The Origins and early development of Islam: problems and perspectives

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Types and characteristics of evidence (Muslim and non Muslim) we have for the formative period of Islam.

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1) **Introduction**

While studying the history of Islam, we notice that no scholars, either western or Muslim, had a critical approach to the sources for reconstructing the early times before the middle of the nineteen century[1]. The only extant approach at that time was to consider the Muslim tradition reliable, even with some suspicions, for a trustworthy account of the early time of Islam. By the middle of the nineteen century, a new consideration of sources started raising up many issues about them and their reliability. Other kinds of evidence has been taken into consideration bringing scholars to reassessing Muslim tradition, which is the biggest font we have and which in some cases has been refused to be deemed as valid. This development of studies naturally brings us to the necessity of analysis of our materials. What we have to give an account of the first decades of Islam is a huge amount of material that seems to cover many aspects of Islamic origins and give details about important features such as, for example, civil wars, the conquests (*futūh al-buldā*n) and also religious aspects. It is necessary, in order to comprehend the problems concerning the data, to classify all the documentary evidence and to observe what we can exploit and what we should omit.

The evidence we have can be divided in four different categories: 1) Muslim literary tradition, This includes all the Muslim writings regarding the early years of Islam. Biographies of the prophet Muhammad (*Sīr*as) and of his companions, texts about Islamic law (*sharī‘*a), commentaries of the Koran (*tafsīr*s), chronicles written down by historians of that time, the sayings attributed to the prophet (*hadī*ths) are the components of this type of material; 2) The Koran, we prefer to keep the holy book of Islamic religion separate from the previous category because of his importance and because of some other aspects regarding the way it was fixed and of his the contents, many times allusive, we find in it; 3) Archaeological evidence, I will write about archaeological finds like inscriptions on coins and on building, documents about taxes (mostly coming from Egypt) and early Islamic construction; 4) Non-Muslim literary production, this section is about all the writings from populations of other religions. Texts in Persian, Greek, Armenian written by Christians or Jews will be here discussed. In this essay, I will examine each one of these categories separately, describing first in what they consist and then highlighting their strengths (if any) and their weaknesses. A conclusion will elucidate about connections between the four classes of evidence and will also include my considerations.

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[1] Donner F.M., Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginning of the Islamic Historical Writings, Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1998, pp. 5-6.

2) **Muslim literary tradition**

As mentioned in the introduction, this section is concern with all the texts awardable to Muslim authors which, with the exception of the biographies of the prophet Muhammad (*Sīras*), are all datable from the middle of the ninth century A.D. onwards. The most important works in this field are, without any doubt, al-*Tābarī* Ta*'rī*kh al-*Rusū*l wa al-M*ulū*k and al-*Balā*dh*urī* Tarikh al-*Buldā*n,[2] nevertheless many other important texts are available and useful for a valid research. All this literary material was written down more or less two century after the death of the prophet (632 A.D.). These writers could only base their manuscripts on oral transmission because since the beginning and even before the revelations the inhabitants of Arabia has kept on referring orally all the events happening to them. This practice has been the only way to spread of information for the first two centuries whose events have a central importance for Islamic and world history. The Muslim tradition divides the contents transmitted in two separates groups, khabar and *hadī*th. Khabar, (plural is *Ahkbā*r) ,news in Arabic, consist in those sayings referring to historical events such wars, peace treaties or caliphs' life whereas *hadī*ths are saying attributed directly to the prophet whose sum constitute the Sunna, a fundamental source to lead believers' life. Both *Ahkbā*r and *hadī*ths thus passed by word of mouth for a long time before nineteen century scholars wrote them down. The reliability of the chain of transmitter (*Isnā*d) was the central problem for these writers who had to valuate the trustworthiness of all the person who carried the message through such a long time. Unfortunately we do not have clear ideas about how these authors judged the authority of *Isnā*ds except for vague ideas of "suitability"[3], but considering historians' aim to report fact as objective as possible[4] it is easy to suppose that unquestionable authority of transmitters was an essential condition to take the reports into consideration. This criteria leads us to think that not all the *akhbā*r were collected but a large part has been regarded as spurious, so left out then therefore lost.

Although the system of transmission of the *Sī*ra has been the same of the other compilations, we need to indicate one difference concerning the codification time of the biographies of the prophet. The creation of literary evidence about prophet's life passed trough two phases. It is likely that during his life people close to him started to collect stories and accounts both oral and written and so continued religious authorities in Medina and Iraq after his death. Under the Umayyad period a

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[2] Humphreys R.S., Islamic History A framework for Inquiry, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1991, pp. 72-73.
[3] Humphreys R.S., Islamic History A framework for Inquiry, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1991, p. 73.
[4] Humphreys points out differences between nowadays historians and medieval muslim historians. The most important feature for them was not to interpret events but to report them as reliable as possible.

process of chronological fixing started to take place, and even if some earlier other scholars may have classified some reports, but the first version of Muhammad life that has come to us is Ibn I*shā*q (d. 751 A.D.) *Sī*rat al-Nabi whose lessons where reported by Ibn H*ishā*m (d. 813 A.D.) some decades later. There is enough evidence to believe that this first account shaped quite remarkably all the following works, some modern academics have argued that *Ibn Ishā*q *Sī*ra is the only source about prophet's life within Muslim tradition[5].

In spite of the notable dimension of some of these manuscript (al-*Tā*bar*ī*'s T*a'rī*kh is really impressive) a clear and broad-accepted version of what really happened in the early decades of Islam is almost impossible. The issues of late fixation and reliability of *isnā*d have divided scholar's opinion bringing them to many different hypothesis and conclusion. A positive approach has been taken by some intellectuals (Horovitz[6], Bausani[7]) who accept a revision of the sources but don't regard as it as a corruption of the historical events. They support this theory because of the need of the new community to have a unique cannon of statements. Especially during the time of the first four caliphs (632-661) the necessity of unification was growing among the believers for the reason that civil wars, caused mainly by different interpretation of the prophet message, were taking place[8].

A much more doubtful view became to be popular among scholars after Goldziher's work about *hadī*ths. In his Muhammedanische Studien, he develops an analysis mainly about prophet's sayings claiming them as spurious. He bases his theory on the demonstration of falsity of many *hadī*ths, which were considered compelling both by Muslim and early western scholars, therefore also *Isnā*d had to be deemed as untrustworthy[9]. Although his work concerns only *hadī*ths and does not investigate historical events (*akhbā*r), his contents were taken seriously under consideration by historians who saw a critical approach applicable to the body of historical texts. Wellhausen studies utilize a similar pattern to examine *Ahkbā*r and *isnā*d. He affirmed that a genuine tradition was certainly extant in the early times of Islam, but another one was born nearly contemporarily and corroboration was his *raison d'etre*. During his first decades Islam spread out from the centre of Arabia to other lands different for religion and cultures, this phenomena pressed on the new community the need to face a series of problems concerning adaptation to the new conquered

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[5] Crone P., Slaves on Horses, Malta, Cambridge University Press, 1980, p. 4.
[6] Humphreys R.S., Islamic History A framework for Inquiry, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1991, p. 82.
[7] Bausani A., Il Corano Introduzione, Traduzione e Commento, Bergamo, BUR, 2001, p. XLIX.
[8] Humphreys R.S., Islamic History A framework for Inquiry, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1991, p. 82.
[9] Donner F.M., Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginning of the Islamic Historical Writings, Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1998, pp. 12-13.

populations[10]. Thus tradition was constantly re-arranged in order to respond to new necessities which new lands and new conquests gradually created. Even though this feature was considered the most important, other aspects such as difficulty of transmission or scattering of transmitters were regarded as corruptors of reports. Notwithstanding the particular characteristics of Islamic tradition we can still, according to some scholars[11], accept it for some general trends and, with a careful analysis, make use of it to achieve a reliable idea of the events.

A different and more radical approach was taken later by other researchers[12] consisting in the total refuse to recognize all the Islamic tradition as reliable. Their argumentations come firstly from a study of the political, religious and social issues and secondly from the distribution of the transmitters in the time that elapsed between the beginning of revelation and the first writings. As mention before, throughout this long period of time historical facts had brought Arabs in contact with many other populations. This changing created the conditions not only to make communications more difficult , but also to produce forgeries. It is likely that the bulk of information has been hidden, twisted or simply invented in conformity with author's politically view, belonging to a certain religious group or devotion to his leader. In this way Muslim tradition is deemed merely as an attempt to support politically and religiously his past, and the proper use we have to consider is an account of which idea eighth or ninth century Muslim society had of the beginning and spread of their religion.

If we take under consideration criticism to *Sīr*as we find more or less the same attitudes taken towards the rest of Islamic tradition. Scholars like Bausani think that, even if *Ibn Hishā*m adapted a number of *Ibn Ishā*q sayings, there is a valid kernel going back to the prophet[13]. It is impossible to believe that such a detailed body of information has been invented ex novo. On the other hand we have very different opinions based on the religious features that historical time might have required. Being in contact with communities of Jews and Christians, Muslims needed their prophet to have specifics attributes to be able to produce the same outcome of the other monotheistic religions. This is the atmosphere where biographies of Muhammad took shape, naturally historical reliability was not an aspect in question but the need of a proper religious tradition was dictating the terms for this work. According to this view *hadī*ths and commentaries of Koran (*tafsī*r) have been the sources which the Koran has been written from.

[10] Noth A., The Early Arabic Historical Tradition, Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1994, pp. 6-15.
[11] Noth A., The Early Arabic Historical Tradition, Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1994, pp. 6-15.
[12] Donner, F.M., Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginning of the Islamic Historical Writings, Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1998, p. 23.
[13] Bausani A., Il Corano Introduzione, Traduzione e Commento, Bergamo, BUR, 2001, pp. XX-XXI.

3) **The Koran**

In the Koran we find not only theological material but also a corpus of sayings concerning jurisdictional aspects, stories about the prophets, moral advices and ritual practices. Helpful information about the early decades of Islam in the Koran are quite difficult to be identified because of his fragmented and scattered body. We may find two verses referring to the same episode in two different and apparently unconnected *sū*ras, this particular aspect, according to some scholars, is best explained by the way it has been transmitted orally before being written down. Another remarkable issue is the allusive feature of the contents, many interpretations are possible, creating uncertainties not just among western scholars but also among Muslim community. An emblematic example is the *sū*ra of Yusuf (cor. 12:4-101) where the story of the biblical character is narrated. To a western reader the body of the story will indeed seem to have no order and there will be an impression of confusion, whereas in the Muslim history there were different types of understandings, from the *khārigī* intransigence that regarded it as apocryphal to the sufi interpretation whose allegories have influenced literatures of different populations[14]. Some names of places, such holy land (Kor 5:21) or some other localities (Kor 9:101) are mentioned in the holy book. So also are names of the prophets, Muhammad is cited four times, nonetheless what we have are not specific information or accounts but some allusive references which make it complicated to extrapolate any reliable report[15].

Muslims have their own tradition about how the Koran was first transmitted among prophet's companion and than finally collected some decades after Muhammad's death. It is said that while revelations went down to Muhammad, his closest followers started to memorize all his sayings and to spread them in Mecca. When the followers increased their number first writings took place initially on material that could be found near them such as animal bones, palm leaves etc.etc. The successors of the prophet started after his death to collect all the writing available up to when caliph *'Uthmā*n made his final compilation. According to Muslim tradition *'Uthmā*n ordered the destruction, in order to avoid confusion and misunderstandings, of all the other extant versions of the Koran and send one of his copy, which is the one we have nowadays, to the provinces of the empire. We have no evidence to substantiate this story or not but it does not seem to be totally implausible, anyway it is likely that not all the copies were destructed and some of them containing modifications from the 'utmani compilation survived in the first three, four centuries of Islam. A famous jurist called *Mā*lik (d. 795) thought that destroying of the other compilation of the Koran

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[14] Bausani A., Il Corano Introduzione, Traduzione e Commento, Bergamo, BUR, 2001, pp. XLVIII-LXVI.
[15] Cook M., Il Corano, Torino, Einaudi Editore, 2001, p. 143.

was a duty of the Caliph, this quote gives us an idea of what might be going there during those years[16]. For a Muslim believer problems of authenticity about Koran obviously do not exist, western scholar in the last two centuries have started an analysis about trustworthiness of sources and contents coming to different conclusion.

We have no evidence of the existence of the Koran before 690/700 A.D.[17], and as for the literary sources we have to take into consideration the means of transmission. Despite the above mentioned writings on animal bones, palm leaves etc., the main way of maintaining the revelation was human memory, followers of the new religion were keeping in mind God's word for quite a long while before being written down. Even the strongest apology to Arabs memory has to admit that such way created incomprehension, differences in quoting and discordant versions. Although we can not claim to have original sayings, the main body of the Koran is attributable to Muhammad and eventual corruptions regard only order of sentences or some not relevant addition. This view is not shared by a consistent number of Orientalists who apply the same critical method used for the Muslim tradition.

 The first scholar who regarded as spurious the core of the Koran is De Sacy whose theory considered needs within the community of believers the real issue thus transmitters simply invented new stories as required by the historical conditions. His example for supporting his thesis was taken from the episode in which ʿUmār (the second caliph), when he came to know about prophet's death, did not believe that a messenger of God could die so Abu Bakr invented a verses (Kor 3:144) in response to this idea of immortality of prophets. Later theories[18] regarded Koran, similarly to Muslim tradition, merely as a product of historical changes and developments, it was written down even two or three century later than classical accounts say, than dated back to give the religion a coherent history. Another supporting factor is that many features of Koran and more largely of Islam were shaped on rabbinical Jewish model. The figure of Muhammad, some religious practices as the prohibition of eating pork are to be accredited as borrowings from Jewish customs. According to this conjecture the Koran can not be use retrospectively for historical reconstruction but only onwards from the date of his fixation.

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[16] Cook M., Il Corano, Torino, Einaudi Editore, 2001, p. 127.
[17] Crone P., Cook M. Hagarism, Malta, Cambridge Press University, 1977, p. 3.
[18] Humphreys R.S., Islamic History A framework for Inquiry, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1991, p. 84.

4) Archaeological evidence

Unfortunately we have no extant buildings form the time of the prophet and other kinds of archaeological material do not help us very much. We need to wait until the Umayyad period to see the first clear Islamic signs where besides the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and the Great Mosque in Damascus we find also coins, papyruses and other types of buildings. Coinage of the Umayyad period presents interesting aspects on his inscriptions, we find on them dates, name of the issuer which was not always the caliph but also other people like local governors and we see also Koran verses (we can see many of them in the British Museum, London, Islam section). This sort of evidence is complex when used for research but some information about economic trends or few political feature regarding sovereigns are possible to be found. From Egypt mainly, a number of document on papyruses written in Arabic, Coptic and Greek have survived intact. They refer particularly about administrative aspect of Umayyad life hence information like dating, names, and accounts on administration of provinces. In addition with the mosques there are other types of buildings classifiable in three main groups: governmental constructions, agricultural estates and fortresses built in the desert.

Even though many has been destroyed (Umayyad palace in Damascus) there are some evidence of edifices in Amman and Jerusalem but as yet studies has not been developed enough to obtain valid information. Some interesting suppositions about economical life can be made on estates, there centres might have been the most important incomes for the caliphate rather than taxation. Recent studies have raised the idea that a so-believed city like Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqī was actually an agricultural centre and instead of having settlements was a productive and trade point[19]. Castles build in the desert have come trough many possible interpretation of their use. It is likely that these constructions were used refuge places when plagues were decimating population in Damascus and other cities. Another possible hypothesis is linked to the time of conquest, during this period such buildings were useful to Arabs for tactical reasons, they were built in a familiar land for the invaders and the geographical position permitted a better control of the surroundings territories[20]. In this case as in the government palaces case more studies and researches need to be done.

A particular importance in this field is deserved by the Dome of the Rock (Qubbat al-Sakhra) in Jerusalem. This is the earliest Islamic construction available to us and it is also the first time in

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[19] Kennedy H., The Prophet and the Age of Caliphates, Singapore, Longman, 1986, p. 381.
[20] Lewis B., Gli Arabi nella Storia, Bari, Edizioni Laterza, 2001, p. 56.

history we see the word "Muslim"[21]. It was built through the Abd al-Malik time presumably under his order, a famous inscription with the name of the caliph, cancelled and replaced by a later Abbasid one al-Ma'mūn, gives us a date of the erection, 691-2 A.D. The reasons that pushed the caliph to order its construction are still issue of discussion. Among the many extant interpretations an historical interpretation attract our attention based on an anti-Umayyad scholar, al-*Ya'qubī*. Throughout the time of the fight between Umayyads and the medinese Ibn al-Zubayr, Palestine was seen as a possible alternative to Mecca, and the caliph was trying to swap Mecca with Jerusalem[22]. Before taking into account such narrative, many aspects such the holiness of Mecca for the Muslim community or the reliability of the source must be seriously analysed. Anyway there might be a core of truth that would started a debate among researchers. Another important feature of the dome of the rock is the inscriptions in it. A couple of Koran verses, the earliest available to us, are written inside the Dome but if we look at the Koran we find them in different order, this, of course, opens a series of questions and problems of interpretation such as "does this different order mean that Koran was still on the way of fixation?" Opinions are, as usual, discordant.

5) **Non-Muslim literary production**

In the few decades of the conquests, the new born religion made contact with a many population different for faith, language and social environment. Obviously it has brought deep transform not only to the new community but also to the conquered people. The amount of different texts is quite impressive. Even if many of them are not helpful and do not describe much the association with the Muslims we have material in Coptic, Aramaic, Greek, Hebrew, Persian written by authors from a similar number of different creeds and social environment. It is very likely that in this time the various cultures shared their customs. Events like conversions, re-conversion, exchanges of books have influenced the sources we are analyzing[23].

Although the new subjugated population were treated in more or less the same way, reactions to the conquerors has been different, hence the literary production is very divided, not only by religion, language or social background, but also for the consideration of the composers. A helpful distinction can be seen between the two different themes treated by Syrian monks and Armenian historian chronicles, while the first did not considered any aspects but their life in monasteries the seconds were concerned with a composed narration of the events. Another example is the different

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[21] Crone P., Cook M. Hagarism, Malta, Cambridge Press University, 1977, p. 10.
[22] E.I.II: Article "Qubbat al-Sakhra", Leiden E.J. Brill, 1986, Vol. 5, p. 298-299.
[23] Holyand, R.G., Seeing Islam as Other Saw it, Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1997, p. 32.

approach of some communities of Christians. The Nestorian catholic Timothy I (780-823) said "They (Muslims) deserve the love and the praise of all"[24] which sums up quite clearly his opinion about them. Texts written in Arabic and Syriac even if they do not love much the new coming, speaks rationally making a reliable account of conquerors' habits but in Greek writings the consideration is much more polemical and derogatory, they are regarded simply as enemies of God. In the case of Jews reactions has been undoubtedly positive, the new rulers were seen as liberators[25] and there have been cases of messianic speculation[26].

Apocalypticism has been a quite common feature among literature, such a thought paradigm was already widespread by the end of the sixth century. Evidence about it is found in both Christian and Zoroastrian society. There are some reasons that originates in religious issues but a central role is definitely played by the Muslim conquests whose rapidity and impact took over their empires and shook their confidence. Apocalyptic feelings were particularly prevalent during the siege of Constantinople when a eventual victory of the Muslim army was regarded as the coming of the Antichrist.

The poetry of pre-Islamic Arabia can be also used for reconstructing early Islam. His themes were mainly about beliefs and customs of society before the coming of the prophet and frequently names of families, persons or places were cited, fight between tribes, local wars and agreements between clan were common subjects of poetry. The main problem is analogous to that of the Muslim tradition: such pre-Islamic poetry was transmitted orally for a long time before being written down. One of the most influential Egyptian scholar of the twelfth century, Taha Hussein, wrote a thesis affirming that all pre-Islamic poetry was spurious, and that what we have now is a version adapted by later scholars in order to give Arabs a glorious literary past[27]. Although this theory has been violently rejected by majority of intellectuals we see the same method of analysis of western scholars, and we may believe that same rules applied for both historical events and literature.

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[24] Holyand R.G., Seeing Islam as Other Saw it, Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1997, p. 24.
[25] Lewis B., Gli Arabi nella Storia, Bari, Edizioni Laterza, 2001, p. 59.
[26] Holyand R.G., Seeing Islam as Other Saw it, Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1997, p. 28.
[27] Gabrieli F., La letteratura Araba, Firenze, Sansoni, 1967, pp. 21-26.

6) **Conclusion**

The assertion regarding the birth and development of Islam, affirming that while Hebraism and Christianity were born in obscure situations, Islam was born in the full light of history[28], must be reassessed after a view of what kind of evidence we can rely on. Each one of the above mentioned classes has contrasts within itself, and dilemmas become more insoluble when we compare them to each other. The four categories give us different reports which can not be considered all reliable. A helpful example that might be taken is the Doctrina Jacobi, which is a Greek text (datable around 630-4 A.D.) that describes, not in flattering words, a new prophet among Saracens by the time of the conquest of Palestine[29]. There is a evident contrast with the muslim tradition that attributes the conquest of the holy land to the time of the second Caliph 'Umār. Even when we have some factors that seem to coincide with each other, as the example of the Koran inscription in the Dome of the Rock, there are always some issues which can be argued and quarrelled, and in any case we can find compelling evidence.

While researching for this essay I got the impression of being gradually more confused as long as I analysed evidence and scholars' opinions. We could not find any source or any text to be assumed as reliable, every piece of evidence is questionable. For example, I think that in the bulk of *hadī*ths there are some information about what really happened in the early years of Islam but it is impossible to extrapolate it from forgeries or corruptions. This impracticality has to be attributed to the complicate way of communication whose transmitters could have infinite reasons to alter the reports. On the other hand non-Muslim tradition does not help us much and archaeological evidence should be studied more. Even if it is hard to believe that such an important epoch left no compelling proofs of his development, there are no possibilities to rely on the sources we have. What, in my view, is the most valuable approach is to form hypothesis from what we know of the following centuries based on what may make sense to us, but to reconstruct what really happened in Arabia during the formation and the early development of Islam is not possible.

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[28] Lewis B., Gli Arabi nella Storia, Bari, Edizioni Laterza, 2001, Chapter 1-2.
[29] Crone P., Cook M. Hagarism, Malta, Cambridge Press University, 1977, pp. 3-4.

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