

Issues in historiography of Islamic origins

Disclaimer: interpretation of the documentary evidence is contested and you'll need to read each scholar carefully to see where they agree and disagree with each other; also documentary evidence is contingent on new discoveries or new evidence which results in re-reading of older discoveries

1) The problem:

Literary evidence for the beginnings of Islam post-date the time of Muhammad by ~100 years

E.g., earliest hadith compilations and sira texts: *Muwatta'* of Mālik ibn Anas (d. 796), the *Muṣannaf* of 'Abd ar-Razzāq (d. 827), the *Maḡhāzī* of Muḡammad al-Wāqidī (d. 822), the *Sīra* of Ibn Hishām (d. 833), the *Ṭabaqah* of Ibn Sa'd (d. 845), and the *Musnad* of Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855)

Documentary evidence for early Islam is sparse and does not attest key words/concepts until the establishment of the late Umayyad and early 'Abbasid dynasties

Types of surviving evidence: inscriptions (official buildings, graffiti, tombstones), coins, papyri

Examples:

- Dome of the Rock inscriptions, commissioned by caliph 'Abd al-Malik, dated 72/691-92 (his name has been replaced by al-Ma'mun's (r. 198-218/813-933))
- From 22/643 coins, papyri, building inscriptions, and tombstones have the full basmala but do not mention Muhammad or "rasul/prophet"
- Attestations of the shahada on coins, inscriptions, and papyri show addition of second part mentioning Muhammad starting only in 65/685
- From 64/683-4 inscriptions use term "amir al-mu'minin" but not "khalifa/caliph"
- Terms "muslim" and "islam" only appear in evidence after 72/691; earlier evidence uses the term "mu'min/believer"

Is this an argument from absence?

2) Academic response to the problem:

Traditionalist school (e.g., Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (1953) and *Muhammad at Medina* (1956))

Skeptics (e.g. Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies* (1889-1890); Joseph Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (1967)); Albrecht Noth, *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition* (1973))

Revisionists (e.g., John Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Mileu* (1978); Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism* (1977); Yehuda Nevo and Judith Koren, *Crossroads to Islam* (2003); Fred Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers* (2010); Stephen Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet* (2011); Karl-Heinz Ohlig, *Early Islam* (2013))

3) Implications of the debate

Dating a distinct Muslim religious/communal identity

Details of the historical Muhammad (dating, location, events, content of movement)
Dating canonization/composition of Qur'an