

The Earliest Writings
on the Life of Muḥammad

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Andreas Görke and Gregor Schoeler

**The Earliest Writings
on the Life of Muḥammad:**

The 'Urwa Corpus and the Non-Muslim Sources

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Preface and Acknowledgments

The first (German) edition of this book was published in 2008 by The Darwin Press in Princeton, New Jersey, as No. 24 of the prestigious series “Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam” (SLAEI). Since the work was written in German and published in the United States, it somewhat “fell between chair and bench”: Not being written in English, it did not find wide circulation in English-speaking countries; and in German-speaking countries, and not only there, it was often difficult to obtain. Moreover, there was no effective advertising on the part of the publisher. We are therefore very pleased that the book can now be published in a second edition by Gerlach Press as part of the reprint of the entire SLAEI series.

The most important revision of this new edition is the addition of the 11th and 12th chapters. The 11th chapter “The earliest non-Muslim writings on Muḥammad” is intended to address the criticism raised by one critic, namely that the book did not live up to its title (“The earliest reports on the life of Muḥammad”) which in the opinion of this critic was not fulfilled. It should be noted that a small inaccuracy remains: of all the six non-Muslim sources discussed, only one gives an actual *account* of Muḥammad’s life, while the others just mention his name, allude to, or briefly report on, his emergence as a prophet, his character, his conquests, and the like. The 12th chapter “Hagarism revisited” contains a refutation of the Hagarism hypothesis. This refutation is based on the new revised editions and improved translations of the non-Muslim sources presented and dealt with in the previous chapter. The 13th chapter comprises comments on and responses to criticisms that were raised in reviews of the book. Longer additions, corrections and further discussions form the 14th chapter.

The newly added parts were written by Gregor Schoeler.

In terms of content, the text of the first edition has been mostly unchanged in this new edition. Obvious errors have been corrected, minor deletions and additions, such as references to recently discovered sources and new literature, have been made.

Quotations from the Koran are based on the translation of *The Study Quran*, edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. The scholarly transcription follows to the rules of the Journal *Arabica*.

First and foremost, our thanks go to Mr Kai-Henning Gerlach, publisher of Gerlach Press for his support. The financing of work contracts was made possible by the Fonds zur Förderung der Studien auf dem Gebiet der ägyptologischen, orientalischen und klassischen Altertumskunde der Universität Basel. We express our sincere thanks to the President of the Fund, Professor Susanne Bickel, and the members of the Commission. We are also grateful to Dr Nicolet Boekhoff-van der Voort (Nijmegen) for sharing her findings about the further transmission of ‘Urwa materials to al-Zuhri and his disciples; Dr Gunhild Graf (Lörrach) for copy-editing the final text, converting the transcription, and revising the index; Professor Tim Greenwood (St Andrews) for providing a new translation (with a linguistic and historical commentary) of the relevant parts of Sebeos’ *Armenian History*; Dr Lutz Ilisch (Tübingen) for his expert advice on numismatic issues relating to early Umayyad period; Mr Michael Marx (Potsdam) for providing comprehensive information on the current state of research on the Koranic text; Professor Jens Scheiner (Göttingen) for his detailed advice on issues concerning the chronology of the early Islamic conquests; Dr G. Bert Thompson for his linguistic revision of our initial draft; and Professor Michael Waltisberg (Heidelberg) for his valuable assistance with the problems presented by the Syriac texts.

Edinburgh and Basel, July 2023
Andreas Görke and Gregor Schoeler

Preface to the First [German] Edition (2008)

“Method is indispensable; but it must be developed from the material itself [...]. To discuss it is like tuning musical instruments; what one wants to hear is the concert.”

J. van Ess, *Der Fehlgriff des Gelehrten*, 391-92.

In today’s world, a scholar, or someone who wants to be one, can become famous by promoting and spreading a provocative thesis. It does not matter whether this thesis is serious or not. There are plenty of examples from various disciplines.

In Islamic studies, a provocative thesis of this kind might be that there was no prophet named Muḥammad. Anyone who is aggressive enough in promoting this view can be sure that some newspapers will print his article and thus make it accessible to a wide audience. It is convenient for the disseminator of such a thesis that he does not need to master the most important source language of Islamic studies, Arabic, in order to produce it. His native language and English are fully sufficient as “source” languages for this purpose; he can find everything necessary in secondary literature in these languages.

Works and articles that question the value of the Muslim sources on Muḥammad and early Islam, in part or in their entirety, exist in sufficient numbers, and have done so for more than 100 years.

The fact is that there are no contemporary Muslim sources about the people and events of the early Islamic era. Apart from the Qur’ān, the existing sources with a specifically Islamic reference were all written between 150 and 250 years after the events – at least in the form in which they have come down to us today. This has been known for a long time, however, and as early as the beginning of the last century, a methodological discussion arose in Islamic Studies in which there were “believers” – today one would say “sanguine scholars” – and “sceptics”. Even in this discussion, the best experts in the field at the time, Theodor Nöldeke and Carl Heinrich Becker, fully aware of the problematic character of the early Islamic tradition, rejected extreme scepticism towards the sources, and with good reasons.

The renewed round of discussions on the authenticity and historical value of the early Islamic tradition, which began in Britain towards the end of the 1970s,

continues to this day. In recent times, the methodological discussion on the side of the “sceptics“, as Josef van Ess has aptly remarked, has taken on an increasingly parasitic character (loc. cit., p. 391). The matter is now less of a concern than the method. Thus, complicated procedures are devised and used for investigations that are only meant to prove that this and that, and ultimately, *everything* the Muslim tradition says, is not true. What is particularly annoying is the arrogance with which one’s own “critical” point of view is often sold as the higher intelligence. This then culminates in the assertion that the Islamic prophet did not even exist as a historical figure.

At the same time enough contributions have come from the other side to show that it is indeed possible to engage with the surviving accounts of the first century of the Hiġra (7th century CE) in a scientifically fruitful way and also gain historical insights from them. Josef van Ess and Harald Motzki may be mentioned here as examples of scholars who have successfully followed this path.

In the following investigation, which pursues the same goal with regard to the accounts of the life of the Prophet Muḥammad, a procedure has been applied which, to our knowledge, has not been used for this purpose before, namely working on the basis of a corpus that is as comprehensive as possible. In our case, this is the corpus of those traditions about the life of Muḥammad that are attributed to the early historian ‘Urwa b. al-Zubayr (fl. in the last third of the first century A.H.). The evaluation of the corpus, as will be shown, very often allows to establish for certain or with a high degree or probability whether a tradition originates with ‘Urwa (i.e., dates from the first century A.H.) or not. Furthermore, our aim is to answer the following questions, among others: Which material did ‘Urwa, who is generally regarded as the actual founder of Muslim historiography, collect? On which events from the life of the Islamic Prophet did he report? In what way did he collect and pass on this material? Which people were involved? And finally: How authentic is this material? Does it contain a historical core?

We owe the fact that we were able to carry out the work primarily to the Swiss National Science Foundation, which approved a three-year project entitled “Foundations for a new biography of Muḥammad: compilation and evaluation of the corpus of traditions attributed to ‘Urwa b. al-Zubayr”. We are especially grateful to Dr. Rudolf Bolzern, who from the beginning accompanied the project with interest and goodwill and addressed all our concerns with great willingness.

Within the framework of this project, which ran from November 2002 to October 2005, lic. phil. Tanja Duncker and Dr. phil. Andreas Görke, created the corpus and set up a database. Tanja Duncker then worked in particular on the material that forms the basis of chapters 4 and 5 and Andreas Görke on that underlying chapters 3, 8 and 9. Gregor Schoeler dealt with the material underlying chapters 2, 6 and 7; in some cases, he was able to draw on his own earlier work in the chapters in question.

Gregor Schoeler spent a particularly fruitful academic period during a research sabbatical in spring 2005 at the Orient Institute in Beirut. We would like to thank the director of the Institute, Professor Dr Manfred Kropp, and the librarian, Dr Wolf-Dieter Lemke, as well as his staff, for their courtesy and help.

Throughout the project work, we were in fruitful exchange with Professor Harald Motzki, University of Nijmegen, and his assistant, Dr Nicolet Boekhoff-van der Voort, who were working on a similar project on 'Urwa's disciple al-Zuhrī. During mutual visits with working sessions as well as by correspondence, it was possible to exchange experiences, compare and supplement collected material, and discuss and solve problems. The cooperation was highly enjoyable, and we sincerely thank our colleagues in the Netherlands for their willingness to cooperate and their help.

Partial aspects of the project were presented and discussed at various academic conferences: the *Deutscher Orientalistentag* in Halle, 2004 (by Andreas Görke), the Congress of the *Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants* in Krakow, 2004 (by Gregor Schoeler) and the conference *From Jahiliyya to Islam* in Jerusalem, 2006 (by Andreas Görke). We would like to thank the participants of these conferences for their comments and constructive criticism.

In the final months of the project, Andreas Görke and Gregor Schoeler began writing the present study. Andreas Görke wrote chapters 1 (Introduction), 3 (Hiġra), 8 (al-Ḥudaybiya), 9 (The Conquest of Mecca) as well as the English summary of the present book; he also prepared the bibliography and the index. Gregor Schoeler wrote chapters 2 (Beginning of Revelation), 4 (Battle of Badr), 5 (Battle of Uḥud), 6 (Slander of 'Ā'īša), 7 (Battle of the Trench) and the second part of the conclusion (209ff.).

[...]

The *Fonds zur Förderung der Studien auf dem Gebiet der ägyptologischen, orientalischen und klassischen Altertumskunde* of the University of Basel enabled us, through follow-up funding, to finalise the manuscript of the book and make it ready for printing. For this, we would like to express our sincere thanks to the President of the Fund, Professor Pascal Simonius, and the members of the Commission.

Finally, very sincere thanks are due to Professor Lawrence Conrad, University of Hamburg, and Mr Ed Breisacher, Darwin Press, for including the publication in the series of *Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam*.

Berlin and Basel, August 2007
Andreas Görke and Gregor Schoeler

The Current State of Research on the Authenticity of the Early Islamic Tradition

“A central argument [...] will continue to be that the tradition offers much material which, if in need of careful examination, is still of historical value for the early period.”

A. Noth, *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition*, 24.

In the preface to the first (German) edition of this book, we commented on the discussion that began in the 1970s about the authenticity and historical value of the early Islamic tradition. This discussion between “sanguine scholars” on the one hand and “sceptics” or “revisionists” on the other – to use the terminology still in use today – is still going on; however, the partisans of the “sceptics” have shrunk to a small group in the meantime.

As far as the Qur’ān is concerned, the assessment of the time of its creation, collection and further transmission has now radically changed, mainly due to the discovery and study of the oldest Qur’ānic copies known to date, especially a palimpsest from Ṣan‘ā’ (probably from the first half of the first century) and a codex from Paris and Saint Petersburg (probably from the third quarter of the 1st century). The scholarly investigation of these and other discoveries took place, on the one hand, within the framework of two large projectsⁱ and, on the other hand, through research work by individuals.ⁱⁱ

i The research project “Corpus Coranicum” (2007-2024) of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities (directed by Angelika Neuwirth and Michael Marx) and the “German Project for the Restoration and Cataloguing of Early Islamic Manuscripts in Yemen” (1980-1996) (directed successively by Albrecht Noth, Gerd-Rüdiger Puin and Hans-Caspar Graf von Bothmer; Chief Restorer: Ursula Dreibholz). – For this project see Dreibholz, *Early Quran Fragments*.

ii Sadeghi and Goudarzi, “Ṣan‘ā’ 1”. – Sadeghi and Bergmann, “The Codex of a Companion” (on the dating of the codex cf. *ibid.*, 353 and 364.) – Déroche, *La transmission écrite du Coran* (on the dating of the Codex Parisino-Petropolitanus cf. *ibid.*, 152 and 157). – van Putten, “The Grace of God”, especially 1-2, 16-17. – Hilali, *The Ṣan‘ā’ Palimpsest; eadem*, “Le palimpseste de Ṣan‘ā’”.

The late Patricia Crone, “our field’s most articulate skeptic”,ⁱⁱⁱ who, like many other “sceptics”, long insisted on the hypothesis that the Qur’ān was not redacted until the reign of the Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 685-705),^{iv} revised her view under the impression of the results of the edition and examination of the palimpsest from Ṣan‘ā’, whose text is most likely non-‘Uṭmānic. In the Preface to her *Collected Studies* (2016), she declared: “The Qur’ān existed by the time when tradition says it existed. There is no longer any good reason to doubt that ‘Uṭmān set up a commission that produced a Qur’ān.”^v Although Crone thus explicitly acknowledged the correctness of a core assertion of the Islamic tradition, she was no longer able to take the further step of recognising and using the Islamic tradition as a useful source of our knowledge of the life of Muḥammad and early Islam, in addition to the Qur’ān itself.^{vi}

Sean Anthony, in his book *Muhammad*, has acknowledged the scholarly significance that Patricia Crone’s intervention, though based on false hypotheses, brought; he writes: “Crone’s intervention was indispensable for the field, a much needed revolt against a stubbornly dominant strain of Orientalist positivism that took these texts as simple records of historical facts.”^{vii} I (G.S.) had already given a similar assessment of the performance of the “sceptics” in my book *Charakter und Authentie in 1996*.^{viii} Today, however, I ask myself whether the decades of work of the “revisionists” has not also had negative consequences for the development of our field. In the studies on the origin and transmission of the Qur’ān, for example, the elaboration and dissemination of the various hypotheses about a late dating of the holy book (final editing only around 700, as Crone and others assumed for a long time; or even only around 800, as Wansbrough thought) absorbed a large part of the research on the subject for decades and led many researchers astray.

Michael Cook, Patricia Crone’s co-author in the book *Hagarism*, has taken a scholarly development different from her. He, who for a long time was regarded

iii So Anthony, *Muhammad*, 3.

iv For this hypothesis see 239 with fn. 881.

v Crone, *The Qur’ānic Pagans and Related Matter*: Author’s Preface, XIII.

vi This is also evident from the fact that she did not revise the article “What do we actually know about Muhammad” published on the Internet in 2008, in which the Islamic tradition is not taken into account at all (www.opendemocracy.net/faith-europe_islam/mohammed_3866.jsp).

vii Anthony, *Muhammad*, 4. – In assessing Crone’s achievement, Anthony was aware of the fact that her pessimistic attitude to the *sīra-maḡāzī* material was by no means isolated or particularly new; he then refers to Paret’s essay “Die Lücke”.

viii Schoeler, *Charakter und Authentie*, 23-24 (= *The Biography*, 17-18). I had also dealt there (p. 9-10) in detail with the first “round of discussions” on the authenticity of early Islamic tradition, which took place in the first quarter of the 19th century and whose protagonists were L. Caetani and A. Lammens.

alongside her and John Wansbrough as another main representative of the “New Scepticism”, has demonstrated in groundbreaking work the correctness of core-assertions of the Muslim tradition about the regional codices of the Qur’ān and their variants (*qirā’āt*).^{ix} On the basis of this research, Cook has been described as a “detractor of the revisionist camp” and consequently, along with Harald Motzki, has been listed among the “neo-traditionalists”.^x

As far as the Ḥadīth and the Prophet’s biography are concerned, among those who “have advanced the exploitation of transmitted texts for the ... historiography of the early Islamic period... with innovative ... contributions”^{xi} in these fields, the late Harald Motzki should be mentioned first. Of his achievements, only the *isnād-cum-matn* analysis, (further) developed by him simultaneously with the authors of this book should be mentioned here.^{xii} This method in many cases makes it possible to reconstruct texts that were in circulation in the first century AH, to determine who was responsible for their original form, and therefore to date traditions and thus shorten the “gap in the tradition about the earliest Islam”^{xiii} by several decades. It has subsequently been successfully tested and applied by several researchers (e.g., J. Scheiner, P. Pavlovitch, N. Boekhoff-van der Voort, U. Mitter). The question of the value of this method, however, sparked a heated discussion at the international level, in which criticism came from both the “sceptical”^{xiv} and the “conservative” side.^{xv} A balanced appraisal showing the prospects and limitations of *isnād-cum-matn* analysis has been written by D. Anthony in his book *Muhammad*.^{xvi}

In the first edition of this book, we developed and applied another method for proving the authenticity of reports from the first century AH, which is based on a comprehensive corpus of traditions going back to a single authority. According to this method, the historicity of a tradition attributed to the early scholar ‘Urwa b. al-Zubayr (d. 712-13) can be considered proven if two or more transmitters of ‘Urwa

ix Cook, “The Stemma”; cf. Sadeghi and Bergmann, “The Codex”, especially 364; 367-369; see also van Putten, “The Grace of God”; Dutton, “Some notes”.

x Quoted from Sadeghi and Goudarzi, “Ṣan‘ā’ 1”, 4.

xi Thus Scheiner in his obituary on “Harald Motzi”, in *Der Islam* 96 (2019), 1-9; cf. 1.

xii Motzki never claimed to have invented this method; he repeatedly referred to J. Kramers and Josef van Ess as his predecessors; see Görke and Motzki, “Tilman Nagel’s Kritik”, 515, with note 82.

xiii This is the title of an important essay by R. Paret (see below, note 35).

xiv Shoemaker, “In Search of ‘Urwa’s *Sīra*”; id., [Review of] Görke and Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte*; see the response of Görke, Schoeler and Motzki, “First century sources”.

xv Nagel, “‘Authentizität’”; see the answers of Görke and Motzki, “Tilman Nagel’s Kritik”, and Schoeler, “Tilman Nagel’s ‘Authentizität’”.

xvi Anthony, *Muhammad*, 5-7.

quote this tradition, traced back to ‘Urwa, independently of each other with the same or a similar text (criterion of multiple transmission). Particularly emphasized here is the attempt to prove that the letters attributed to ‘Urwa to the caliphs ‘Abd al-Malik and al-Walīd, which were handed down like normal traditions, are authentic. Anthony, in his aforementioned book, has cautiously agreed with our proof of evidence and brought new arguments for the authenticity of ‘Urwa’s letters.^{xvii}

Anthony and most reviewers of the first edition of our book agree that with the *isnād-cum-matn* analysis and the evaluation of the ‘Urwa corpus^{xviii} procedures have been developed that allow researchers to make statements about the beginnings of the Islamic historical tradition in the first century AH. However, there is still disagreement on the question of how large or small the gap between the events in Muḥammad’s life and the oldest reports about them remains.^{xix} With this second edition of the book, we hope to substantiate a hypothesis we proposed earlier, namely that ‘Urwa’s reports,^{xx} which he received for the most part from contemporaries – often close relatives, sometimes even eyewitnesses – from *one* generation before him, still correctly preserve the main features of the events.^{xxi}

We hope that making this book available to a wider audience through this revised and expanded English edition will allow more readers to appreciate and critically engage with its arguments and to get a better insight into the development of the earliest Muslim traditions on the life of Muḥammad.

xvii Ibid., 102ff.; see especially 103 and 104 (Figure 10: Chains of transmission for ‘Urwa’s letters).

xviii “We even know what one of al-Zuhrī’s teachers, ‘Urwah ibn al-Zubayr, probably said.” (Anthony, *ibid.*, 5).

xix See below, 251 with fn. 943, 256 f.

xx We are talking, here, of course, about the *critically sighted* reports of ‘Urwa.

xxi See below, 248, 256.