.[27] It does not take a genius to work out what happened here. The leaders of different traditions (Shi'a in the former, Sunni in the latter) simply invented traditions supporting their view of the succession. As such, the prophet was being enlisted on both sides of the most bitterly contested political debate within worldwide Islam, as questions related to political succession during the post-Muhammad period form the basis for the Sunni/Shi'a split.[28]

These contradictory traditions are, of course, endlessly argued over (in terms of which ones are accurate), but their mere existence should be enough to cause all sorts of red flags to go up for the historian. What we have here are two mutually exclusive readings of history, both supposedly supported by an impeccable line of narrators[29] (i.e. those who supposedly retold the traditions until they were finally written down). The purpose of citing this example is obviously not to attempt to resolve this contradiction, but to forcefully point out that anyone who begins to read Islamic history is entering a minefield.

Given the deeply contested nature of Islamic historical accounts, it is all the more important to be very suspicious of the mere repetition of supposedly accepted accounts or 'everybody knows that it happened this way' statements. If Muslim scholars cannot even remotely begin to agree among themselves on the history of their faith, why should outsiders meekly accept the confidently asserted certainties of one or the other of the Islamic schools of thought?

What is sorely needed is a thoroughgoing investigation of early Islamic history without being shackled by pre-conceived notions of what we're supposed to find during this investigation. In other words, when it comes to the early history of Islam, we need to be able to ask the very same questions that are asked about other historical periods and about the reliability (or otherwise) of the sources used to reconstruct those periods. This is exactly what motivated the writing of this book.

In asking these questions, we must spend a bit of time thinking about the way historical research is conducted and how historical accounts are written (a field of study known as historiography[30]). For many, if not most, readers this may sound like an impossibly dull pursuit, but a discussion of some of the basic principles of historiography is necessary. It will, however, be kept as non-technical and relevant to the topic at hand as possible.

1.2. Dealing with Sources: Some Basic Historiographical Principles

It has already been stated that an investigation of the sources used to write Islamic history will be at the heart of this book. In general, historians ask three basic source-related questions at the beginning of any historical research project. They are:

- What sources are mostly used to serve as the basis for reconstructing the history of the person, period or place in question?

- How reliable are these sources? Simply put, can they be trusted?

- Are there other sources, perhaps hitherto ignored, that can contribute to (or even radically alter) our understanding of the period, person or place in question?[31]

One of the purposes of this chapter is to work through these questions as far as the early history of Islam is concerned. However, before we go into specifics, a few general remarks about historical sources would be in order.

Historical sources come in all shapes and sizes. They can be:

- *Documentary:* This refers to books, letters, diary entries and a host of other forms of writing. Part of the task of the historian will be to gain access to reliable written sources.[32] Sometimes this can be as (relatively) easy as visiting an archive where specialists store carefully catalogued sources in conditions optimized for their long-term survival (many such archives are being digitized, which will make the task of consulting them even more straightforward in future). In other cases, finding written sources can be very difficult. This is a problem that becomes more acute the further back in time the research subject is. It will, for example, be much easier to conduct documentary research into Hitler's Third Reich (where the volume of available documents is likely to be overwhelming) than it would be for the empire of Alexander the Great where the sources at our disposal will be relatively few and quite likely secondary in nature (see below for the difference between primary and secondary sources). There are relatively many documentary sources available for the period that we are interested in, although nothing approaching an abundance. However, significant questions can be asked about the reliability of many of these sources (this issue will be discussed in much more detail below).

- *Oral Sources:* Sometimes historical evidence can be provided in the form of oral recollections by people who lived through the period in question. We obviously do not have any audio recordings dealing with firsthand memories of early Islamic history however. What we do have is entire collections of traditions that *claim to be* the result of the committing to paper of vast amounts of oral traditions. These volumes, therefore, exist in a kind of strange no-man's land between written and oral sources, and we will return to them with a view to assessing their reliability as historical sources.

- *Artifacts:* Anyone who has ever been to museum will have had the opportunity to observe plenty of historical artifacts.[33] Artifacts can be described as physical objects associated with the subject, period or person in question. In the case of ancient history, artifacts

are often obtained through archaeology. There will sometimes be significant questions associated with the authenticity of artifacts supposedly originating from the distant past. We are, for example, entitled to raise an eyebrow at the many claims from the trustees of several sacred sites around the Middle East that each of them have been entrusted with the safekeeping of the actual head of John the Baptist. This kind of healthy skepticism should probably also be employed when it comes to certain objects supposedly directly associated with the person of Muhammad, like his cloak (supposedly in the possession of the Taliban in Afghanistan)[34] and hair from his beard (proudly displayed by the Topkapi Museum in Istanbul).[35]

- *Archaeological Evidence:* Archaeology can be particularly helpful as an aid to help reconstruct historical events or periods for which there is a lack of documentary and oral sources. In fact, there have been several instances in which archaeology significantly modified, or even completely altered, our understanding of specific periods of history. We will, therefore, need to look at what, if anything, archaeological sources can tell us about the period we are studying.

It is very important to remember that not all historical sources have been created equal, not by a long shot. Various considerations allow historians to attach different values to sources as far as their usefulness in drawing up a reliable historical account is concerned. These factors include the following yardsticks that will be particularly relevant for our purposes:

- *The reliability of an author (or narrator):* For example, historians would normally attach more authority to the testimony of a respected medieval chronicler than that of a storyteller known for spinning tall tales.

- *The distance in time and place from the event:* Documents or other pieces of evidence that can be accurately traced to the period and region in question generally carry more weight. In other words, historians interested in medieval life in Southern France will generally pay much closer attention to a document from Provence, dated to

1350, than to a document from Picardie (on the other side of the country) dated to 1650, even though they may claim to describe the same events.

- *Wide Distribution:* Although this is not a hard-and-fast rule, historians will generally assume that texts that were widely distributed (especially if distributed through official channels, e.g. royal chronicles) during the period in question are more reliable, as their wide distribution invites more opportunity for comment and possible correction.

- *Documentary evidence generally trumps oral/legendary material*: There are obviously many narratives out there that claim to be based on actual historical events, but that may be nothing of the sort. Most historians will, therefore, perhaps be willing to concede that legendary material (often based on oral retellings) may contain kernels of historical truth, but will not take every single claim that is made on face value. They will, instead, do their best to find reliable written sources and/or archaeological evidence to ascertain the reliability of such material.

1.3. Primary and Secondary Historical Sources

One of the most important historiographical distinctions between different types of sources is related to the distance from the time and place of the events being described. These differences are expressed in terms of primary and secondary sources.

At the most basic level this distinction has to do with presence. A primary source[36] is a source which can be shown to have been present (i.e. existed) during the period under discussion. If, for example, I am doing research into Napoleon's Russian Campaign, his diaries, letters and daily dispatches will be some of the most important primary sources that I can consult. Secondary sources are typically sources that were 'not present' (i.e. they were written or created after-the-fact). Let's stick with our example of Napoleon's Russian campaign. In this case, the most widely

available secondary sources will be books, articles and reports written by others after the campaign. These can range from sources written shortly after the events and right up to the present.

It should immediately be obvious that primary sources are crucial for accurate history writing since they take us right to the heart of what is being discussed. Secondary sources are, of course, not unimportant, but here historians have their work cut out for them to sort the wheat from the chaff in terms of accuracy and reliability. An important part of the historian's craft is, therefore, to 'weigh' and evaluate sources in terms of their reliability and usefulness in reconstructing the past. It is, for example, logical, that a history of the Napoleonic wars written while many of the participants were still alive will be regarded as a much more important source than a summary article that appeared in a 21st century encyclopedia. Most historians will, in fact, regard contemporary summaries of historical events (like encyclopedia entries) not so much as historical sources in the strict sense, but rather as useful (depending on the quality of course) introductions to historical subjects for non-specialists.

In case this is not abundantly clear already, an important principle should be stated outright: primary source research represents the gold standard when it comes to the writing of history. In other words, when it comes to the early history of Islam, we need to be able refer to (and give preference to) documents, artifacts and archaeological evidence that can be reliably dated to the period under discussion (roughly 570 CE to 732 CE, i.e. from the birth of Muhammad to about a hundred years after his death).

Much of the discussion over the coming chapters will focus on the quality (or perhaps lack thereof) of the primary sources upon which the traditional accounts are based. We will also be looking at the question of whether there are not perhaps alternative primary sources that are routinely being excluded from the discussion because they do not fit in with a particular ideological agenda.

1.4. The Place of Oral Tradition in Historiography

Readers may wonder why a section on oral traditions as historical sources was included in a book about the early history of Islam? Simply because this is more-or-less what the accepted Islamic historical tradition has to offer by way of primary source support. The bulk of Muslim historical accounts as taught in mosques and *madrassas* (Islamic schools) around the world rest upon a vast bulwark of oral retellings supposedly stretching all the way back to the time of the prophet.

In most cases, these traditions were only finally committed to paper about 200-300 years after the date (632 CE) generally associated with the death of Muhammad. This is essentially what you will find in the stacks of books on Muslim history lining the bookshelves of Muslims scholars: written-down versions of supposedly reliable oral traditions. It is important to repeat, however, that there was a period *of at least two centuries* when the oral versions were supposedly all that there was.

We need to begin our investigations by asking if oral sources are, in fact, admissible as primary source evidence. In the writing of modern history, the answer would, in most cases, be a resounding 'yes'.[37] A historian writing the history of the Watergate Scandal would, for example, be able to refer to recordings of the testimony of the major protagonists. He may even, if this could be negotiated, get to interview some of them. This is, however, not the kind of oral sources that we are faced with in the writing of ancient history where ways of accurately transmitting and preserving oral records were still many centuries in the future.

The problem with validating oral sources that originated before the advent of recording technology should be immediately obvious. These sources can really only be taken seriously if we can trust the accuracy of transmission up to the point where the oral accounts were finally written down. Transmission in this context refers to the process of 'retelling' a story or tradition from its point of origin to the point when it is finally committed to paper. The biggest challenge in this context is that corruption may have occurred at some stage during the transmission process.

Corruption in the historiographical sense obviously has nothing to do with bribe-taking, but rather refers to the way in which a historical tradition can be altered, sometimes radically so, in the process of being passed from one person to another. In other words, the original meaning or message gets corrupted. Anyone who has ever played a game of Chinese Whispers will immediately be aware of how significant this problem can be. Stories tend to 'grow tails' in the retelling until we are left with a deep sense of unease about whether we are in any way able to reconstruct the original version.

The claim is often made that there are some oral traditions that were preserved with a remarkable degree of accuracy over the centuries. While it is true that some people are indeed capable of prodigious feats of memory, we should be very careful to make claims for anything approaching flawless transmission and perfect recall when it comes to oral traditions.

Perhaps the most remarkable surviving oral traditions are the classic Hindu epics (the Mahabharata and the Ramayana). There are many examples of people being able to recite large parts of these huge epics from memory. In fact, the memorization of these key Sanskrit texts[38] is seen as a sacred obligation by many Hindus and there have been large numbers of specialists who dedicated their entire lives to memorizing and retelling these epics. Some of these reciters have been shown to have memorized more than a million words. Yet, even this elaborate system dedicated to the preservation of an oral tradition have not prevented the occurrence of significant variations between different versions of the epics.[39] These variations can typically be traced to certain regions of India or to specific groups within Indian society. It can, considering this, be argued that the epics reached their definitive form only when a more-or-less general consensus (still elusive as far as some Indian scholars are concerned) was reached based on a written-down version of the traditions.

The example of the Hindu epics should serve as a salutary warning to anyone making the claim that anything approaching flawless transmission of oral traditions is possible. This goal will be doubly elusive in settings where there is not an established procedure for passing on oral traditions (as is the case with the Hindu epics). If formal memorization still leaves

us with variations and ambiguities, this will be all the more the case if we are simply dealing with stories retold from generation to generation around the campfire.

Considering this, most historians will treat written-down oral accounts pointing to a period in the distant past with extreme caution. They would ideally like to see such sources validated by other kinds of evidence, especially well attested primary documentary sources from the period in question.

1.5. The Islamic Sources under the Lens

The time has now come to pull some of the threads discussed above together by critically examining the standard sources for Islamic history.

The first thing that strikes the historical researcher when it comes to the generally accepted source material for Muslim history is how small the pool is that authors writing about the earliest years of Islam draw from. Whether we are talking about books written hundreds of years ago[40] or some of the slick biographies of Muhammad produced by the likes of John Esposito[41] or Karen Armstrong[42], they are all based on the same narrow collection of historical sources.

This means that mainstream research into early Islamic history is essentially a sterile enterprise, since virtually no additional information is allowed to intrude into the carefully guarded circle of canonical sources. The result is that, among those who limit themselves to these sources, essentially nothing new is being said and historical writing has degenerated into a desperate attempt to find innovative ways to say the very same things that Muslim scholars have been saying for ages. One of the key messages of this book is that it does not have to be this way. Applying sound principles of historical research can revolutionize our understanding of Islamic origins.

An important feature of the traditional source pool for Islamic history has already been identified, but is worth discussing in more detail. This

is the fact that it consists mainly of documents claiming to be the written records of oral retellings stretching back to the time of Muhammad. The written records, however, date from much later (typically 200-300 years after-the-fact). In other words, and this vitally important to grasp: *Standard Islamic history rests mostly on secondary sources claiming to be based on oral primary source evidence*.

Therefore, the most basic question that we should ask of the Islamic sources is whether the claim of accurate oral transmission up to the point of a written record being created can be sustained. Unfortunately, many historians of the earliest years of Islam are not asking this question. Instead they tend to treat these secondary sources as if their reliability and authenticity have been established once and for all. This is, as we shall see, far from the case.

We will now proceed to look at some of the sources traditionally mustered in support of traditional Islamic historical accounts with a view to assessing their usefulness as building blocks for constructing an accurate historical picture. The obvious place to start is with the document at the heart of Islam, the Qur'an itself.

1.5.1. The Qur'an as a Historical Source

Most non-Muslims assume that they can, should they be so inclined, pick up the Qur'an and learn all they need to know about the early history of Islam. This is simply not the case. The Qur'an is remarkably de-contextualized. Very few individuals, place names or historical events are mentioned. For example, the word Mecca occurs exactly once in the Qur'an (Qur'an 48:24)[43] and the name Muhammad, as opposed to indirect references, a mere three times (Qur'an 33:40[44], 47:2[45] and 48:29).[46] When you look up these references, it quickly becomes clear that they all make general statements and are of no use in terms of discovering the true history of either Mecca or Muhammad. The Qur'an could in a sense have been written at any time or any place for all the historical information that it provides.

The extent to which the Qur'an is deficient in the area of geographical and historical references is quite staggering. It contains just shy of 150,000 words in Arabic. Only 65 of these words are references to specific locations. The figure of 65 is further reduced when we consider that several of these markers occur more than once and are, therefore, counted several times within the total. In fact, there are only 9 unique location references within the entire book.[47] To put it in another way, you must read on average 2,229 words in the Qur'an before encountering a reference to a location. A useful point of comparison is the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) in the Christian New Testament, all of which contain about ten times more location references than the Qur'an, with the Gospel of Mark referencing a location on average once every 200 words.[48]

Early Muslim scholars tried to solve the problem of the de-contextualized nature of the Qur'an by writing voluminously on the supposed origins of every chapter in the book. This so-called 'Occasions of Revelation' (*Asbāb al-nuzūl*) literature[49] divides the chapters of the Qur'an into different periods: Early Meccan, Intermediate Meccan, Late Meccan and Medinan. These divisions correspond to the biography of Muhammad as it is traditionally presented.

The main problem with the 'Occasions of Revelation' literature (a problem we will encounter again and again during this discussion of sources) is that all attempts to provide context for the Qur'an were written generations after the book was supposedly revealed. They are therefore open to the charge of being back-projections from another place and time (200 years into the future, in fact) to the time of the prophet. The suspicion that this is what happened is further confirmed by the fact that there are often several precisely contradictory contexts provided in different books. Without reliable contemporary eyewitness testimony or documents, it is impossible to choose between these different versions of events.

1.5.2. The *Hadiths* to the Rescue?

If you visit the study of any Muslim scholar, you are likely to find huge collections of beautifully bound books purporting to contain authentic

traditions of the acts and sayings of Muhammad. They are *hadith* collections containing many individual *hadiths* (the word *hadith* literally means 'report' in Arabic, but is more commonly translated as 'tradition'). *Hadiths* generally consist of two parts. The 'chain of transmission' (or *isnad*) refers to the authorities who reported the *hadith*, supposedly right back to the time of the Muhammad.[50] A typical *isnad* will read like this: "I heard from A, who heard from B, who heard from C, who heard from E, who heard from F that the prophet did such and such a thing". The second part of the *hadith* then contains the text of the act or saying that is being reported.

This sounds like a very neat and reliable system, except for the fact that there are literally hundreds of thousands of *hadiths* floating around, often containing directly contradictory descriptions and teachings.[51] It is easy to work out why this would be the case. If someone in a later era wanted to bolster his argument on an issue, it would be the easiest thing possible to invent a saying of the prophet in support of that position. This will work well until your opponent gets the same idea. This is apparently exactly what happened and the result was utter chaos. By the mid-850's CE tens of thousands of *hadiths*, many profoundly at odds with each other, but all claiming to go right back to Muhammad were circulating in the Muslim world.[52] Muslim scholars of past generations tried to get around this problem by researching the supposed reliability of different *hadiths* and classifying them as *sahih* (authentic or sound), *hasan* (good) and *da'if* (weak).

Over time, whole collections of *hadiths* were compiled in order to provide the faithful with easy access to the more reliable traditions. Within Sunni Islam, six of these collections eventually came to be regarded as the most reliable[53]:

- Sahih Bukhari compiled by Imam Bukhari (died 870 CE)

- Sahih Muslim compiled by Muslim bin al *Hajj*aj (died 875 CE)

- Sunan al-Sughra compiled by Al-Nasa'i (died 915 CE)

- Sunan Abu Dawood compiled by Abu Dawood (died 888 CE)

- Jami al-Tirmidhi compiled by Al-Tirmidhi (died 892 CE)

- Sunan ibn Majah compiled by Ibn Majah (died 887 CE)

The first two collections (Sahih Bukhari and Sahih Muslim) are especially important, and their contents are regarded as generally sound by most Sunni Muslims.[54]

Shi'a Muslims do not accept the same collections as the Sunnis do. Within Shi'a Islam, the so-called 'Four Books' are regarded as the most reliable.[55] These are:

- Kitab al-Kafi compiled by Muhammad ibn Ya'qub al-Kulayni (died 941 CE)

- Man la yahduruhu al-Faqih compiled by Muhammad ibn Ali ibn-e Babuyeh (died 991 CE)

- Al-Tahdhib and Al-Istibsar compiled by Abu Jafar Muhammad Ibn Hassan Tusi (died 1067 CE)

It is hard to overstate the importance of the *hadiths* in constructing Islamic faith and practice. If it were not for the *hadiths*, Muslims would have no textual basis for key aspects of Islam. For example, without the *hadiths*, Muslims would not know the words of the *Shahada* (Confession of Faith)[56], how to perform the *Hajj* (Pilgrimage)[57] and how often to pray.[58] While it is true that there are small groups who follow 'Qur'an Only' Islam[59], they are generally regarded as apostates by both Sunni and Shi'a. The scholars of both these groups agree that Islam is impossible to follow without referencing the *hadiths*.

The importance of the *hadiths* as sources for the beliefs, practices and history of Islam seems to indicate that they can be regarded as ultra-reliable documents dating from the very beginning of Islam. This is evidently not the case. To substantiate this claim, we simply have to look

at the death dates given for the compilers of the major Sunni and Shi'a *hadith* collections above, while keeping in mind that Islamic tradition states that Muhammad died in the year 632 CE. It will immediately be obvious that these compilers all lived roughly 200-400 years after the time of Muhammad. This means that we are asked to accept the historicity of documents that supposedly circulated orally for *six to seven generations* before being committed to paper. To put that in perspective, a modern equivalent would be for someone to go to Europe and collect oral traditions on the last days of Napoleon and the Battle of Waterloo (which happened almost exactly 200 years ago) and publish it as the definitive version of those events.

The main problem with extended oral retellings of events or circumstances is obviously that the potential for corruption of, or additions to, the original content is tremendous. In fact, Muslim scholars agree that there were many spurious *hadiths* around[60], to the extent that only about 3-4% were accepted in the canonical *hadith* collections.[61] Even with these, there are huge problems.

There is straightforward evidence that many people struggled to memorize the Qur'an for a single generation (with many chapters or verses found only with single individuals)[62], yet we are asked to believe that thousands of traditions survived flawlessly across seven generations. In this regard the so-called *isnads* (chains of transmission) create more problems than they solve. The earliest *hadiths* appeared without them until they were suddenly 'discovered' to lend authority to certain *hadiths*.[63] This means that we are asked to believe that *isnad* and *hadith* existed in isolation until they were somehow magically brought together.

There are, furthermore, many examples of supposedly sound (*sahih*) *hadiths* in the canonical collections that directly contradict each other. You have, for example, separate and contradictory collections accepted by the Sunni and Shi'a.[64] What clearer evidence for the unreliability of the *hadiths* can you ask for than the fact that the two major divisions of Islam both have access to collections that support their positions to a tee? Beyond this, we even find that irreconcilable contradictions occur within individual collections. This leads to the absurd situation that two

traditions both regarded as *sahih* (sound) and in the same collection will profoundly disagree with each other. We see, for example, that there is a *hadith* in Sahih Bukhari (by far the most respected Sunni collection) that states that Muhammad performed only one ablution before praying (1:4:159)[65], the very next *hadith* states that he did so twice (1:4:160)[66] only to be contradicted by the next one (1:4:161) where it states that it should be done three times.[67] So much for the supposed accuracy and soundness of the oral traditions that we find in the *hadith* collections.

There is another factor that casts serious doubts on the value of the *hadiths* as historical sources. This is the simple fact that many of them are absurd in the extreme, being filled with fanciful tales supposedly associated with Muhammad. They tend to portray Muhammad as the greatest miracle worker who ever lived[68] despite the fact that the Qur'an makes it clear that Muhammad was not a miracle worker but a 'warner' (cf. Qur'an 13:7).[69] This kind of over-the-top elaboration on the life of a historical figure is, of course, exactly what we would expect from tales that grew in the telling over the centuries, but their presence certainly does nothing to increase confidence in the *hadiths* as historically reliable records of the life and teachings of Muhammad.

In considering the reliability of the *hadiths,* we also have to consider why a literate people would need a vast amount of oral traditions to preserve their history. It is true that Muslim tradition states that Muhammad was illiterate (although legitimate questions can be asked about whether this was in fact the case[70]), but many of his followers clearly were not. This fact is specifically acknowledged in the Islamic tradition which states that some of the early Muslims were tasked to act as secretaries for Muhammad[71] and others to help with the compilation of the written form of the Qur'an after his death.[72] This raises a few crucial questions:

- Why would a people who counted many excellent scribes among their number rely *exclusively* on oral retellings to preserve something as important as the historical memory of their prophet?

- Why, furthermore, would they keep this peculiar practice up for two hundred years, especially given the risk that these precious memories could be corrupted or lost?

- If the *hadiths* were such an important part of the legacy of Muhammad, why are references to them glaring by their absence in the attested historical record? Why do the earliest Muslim rulers, for example, not reference them on their inscriptions, correspondence or legal rulings?

The only conclusion that we can come to is that they did not reference them because they did not know they existed. A very strange position for those who supposedly succeeded Muhammad as the leaders of the faithful (and who were thus supposed to emulate his example as found in the *hadiths*) to be in.

It may, lastly, be worthwhile to ask a profound theological question from within the Muslim tradition itself: Why do the *hadiths* exist at all if the Qur'an is indeed a 'detailed record' (Qur'an 6:114)[73] from which 'nothing is omitted' (Qur'an 6:38)?[74] These verses, and others like them, make it clear that the Qur'an is a sufficient guide for faith and conduct. The Qur'an, therefore, does not contain a single direct command related to the collection and memorization of a secondary source like the *hadiths*. This fact places yet another massive question mark over the reliability of the *hadith* collections. We are asked to believe that thousands upon thousands of people independently undertook the mammoth task of *hadith* memorization despite the absence of any encouragement whatsoever from Allah or Muhammad to do so.

It should be obvious from the above that the official explanation behind the composition of the *hadiths* is exceedingly hard to credit and this significantly increases the suspicion that they were simply invented at a later date to serve the political agendas of future generations of Muslim leaders. All of which must necessarily lead to significant doubts about their reliability as sources that could contribute anything of value to the process of reconstructing the early history of Islam.

1.5.3. Biographies of Muhammad

Muhammad is, of course, the major human figure in the religion of Islam. It would therefore be only natural for Muslims to want to find out everything that they can about him. This market is well served by a variety of biographies purporting to fill in every detail of the life of the Islamic prophet. There is just one problem with this whole enterprise. Not even one of the biographies of Muhammad can be viewed as a primary source as all of them date from a much later period.

The most famous and earliest biography of Muhammad of which we have a written record is the *Sirat Rasul Allah* (Biography of the Apostle of Allah)[75] by Muhammad ibn Ishaq ibn Yasār (often known simply as Ibn Ishaq) who lived from 704-770 CE. It is instructive to focus on his birth and death dates. The author of the earliest biography of Muhammad in written form was born a full 70 years after the date traditionally given for the death of Muhammad and probably started work on his famous biography more than 100 years after Muhammad's death. It should, furthermore, be noted that we do not have the actual book, but only references and extended quotes from later biographers like Ibn Hisham (who died in 833 CE, almost exactly 200 years after Muhammad).[76] It is very significant, when it comes to assessing Ibn Hisham's passing on of Ibn Ishaq's writings, that the later author is quite upfront about the fact that he did not simply transmit Ibn Ishaq's material as he found it. He instead seems to have exercised a significant level of editorial control. Or as he put it: "...confining myself to the prophet's biography and omitting some of the things which Ibn Ishaq has recorded in this book in which there is no mention of the apostle and about which the Quran says nothing and which are not relevant to anything in this book or an explanation of it or evidence for it; poems which he quotes that no authority on poetry whom I have met knows of; things which it is disgraceful to discuss; matters which would distress certain people; and such reports as al-Bakka'i told me he could not accept as trustworthy - all these things I have omitted. But God willing I shall give a full account of everything else so far as it is known and trustworthy tradition is available."[77] Hardly the kind of statement designed to inspire ringing confidence that we are dealing with a pristinely preserved historical tradition.

We must conclude, then, that even the most revered of Muhammad's biographies is hamstrung by the twin impediments of being chronologically far removed from its subject and serious questions about whether its contents were reliably transmitted.

Several other works (besides those by Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Hisham) are sometimes cited as more reliable biographies of the prophet, especially by those who dislike some of the elements of the biography as related by Ibn Ishaq. These include works ascribed to Urwah ibn Zubayr[78] (died 712 CE) and Aban bin Uthman bin Affan[79] (died 723 CE). The problem with these claimants (as, in fact, with the biography of Ibn Ishaq itself) is that the originals were lost and all that we have are references to these works written down generations after their authors died. Again, the potential for textual corruption and putting 'words into the mouth' of these figures is immense. To put it bluntly, *claiming* an ancient pedigree is not the same as actually *proving* an ancient pedigree. This principle is confirmed by countless forgeries of historical documents that have been unearthed over the years. Thus, as with so much of the Islamic historical record, the claims regarding alternatives to Ibn Ishaq should be taken with a healthy pinch of salt.

When we analyze the contents of the earliest prophetic biographies, certain problems emerge almost immediately:

- The contents of several of the biographies are, firstly, significantly at odds with the teachings of the Qur'an. There are many examples of this, but the divergence between the Qur'an and the biographies of the prophet on the issue of miracles is perhaps most striking.[80] In the Qur'an, Allah repeatedly refuses requests for miracles by stating that Muhammad is simply 'a warner' (cf. Qur'an 13:7)[81] Based on this, we would have to say that the Qur'anic Muhammad was not a miracle worker (except for the supposed miracle of the Qur'an itself and the dubiously attested 'splitting of the moon'[82]). The picture presented in Muhammad's biographies is rather more spectacular. Muhammad seems to have performed miracles aplenty. Water flows from his fingertips[83], he pops eyeballs back into the eye sockets of injured people causing them to work better than before[84] and multiplies food for his followers.[85] The list goes on and

on. The austere non-miracle working figure of the Qur'an has now been transformed into a prolific 'wonderworker'.

- A curious fact about the biographies of Muhammad is that the later the biography is (in terms of the date that it was written), the more detailed it tends to be. Later generations of writers seemingly had access to a wealth of detail that entirely escaped earlier biographers.[86] This is strange to say the least. Where did all this new information, never before committed to paper, suddenly come from hundreds of years after Muhammad's death? What we see here is a clear example of legend creation and myth making in action.

- One of the strongest arguments against the accuracy of the biographies of Muhammad is that they are all based on the 'wrong' calendar. In Ibn Ishaq (and later biographies), the dates when certain events occurred are scrupulously recorded. This may seem like a very commendable commitment to accuracy until you realize that every third year has an entire month missing. The context of this is that the traditional account tells us that the Islamic lunar calendar replaced the pre-Islamic pagan calendar in 629 CE.[87] The pagan calendar had a leap month every three years to keep pace with the solar calendar. The Islamic calendar does not have this leap month[88] and is thus 11 days shorter than solar-based calendars. The year 629 CE (when the pagan calendar was replaced) was 19 years since Muhammad claimed to have received his first revelation. In the intervening period, he lived through six leap months, claiming to be a prophet, before the Islamic calendar was adopted. Yet of all the thousands upon thousands of events recorded of his prophetic ministry, *not a single one takes place during a leap month*. One can only conclude, on the basis of this, that the traditions in Ibn Ishaq were created at a time when all knowledge of how the previous calendar worked was lost.[89] Date selection was, therefore, arbitrary and not based on any well-preserved tradition. This suspicion is further strengthened by the fact that many of the major events of Muhammad's life are placed on exactly the same day (Monday) and date (12 Rabi Al Awwal) in different years.[90]

In addition to the issues discussed above, we haven't even touched on the errors, absurdities and inconsistencies in these biographies. Despite this, Ibn Ishaq and those who followed him are widely accepted by Muslims as giving a reliable picture of the life of Muhammad. Even those who are embarrassed by Ibn Ishaq still return to his work for the only available historical references to some of the widely-accepted events in Muhammad's life. While there are claims that some biographies are more accurate, no early copies of these exist. The reader will have to agree on the basis of the above, that the traditional biography of Muhammad is built on an exceedingly shaky foundation.

1.5.4. Early Islamic Historical Texts and Their Legacy

At about the same time when the *hadith* collections were being compiled, some early historians took it upon themselves to systematize the material contained in the sources above into histories of the earliest years of Islam. There are many examples of such works emerging from the mid 850's CE (i.e. 200 years after the death of Muhammad). The most famous of these early Muslim histories is 'The History of the Prophets and the Kings' by Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (839-923 CE).[91] This book, often simply known as the Tarikh al-Tabari (History of Tabari), is a monumental work and is still immensely influential as one of the fountainheads of Muslim history writing.[92]

How exactly did Al Tabari write his history? Did he engage in meticulous primary source research in order to reconstruct the time of Muhammad and the subsequent Arab Conquests as accurately as possible? Not quite. Al Tabari's method (a method also used by the many who followed in his footsteps) was essentially to collate material that he believed to be surviving oral traditions and to present this with as little commentary as possible. The Tarikh Al Tabari is, therefore, simply a series of narrations presented in a more-or-less chronological order.[93] What is more, Al-Tabari's version of history was highly partisan, designed to bolster the legitimacy Islam's second ruling dynasty, the Abbasids.[94] It is a distinct possibility, when history is 'weaponized' like this that ideological point scoring will trump a commitment to historical accuracy. The suspicion

that this is exactly what happened can be confirmed through the many instances where Al-Tabari's confident claims about the speed, nature and make-up of the Arab Conquests are comprehensively contradicted by contemporary sources.

By giving preference to supposedly ancient yet highly partisan oral traditions as the bedrock of Islamic history, Al Tabari (widely regarded as one of the most important theologians and historians of the early Islamic period) established a very significant precedent. He accepted without question that the biography of Ibn Ishaq and the 'sound *hadiths*' were indeed reliable and directly connected to the time of Muhammad. This established these 'secondary sources claiming to be primary sources' as unassailable authorities in the eyes of many who followed Al Tabari's lead. In the process, the very significant questions outlined above about the reliability of the transmission of the oral traditions were essentially ignored and the *hadiths*, Ibn Ishaq's biography and some other later traditions were enshrined as reliable source material. The uncritical acceptance of these sources is still the default position of traditional Muslim historiography.[95]

1.5.5. The Current State of Play: A Puzzling Lack of Critical Engagement

One can perhaps understand why Muslim historians would accept without question the historiographical tradition established by Ibn Hisham, Al Tabari and others, since it so significantly underpins traditional understandings of Islam. What is rather puzzling, however, is the readiness of many Western scholars to fall into line. Pick up just about any introductory text on Islamic history prescribed at Western universities and you will find essentially a standard retelling of the narratives first penned by Ibn Ishaq, Al Tabari and other Muslim historians following in their wake.[96] References to actual contemporary primary sources will, by contrast, be conspicuous by their absence.

What is particularly ironic is that this uncritical acceptance of sources that would normally be laughed out of court, or dismissed as 'legendary material' when applied to any other period (or religion), is occurring at

universities and research institutions where revisionist projects questioning various other 'accepted histories' will often be actively encouraged.

The ignoring of accepted standards for historical enquiry when it comes to the history of Islam, including by Western scholars, has a long history. Even a figure as illustrious as Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) in his majestic 'Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire' confessed to neglecting to rigorously examine the sources for Islamic history. He prefaces his discussion of Muslim history with this rather startling but eminently honest statement: "I am ignorant, and I am careless, of the blind mythology of the Barbarians: of the local deities, of the stars, the air, and the earth, of their sex or titles, their attributes or subordination."[97]

While few modern historians would be willing to own up quite so flippantly to being careless in checking out their sources, we evidently have not progressed too far from Gibbon's supreme indifference to the idea of investigating the reliability of the sources supporting the standard Islamic account. In fact, scholars who dare to embark on critical investigations of early Islamic history are often vilified and ostracized for threatening accepted orthodoxy.

Instead we are loudly called upon by the guardians of the traditional view to continue to believe that hundreds of literate people independently undertook the mammoth task memorizing a vast oral tradition despite the absence of any encouragement whatsoever from their God or his prophet to do so. We are also asked to believe that while engaged in this essentially pointless project (why did they not simply commit their precious memories of the prophet to paper?), Muslim leaders also apparently took great care to never so much as mention the existence of this supposedly authoritative oral tradition. Even as a basis for the laws that they were devising for their expanding empire. Not to put too fine a point on it: the standard narrative underpinning Islamic history stretches credulity beyond breaking point, even before we begin to investigate possible alternative sources for reconstructing the history of the beginning of Arab dominance in the Middle East.

There are many reasons behind the reluctance of many within the academic establishment to going beyond regurgitating the same supposed

certainties (bereft of solid primary source evidence) when discussing the history of early Islam. An awareness of the fate of critics of Islamic orthodoxy almost certainly plays a part (which is, by the way, also why several scholars working in this area use pseudonyms).[98] There is also the well-established fact that many Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies departments in the West are generously supported by Islamic governments[99] and other entities who have a vested interest in perpetuating the teaching of the orthodox narrative that have become so deeply embedded in the teaching of Islamic history.

There is, lastly, the belief that that the classic Islamic sources are essentially all that we have to work with. In other words, so the thinking goes, we must accept the standard Islamic sources, otherwise the period in question will be a blank canvas. This is simply not the case. There are many other sources we can turn to, many of them *bona fide* primary sources. It is to these possible alternative sources that we now turn.

1.6. Not So Silent After All: Finding Alternative Sources

Traditional Muslim historiography tends to emphasize the idea that pre-Islamic Arabia contained very little of worth.[100] If we accept the idea that all was darkness, ignorance and barbarity, then it follows logically that very little must have survived as far as historical sources from this period goes. The problem is, however, that the Muslim characterization of Arabia before Muhammad as nothing more than a wasteland filled with ignorance is a grotesque misrepresentation. Ancient and sophisticated cultures flourished in this part of the world.[101] Many of these cultures and societies left deep and multi-facetted layers of historical evidence. One can understand why Muslim scholars, wishing to maintain a firm belief in an Islam that owes precisely nothing to what came before, insist that pre-Islamic Arabia was a cultural and political wasteland. This belief can, however, only be maintained in the teeth of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Much of this evidence is contained in the many documents touching directly on life in the Arabian Peninsula that survived from the 5th to the 7th centuries.

The richness of the pre-Islamic historical record is partially due to the fact that the Arabian Peninsula was firmly tied into contemporary international trade networks. Where money is involved, which is invariably the case with trade, a documentary trail inevitably follows. This principle was as true in the ancient world as it is today. There are, therefore, an abundance of documents relating to trade in the Arabian Peninsula that historians can consult.

Add to this the fact that the Romans and Persians enlisted Arab tribes to fight their wars for them and, therefore, kept obsessively detailed records (many of which survive) of the places and tribes of Arabia and you have a veritable feast of primary source documents to choose from when it comes to the history of this part of the world. Sources that the historian of early Islam can draw on include:

- *Correspondence:* By the time of late-antiquity, letter writing has long been accepted as a vital part of long distance communication and much can be learned about the world from which they originated by reading letters surviving from this period.

- *Trade route descriptions and maps:* Those crossing the Arabian Desert obviously had to have some idea of where to go and what to expect on route. There are several surviving trade route descriptions that take in the area that we are interested in (sometimes at a level of detail that could almost be regarded as obsessive).[102] Occasionally these descriptions included rudimentary maps.

- *Formal Geographical Descriptions:* Over the course of this book we will meet a range of ancient authors who went to great pains to provide their readers with accurate information on the ancient Near East. They include Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, Pliny[103] and many others. We will also have occasion to consult works that provided geographical information for official use. Since both the Roman and Sassanian (Persian) empires enlisted Arab tribes to fight on their behalf, the two world-powers of Late Antiquity had a keen interest in Arab lands. We can, therefore, draw upon both Roman and Persian official descriptions for more information on

this part of the world. This type of document is often referred to as a 'gazetteer', i.e. a kind of geographical dictionary that describes the features, population and other important features of a particular territory

- *Christian, Jewish and Persian Chronicles:* Contrary to Muslim claims, Arabia was not merely a pagan wasteland before the coming of Islam. There were significant communities of Christian, Jews and Zoroastrians living both in Arabia and on its edges. Members of these communities wrote about their experiences (sometimes in formal chronicles, at other times more informally)[104] both before the coming of Islam and during the Arab conquest. By reading these sources, we can get a rich and varied picture of the period we are studying.

- *Artifacts:* Perhaps the most important artifacts from this period are coins. The study of coins (formally known as numismatics) can be of tremendous help in reconstructing the history of a period. Particularly since coins tend to be very closely associated with the exercise of political and military power.

- *Archeology:* The period that we are studying left some very significant archeological traces. The opposite is true as well. There can sometimes be an utterly surprising lack of archaeological traces where we might reasonably expect them to be.

There are, in summary, no lack of verifiable primary sources from the period and places intimately associated with the early years of Islam and the subsequent Arab conquest. It is just that these sources are steadfastly ignored by those wedded to the traditional account of Islam's origins. We are, in fact, left with a rejection of actual primary sources in favor of much later secondary sources (albeit ones claiming to be based on primary oral traditions).

One of the basic approaches underlying this book will be to do everything possible to rely on as wide a range of sources as can be found. Particular attention will be paid to previously neglected primary sources. This will

not only help us to evaluate the claims made about the reliability of the oral tradition contained in the *hadiths*, Ibn Ishaq, Al-Tabari and others, it may also open our eyes to an entirely different world from the one presented so confidently in these canonical sources.

It is worth emphasizing again that care will be taken to fully reference all sources taken from the list above when they are referred to. By consulting the endnotes, the reader will, therefore, be able to ascertain whether these sources are being used in an accurate and historically responsible manner.

1.7. Chapter Summary

Islamic history is strongly contested, suggesting a high likelihood that the historical record was manipulated to serve and strengthen later partisan political positions.

Interaction with primary sources represents the gold standard of historical research. However, the standard Islamic account rests on secondary sources mostly compiled about two to three centuries after the events they claim to describe.

These secondary sources claim to be a written record of reliable oral traditions stretching back to the time of Muhammad. There are, however, several serious objections to the idea that oral traditions in general, and these in particular, could have been flawlessly preserved.

Many of those working on the early history of Islam neglect to practice rigorous source criticism on the classic sources generally used for this purpose, choosing to accept them on face-value. This is an inconsistent (given the vigorous investigation into the reliability of the sources underpinning other periods) and unscientific approach.

There are, contrary to popular belief, a vast range of non-Islamic primary sources that we can draw upon to reconstruct the history of the Arabian Peninsula in the 6th - 8th centuries CE.
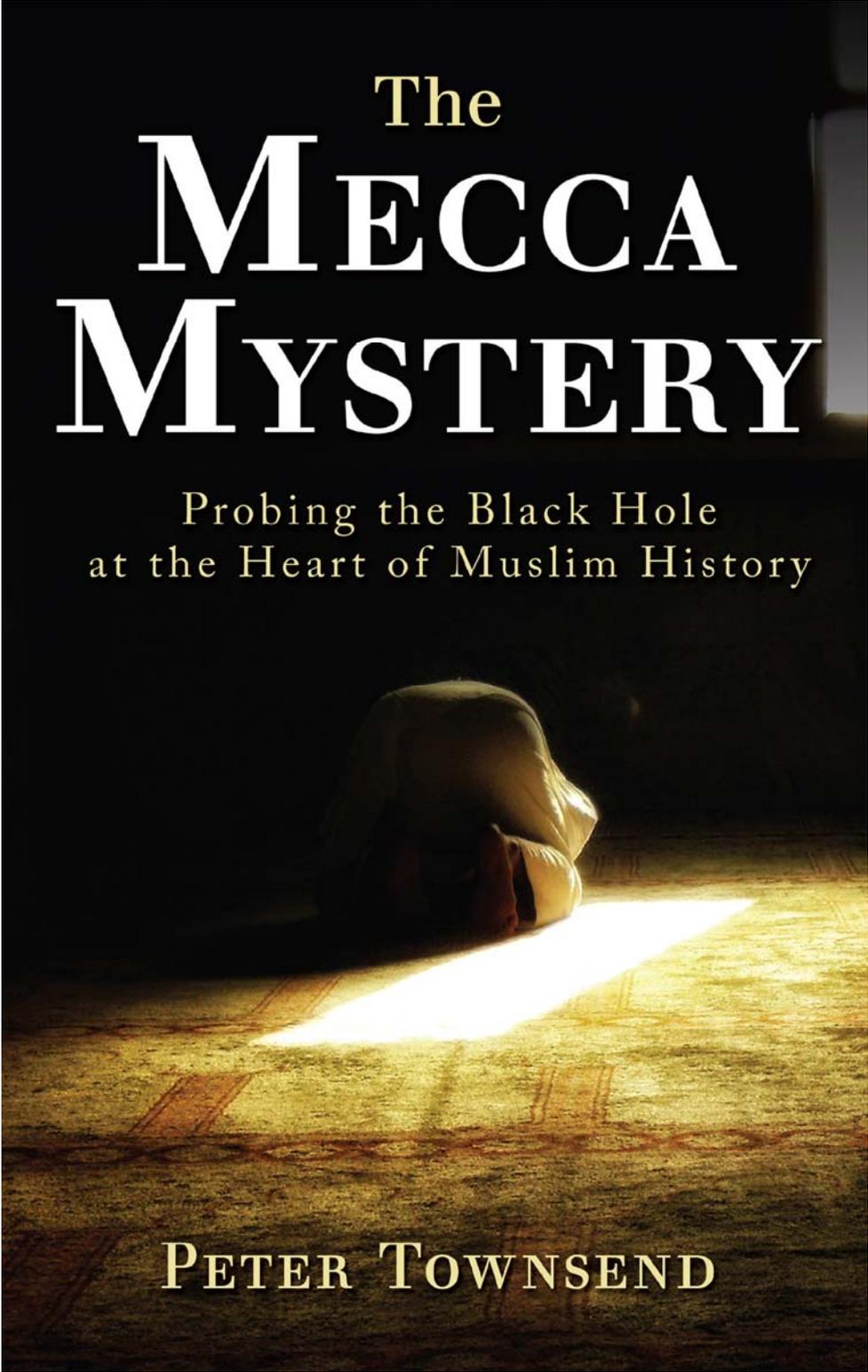
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