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ISLAM AND THE DISSOLUTION OF LATE ANTIQUITY

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RESUMO

A sobrevivência das civilizações da Antiguidade Tardia com traços islâmicos foi, em algumas visões, discutida tomando como referência o dialeto e a identidade Mulçumana e Árabe no contexto da Antiguidade Tardia. A persistência acerca das tendências econômicas; a mudança das relações entre as elites árabes e "não-árabes"; a ascensão e o declínio do Califado e do Império Unido; e o renascimento da filosofia clássica são fatos históricos vitais na história do Islã. O artigo pretende refletir que as sociedades que formavam o império islâmico emergiram na Antiguidade Tardia, contudo, a sua fragmentação política e espiritual entre c.700-950, decididamente constituiu as comunidades medievais sob comando das dinastias islamizadas.

Palavras-chave: Islã – Antiguidade – Periodização

ABSTRACT

The survival of late-antique civilisational traits under Islam is discussed with reference to the dialectic between Muslim and Arab identity and the late-antique context; the persistence of economic trends; the changing relationship between Arab and non-Arab élites; the ascent and decline of the Caliph and the united empire; and the rebirth of classical philosophy. The article concludes that imperial Islamicate civilisation was indeed late-antique, but that its spiritual and political fragmentation, c.700-950, produced a decidedly medieval commonwealth of Islamicate dynasties.

Keywords: Islam – Antiquity – Periodization

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Over the past century, historians have come to recognise the pernicious chauvinism and analytical poverty of the tripartite division of history. The fall of Rome no longer marks the fissure between classical civilisation and medieval barbarism; where previous generations saw decadence, we see transformation (O'DONNELL, 2004). Late Antiquity came to replace the arbitrary and pejorative divisions, in time and space, that had fractured a surprisingly integrated world. Its supporters thrilled in their new interpretive freedom, identifying the properties of 'Romanity' that survived Christianisation and the barbarian migrations. But over time, it became clear that Late Antiquity was a heuristic glutton, consuming the late-classical and early-medieval ages.

In a borderless history, periodisation is easily neglected. "Late Antiquity" poorly describes its vast subject matter – like "Middle Ages", it works for want of anything better – and since it can barely be defined, it can scarcely be delimited. The term has ventured as early as the second century and as late as the ninth; as westward as the British Isles and as eastward as Transoxiana (BOWERSOCK, 1999). Hence the quite jarring neologisms and equivocations – *spätere Spätantike*; late-antique/early-medieval – that our field has yet to overcome. Furthermore, to emphasise, in the manner of Peter Brown, the transformative quality of Late Antiquity is necessarily to concede its weakness as a unit of periodisation (BROWN, 1971; 1978).

Although it has become fashionable to speak of early Islam as a late-antique religion, in that its birth and infancy owe much to late-antique civilisation (HOYLAND, 2012), those concerned with periodisation could well insist that the swift and sweeping repercussions of the Arab Conquests make them a *defining* moment in history: a historical boundary. Classicists will hear echoes of the contest between 'catastrophist and continuationist' models of history from the ongoing quarrel over the fate of the Roman West (WARD-PERKINS, 2005).

On the face of it, the Conquests resemble a natural boundary. When the Arabs destroyed the Sasanian Empire, they put an end to seven centuries of competition

between Persian and Roman states; they united the Fertile Crescent for the first time since Alexander the Great; and they created a 'world empire' from the Mediterranean basin to the Persian highlands for the first time since Cyrus the Great (FOWDEN, 1993). In an act that may now symbolise the eastward turn of the Mediterranean, they redirected the Nile's food surplus from Constantinople to Mecca. Although spread thinly, the arriviste Muslims put down roots, and a veritably Eurasian civilisation began to grow (HUMPHREYS, 2006). But there is a danger that, in marvelling at the Arabs' geopolitical achievement, we overlook the tenacity of *systems* and *ideas* underpinning the late-antique world.

This article will explore the relative survival and decay of late-antique patterns under Islamicate rule by examining a series of conceptual hubs, each of which provides a different context, and which should complement and illuminate each other. Far more deserves to be said than we have space for here, and I am aware that readers of *Nearco* might not have specialist knowledge of names and dates; consequently, what follows is truncated at best and simplistic at worst. I can only hope that it provides 'food for thought' in the discourse between Byzantinists and Islamicists.

1 THE CONQUERORS

1.1 ETHNICITY

Arabs had long migrated into the Fertile Crescent (MACDONALD, 2003), and comparison with the Germanic migrations in the late-antique West has led some scholars to view the Islamic Conquests as the last and greatest outpouring of Arabian peoples into the wider world (NEVO & KOREN, 2003). But there is a crucial difference between the Migration Periods and the Arab Conquests: the latter were a strategic, ideological programme of colonisation (DONNER, 1995), sustained by the affective energy of religion.

Before Islam, the Arabs enjoyed a sense of commonality, but its nature and extent are unclear. Arabia, including the Syrian Desert (MACDONALD, 2003), was vast and varied.

The tribes of the fertile, citied south-west were very different from those who led their flocks across the dry, desolate inlands (HOYLAND, 2011). The Conquests churned the communities of Arabia and resettled them in garrison towns, so that tribes which had been mutual strangers, or even rivals, were forced to negotiate a common identity in contradistinction to the very foreign conquered peoples.

Although tribal patterns underlay many of the power struggles within early Islam (CRONE, 1980; 1994), these did not retard the process of ethnogenesis: tribalism itself was a distinguishing feature of the community. Muslim scholars connected the aetiological myths to biblical genealogies, weaving the tribes into the shared story of the Abrahamic religions (RETSÖ, 2002: 28ff). Even converts to Islam were expected to join a tribe as clients (*mawālī*) (CRONE, 1980: 49-57). In primitive Islam, the connexion between tribe and religion was vital; but it soon proved inadequate as an organising principle for the urbane, civilian lifestyle that new generations of Muslims inherited, and the weight of non-Arab converts eventually broke the religion's ethnic superstructure during the eighth century. Although the ethnic dimension to Islam fell away, Arabic survived as the prestige language, and Arabia was privileged for its sacred history: the Muslims always preferred Mecca to Jerusalem.

Whereas the Germanic migrants succumbed to Christendom and (arguably) Romanity, the Arabs sustained a native ethnic and religious identity (hence CRONE & COOK, 1977). Given the confidence with which this newly self-aware minority spread over the Middle East, it is tempting to name the Conquests as the definitive boundary between the dominion of the Arabs and the rule of the late-antique post-Hellenes; but it is important to remember that the ethnogenesis of the Arab people and the calibration of a common Arabic language owed more to the post-Conquest settlements than to the decentralised conditions of pre-Conquest Arabia.

1.2 RELIGION

Similarly, the extent to which Islam developed in pre-conquest Arabia compared with its fruition in the post-conquest Fertile Crescent is hotly disputed. Even its Arabian phase could not have been insulated from late-antique discourse (HOYLAND, 2012): biblicist currents coursed through the peninsula, from the short-lived Jewish kingdom in sixth-century Yemen to the Monophysite phylarchs on the Roman border; from the Ethiopian soldiers who served in the Ḥijāz to the Nestorian priests in Baḥrayn. Trade, though less spectacular than previously imagined, was buoyant (CRONE, 1987; RUBIN, 1990; HECK, 2003), and upheld the circulation of peoples and ideas.

One way or another, Islam – the key to the Arabs' military success and state-building endeavours – was a product of Late Antiquity. This is evident in its scripture (WANSBROUGH, 1977) and ritual (HAWTING, 2006); its uncompromising piety and righteous militancy (SIZGORICH, 2008; DONNER, 1998); and its undercurrent of apocalypticism (COOK, 1997). There were elements of reaction to late-antique religious tendencies, as well: while the biblicist communities of the Fertile Crescent were factious and accused each other of heresy, Islam was relatively catholic, in that it dismissed Christological disputes and the like altogether (DONNER, 2010).

The Conquerors' identity seems to have evolved considerably after the initial Conquests (CRONE & COOK, 1977). This fact should bear weight in the discussion over periodisation. The ethnogenesis of Arab identity took place in the garrison towns and in contrast with the non-Arab (*ʿajam*) subjects; besides which, any reading of history that privileges race or language is likely to be superficial at best. Meanwhile the complex sources for the first two centuries of Islam betray the religion's plasticity and adaptability, drawing on the intellectual resources of the Fertile Crescent.

If Late Antiquity exerted an influence over the conquerors' identity, which needed some time to settle, then perhaps early Islam and its practitioners should be seen through

the prism of Late Antiquity. Indeed, we might even speak of an *Islamic Late Antiquity*, beginning with the Conquests and continuing through the High Caliphate.

2 THE WORLD ECONOMY

2.1 THE ECONOMIC EFFECTS OF CONQUEST

This is not the place to analyse meticulously the economics of transition to Arab rule, a subject that crosses three continents and many distinct economic zones. The following is meant only to introduce readers to some of the major contributions to late-antique economic history, with an eye on the question of whether the Islamic Conquests caused such a rupture in socio-economic conditions that they deserve to be treated as a break in periodisation.

Probably the most famous economistic interpretation is Henri Pirenne's, whose *Mahomet et Charlemagne* (PIRENNE, 1937) provided a narrative framework according to which the Islamic Conquests inaugurated the Middle Ages. As Pirenne saw it, the Arabs split the Mediterranean, snapping cultural bonds of Romanity that had withstood the Germanic migrations and severing lucrative trade routes. As the economy of Western Europe turned from maritime commerce to parochial agriculture, sowing the seeds of feudalism, the Arab merchants took their caravans to the Silk Road and beyond. So the Conquests recentred the productive energies of Europe northward, and those of the Mediterranean eastward.

The 'Pirenne Thesis' remains seductive, not only for its majestic scholarship, but for its possible application to origins of 'European Civilisation' or 'the West'. This question has drawn the attention of many scholars in recent decades, despite the dubious assumptions on which it rests (BALZARETTI, 1992, cf. FERNIE, 2008), and it cannot be fully disentangled from the issue of periodisation: Pirenne's contribution to Late Antiquity as a period of

continuity allows historians of Western history to explore the possibilities of 'late Romanity' or the fusion of Germanic and Roman elements.

His model is attractive for its scope, but it has not been widely accepted. The Germanic migrations caused a greater divergence from classical Romanity than Pirenne had allowed for, and his reliance on maritime trade as the lifeblood of Roman civilisation is surely excessive (BROWN, 1974). There was a decline in maritime trade as early as the sixth century, which Pirenne had not perceived; and from the mid-eighth century, the increasing demand for European slaves within the Caliphate helped to revive the transmission of Middle-Eastern goods across the Mediterranean (MCCORMICK, 2001; 2002). The Conquests did not erect an insuperable barrier to trade – they facilitated it.

Recently, Chris Wickham has proposed a similarly economistic narrative based on the stimulative power of the state. The Roman Empire relied on taxation delivered to the major cities from the many provinces. It built an infrastructure for the transport of goods which could then be exploited by the private sector. As the Germanic migrants tore the Empire into rival statelets, its infrastructure crumbled and the 'free ride' was over. Meanwhile the new aristocracies posed a relentless mutual threat, and their militarisation dissolved the urbane high culture of Antiquity. Not only did the Arabs appear part-way through this process; they actually preserved the Roman means of taxation and aristocratic way of life much longer than their northern counterparts (WICKHAM, 2005).

At this point, it seems that the assumptions underpinning the Pirenne Thesis have been turned on its head. The Arabs appear as the champions of Mediterranean commerce. They seized a Sasanian economy which was expanding, and took the helm with enthusiasm. Mining and irrigation projects continued well into the High Caliphate; trade in the Indian Ocean was dominated by Sasanian and then Arab ships; and the Persicate merchants who had ventured as far as North Africa and western China found that Islamdom provided a bridge between disparate markets. Indeed, the Islamic colonial project seems to have targeted those areas that were expanding or, as in the case of the

eastern Byzantine territories, were declining more gracefully than their neighbours: when the Syrian aristocrats fled to poverty-stricken Anatolia, the Arabs did not pursue them, but settled on their lucrative agricultural estates (MORONY, 2004/A).

It might still be the case that the Arab Conquests created the conditions necessary for the Western-European Middle Ages – that Pirenne was right for the wrong reasons –; it is beyond our purview to say so here. From our perspective, as we scan the horizon of history for sudden peaks and troughs, the curious outcome of the Islamic Conquests is that they brought the most prosperous territories of the western œcumene under the control of a single polity *without* substantially altering their economic patterns. The economies of the late-antique Middle East continued along their trajectories under Islamic rule.

2.2 ECONOMIC POLICY IN THE CONQUEST-ERA STATE

The explanation is, most likely, that the Arab empire was basically colonial: pragmatic and exploitative. Although religious fervour certainly drove the Conquests, the Arabs did not intend to convert their subjects, or to treat them with zealous cruelty. Despite the genuine suffering caused by invasion, besiegement and slavery – and the hyperbolic response by contemporary writers (DONNER, 2011; HOYLAND, 1994, *passim*) – the Arabs were not bent on savagery and destruction. The armies' activities were centralised, and their leaders negotiated the peaceful surrender of towns wherever possible (KENNEDY, 2007; DONNER, 1995). The archaeological record suggests that depopulation and destruction are better attributed to the war between the Byzantines and Sasanians, or to natural disasters, than to the Arab Conquests (HOLUM, 1992; AVNI, 1994: 126; SCHICK, 1998: 76), which were relatively benign.

The Arabs' strategy was governed by rational self-interest: so long as the subjects paid their taxes, they were generally left to manage their own affairs. So while the

imperial, interregional élites of the Middle East were deposed, the landowners and urban notables were often upheld as tax collectors and mediators between the Muslim governors and their subjects. The Arabs formed a stratum of military overlords who cared only to extract revenue from their subjects in the simplest possible fashion. The impression for students of periodisation is that the Conquests were no severe rupture in economic activity, and should not *in themselves* be seen as a turning point in economic history.

3 THE CONQUERED ELITES

3.1 COLLABORATION

In recent years scholarship has recognised that the Sasanian dynasty did not govern a centralised state; in fact, it negotiated power through a confederation of Pārsīg and Pahlāv families, whose machinations are obscured by triumphantly imperialistic chronicles. The confederacy was unravelling in the century preceding Islam; the Conquest of Persia merely cut the fraying bonds between the provinces and the court (POURSHARIATI, 2009; cf. DARYAEE, 2010). The ruling dynasty was toppled, but local administration was delegated to many of the aristocratic and landowning families who had performed such duties for the Sasanians. Buckled and twisted, the infrastructure of local government survived the transition between empires (MORONY, 2004/B).

Much the same process obtained on the Byzantine side of conquered territory, where Greek continued to be the dominant language of administration for two or three generations after the initial Conquests (e.g. DI SEGNI, 2009). Early Islamicate government was highly deputised and conservative. The Caliphs made little effort to change the coinage, and even purchased Byzantine currency with bullion to plug the gap between mining and minting (HEIDEMANN, 1998). Whether due to the state's indifference to numismatic imagery or the native peoples' rejection of new coins, most of the

experimental mints in the first Islamic century were merely variants on the Byzantine or Sasanian models (BATES, 1994; YARSHATER, 1985—: s.v. "Arab-Sasanian Coins").

3.2 MARGINALISATION

This aloof form of government could not last forever. In the late seventh century, a war between the Umayyad dynasty and a pretender based in Medina shone a terrifying light on the discord within the Muslim diaspora. The tribal and militaristic loyalties which had borne the psychological weight of the Conquests were finally disintegrating (HOYLAND, 2006), and the miserly treatment of non-Arab converts was now a political issue (BEARMAN, 1960-2005: s.v. "Mawlā", §2). Having won the civil war, the Umayyads set out to rationalise the state in order to confirm their dominance over an ever-more fractious population. The army was professionalised; taxation was standardised and more robustly pursued; bureaucracy was conducted entirely in Arabic; and administrators were expected to be either Arabs from newly-educated families or non-Arab Muslims (ROBINSON, 2005).

As the state was rationalised, the non-Muslim functionaries were dismissed and dispossessed. Simultaneously a legal category for the 'People of the Book' crystallised, which functionally resembled the toleration of minorities under the Sasanians (MORONY, 1974; 1984: 306-383; cf. PAPACONSTANTINOU, 2008) and which conceptually extended the Christian toleration of Jews to other 'protected' (*dhimmī*) monotheists. Meanwhile, the rulers resorted to ever-more extravagant displays of Islamic piety in order to pacify the Muslim dissidents: from introducing a new type of figureless coin, bearing only religious messages, to building a magnificent shrine over the ruins of the old Temple of Jerusalem, decorated with inscriptions berating the Christians and praising God (ROBINSON, 2005). In effect, Islamic civilisation was asserting itself against the non-Muslims for the sake of Muslim unity: it was building a distinctive form of government

which proclaimed the victory of Islam – less so of the Arabs – over the empires that had gone before.

Periodisation requires that we view these events from a distance, in order to trace the contours of history; so we should step back for a moment. Although the Arabs established themselves as tax farmers wherever they conquered, it took half a century for them to *begin* building a distinctive kind of state with the twin aims of embedding governmental power across the Fertile Crescent and promoting a religiously-charged myth of legitimacy. During this time, the only serious challenges to the Umayyad dynasty came from within Islamdom (CRONE, 1980): the Persian confederacy had crumbled and the Byzantines, for largely internal reasons, were unable to sustain a counter-conquest (KAEGI, 1992; SARRIS, 2011: 275-306). Maybe the Caliphate, makeshift and unruly, should have been demolished before it had left its imprint on the Middle East. In the event, it sluggishly evolved from a network of garrisons to a sophisticated imperial state.

Yet for all its innovation, the state that developed was very much in the late-antique mould. Its religious triumphalism mirrored that of Byzantium; its economic activities followed the trajectory set by the deposed empires; and its centrepiece, the office of the Caliph, embodied the autocratic and theocratic yearning of the late-antique potentates.

4 THE CALIPHATE

4.1 THE NATURE OF CALIPHAL AUTHORITY

The Caliph was both the successor to Muḥammad and the 'deputy of God' on Earth. Not only was he to act righteously, as an exemplar; he was to establish normative behaviour in order to regulate worldly affairs as well as to guide the believers to paradise. Early-Islamic law synthesised the customary law of Arabia, the commandments in the Qur'ān, and Caliphal edicts (CRONE & HINDS, 1986). At last, the 'heads of the eagle' had

been reunited: the agents and interests of church and state were harmonised at the court of the Caliph. Or, rather, there was no division between church and state in the sacred polity.

So the office of the Caliph can be seen as the apex of late-antique imperial ambition, in that it combined sacred and secular authority in one man. The Sasanian and Byzantine emperors could change religious law and practice only by manipulating the priesthoods, which often proved intransigent (YARSHATER, 1985—: s.v. "Judicial and Legal Systems: iii. Sasanian Legal System"; BOWERSOCK, 1999: s.v. "Christian Triumph and Controversy", 200-201); only the Caliph had the right to articulate religious law directly.

A commonplace theme of Muslim historiography is the difference between Caliphate and kingship. Since all sovereignty was God's, the Caliph was expected to rule as a humble servant A Caliph who acted in a tyrannical or impious fashion, or mimicked the old emperors by his indulgence, malice or favouritism, was no true caliph, but a mere king (EL CHEIKH, 2004).

This sensitivity to corruption inherent in kingship led caliphs to eschew the crown as a symbol of their authority (CRONE, 2004: 7, 44-6; BOWERSOCK, 1999: s.v. "Imperial Cult", 510-11). Less ostentatious symbols did survive the transition to Arab rule, including the staff, signet ring, and cloak; but in order to soothe the primitivist spirit in early Islam, the insignia were *retrojected*: they were held to have been the Prophet's originally, then passed down the Caliphal line (MARSHAM, 2009). Thus, late-antique kingship was recast as Islamic, and the self-indulgent quirks of empire were partially excused.

Although the Caliphate did break an ancient tradition of sacral kingship, in that the Caliph was neither sacred nor inviolable (CRONE, 2004: 21-2, 40-2; cf. YARSHATER, 1985—: s.v. "Farr(ah)"), he did enjoy a similarly elevated quality, dubbed 'insight' or 'inspiration': God steered the Caliph to make good decisions and to dispense good advice (CRONE & HINDS, 1986: 56). The basic function of the late-antique emperor survived in him: he embodied and protected the religious community; he led certain rituals – prayer

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and pilgrimage – amongst his executive duties; and, like the Byzantine emperors, he defended the faith.

4.2 THE PIOUS OPPOSITION

The early Caliphs realised the theocratic aspiration of Late Antiquity, but their victory was fleeting. Although Islam would never develop a priesthood in the Christian or Zoroastrian mould, it did spawn an intelligentsia whose struggle with the Caliphal state would characterise the classical period of Islam. The scholars were experts in law because they had learnt the edicts and behaviours laid down by previous Caliphs and by the Prophet. Initially, the Caliphs could even approach religious scholars in search of these legal precedents (CRONE & HINDS, 1986: 51-52).

Now, some Muslim thinkers denied the Caliphs' right to dictate pious behaviour, and promoted other forms of social organisation. Some insisted that the Umayyad dynasty was illegitimate because it was not in the prophet's bloodline. Even those who supported the dominant theory of law-making Caliphate *in principle* were disappointed when the Caliphs inevitably fell short in their personal piety. And so, in the first two centuries of Islam, the scholarly class waged an ideological campaign to seize legislative power from the Caliphs, claiming authority from their 'chains of transmission' extending back to the Prophet and his companions (CRONE & HINDS, 1986: 49, 58-96; HODGSON, 1974: 238-9, 247-56).

4.3 THE CALIPHATE IN DECLINE

Once again, the greatest threat to the Islamicate élite came from within Islamdom. The 'Abbāsid family rode the wave of frustration felt by the non-Arab clients and fomented by the scholars and other factionalists: they overthrew and massacred the Umayyads in 750. The cruelty with which the 'Abbāsids eliminated their rivals was less

traumatic for the Arab population than the replacement of a Syrian military cadre with Persian-speaking soldiers from Khurāsān. The sovereignty of the Arab people had apparently been overruled. More than this: the quasi-tribal confederations on which Umayyad power had rested were no longer relevant. Consequently, the new dynasty of Caliphs had to find legitimacy in religious affairs (CRONE, 1980: 61-65); and this inevitably brought them into conflict with the ever-more confident religious scholars.

The outcome of this conflict was the Miḥna: a courtroom inquisition in which the Caliph and his deputies examined the metaphysical beliefs of leading thinkers in order to suppress heterodoxy (BEARMAN, 1960-2005: s.v. "Miḥna"). The immediate consequence was the imprisonment and flogging of popular religious scholars for a crime of conscience, which simply hardened the hearts of the 'pious opposition' against the Caliph.

Ultimately, the 'Abbāsids could no more play the rôle of impeccable leader (*imām*) than the Umayyads had. As the early days of the Prophet and the Conquests receded into cultural memory, and the personal failings of the earliest Muslim politicians were forgotten, the scholars drew ever-greater strength from that golden age. The religious authority of the Caliphate waned, and the autocratic impulses of Late Antiquity began to subside.

5 PHILOSOPHY

A legacy of classical paganism, philosophy had withered under the austere conditions of Late Antiquity. The 'greats' from among the old texts were preserved, translated and taught, but across Europe and the Middle East the creative act of philosophy itself was largely abandoned. The Umayyads were relatively sheltered from classical thought in the heavily Arab cities of Medina and Damascus, and showed no more interest in philosophy than had their imperial predecessors. Isolated attempts were made by Muslim intellectuals to adapt classical motifs, but there was no large-scale translation

of texts and ideas until the 'Abbāsid Caliphs transferred their capital to Baghdad. The new dynasty was thus caught in the intellectual currents of the Sasanian heartland, where, as part of their project to subsume Hellenism under the rubric of Persian history, the deposed élite had sponsored translations of Greek texts to Persian languages. The Caliphs wanted to present themselves as innovative and active guardians of the faith: once presented with a distinctive body of literature that the non-Muslims knew and respected, the Caliphs were keen to turn it against them.

Hence the mummified remains of classical philosophy were revived in Arabic texts for the purposes of religious disputation, as a supplement to scriptural hermeneutics. Only from the ninth century, under the influence of al-Kindī (c.801-873), was philosophy treated as a discipline in its own right and for its own sake. The mother tongue of medieval philosophy was not Greek, but Arabic; its spiritual home was not Alexandria, but Baghdad; and by so liberating philosophy from its philological straitjacket, the 'Abbāsid scholars proved its relevance and adaptability to all nations, which encouraged its diffusion (GUTAS, 2010). Defossilised and rejuvenated, medieval philosophy clearly distinguishes medieval thought from late-antique tradition; and crucially, for the purposes of periodisation, the renaissance of philosophy was suspended for some two hundred years after the Islamic conquest of Mesopotamia. If late-antique attitudes prevailed in the second century of Islam, we should wonder whether, in this respect, the early 'Abbāsids still 'belonged to' Late Antiquity.

6 EMPIRE TO COMMONWEALTH

6.1 THE TRADITIONALISTS

Although their legacy would eventually reach Europe and have a major influence on the development of the universities, the ninth- and tenth-century philosophers of Islamdom were hamstrung by the forces of history. They were briefly

favoured by the power-grubbing Caliphs of the Miḥna episode, and that association poisoned attitudes between the philosophers and the 'traditionalists'. In any case, there was a fundamental incompatibility between philosophy and the Islamic sciences that had developed under the auspices of the traditionalists.

These scholars had established that authority came from the Qur'ān and from the good practice (*sunna*) of the Prophet and his most favoured companions. This authority was effectively theirs because they transmitted stories about these early figures from master to student, ensuring the stories' conservation. Reliable knowledge was old knowledge, grounded in the past; everything else was extrapolation. The philosophers, who speculation was built on axioms, could not be authoritative, because they did not work from scripture and *sunna*. And since authority had been projected back into a semi-legendary past, the Caliphs had lost their place as living guides to normative behaviour.

6.2 THE CALIPHATE FRAGMENTS

Soon after the 'Abbāsid dynasty was established, a surviving member of the Umayyad family set up an emirate in Spain. Although it paid lip service to the new dynasty's leadership, the Emirate of Córdoba was effectively an independent state. A dangerous precedent was set. Meanwhile, the ideologues who had supported the revolution of 750 were deeply alienated by the 'Abbāsids, whom they saw as either usurpers or traitors to a radical cause. From the ninth century onwards, gubernatorial families, often with religious agenda, acquired effective control over large territories.

The reasons for the collapse of central authority are poorly understood. Internally, the cumulative size of the cadre of slave soldiers in the court, once introduced, altered the balance of power until the Caliphs were little more than puppet rulers on behalf of their Turkic guardsmen (CRONE, 1980); even if the incumbent were fit to rule – which was not always the case – the office of the Caliph lost its agency.

Perhaps the officer corps could have governed on his behalf, if not for external developments. Garth Fowden, after whose book this section is named (FOWDEN, 1993), connects the dissolution of Islamicate territory with the development and formalisation of rival sects within Islam. The quickening rate of conversion injected more and more non-Arab blood and ideas into the religion, adding to the local variation in beliefs and practices; meanwhile the vastness of the ninth-century empire prevented even the most capable ministers from suppressing the boisterous discontent which could be channelled into political projects by savvy scholars, warlords and administrators.

However it came about, the dissolution of the Caliphate was the dissolution of Late Antiquity. The theocratic ideal of a sacred and secular commander-in-chief was realised in the Caliph briefly in the seventh and early eighth centuries, but it soon faltered against the power of the traditionalist scholars. The Caliphs patronised philosophy and tried to suppress the traditionalists, but to no avail: their Caesaropapacy was reduced to mere kingship. The Caliphs still resembled their imperial forebears – they had borrowed and Islamised much of the semiotics of kingship from them – but even this did not last: the empire fragmented into a commonwealth of Islamicate states, all of which recognised their commonality, practised the same religion, and revered the Caliph in principle. The Middle Ages were well and truly underway by the mid-tenth century and the Buyid capture of Baghdad.

CONCLUSION

The Arab Conquests did not dissolve Late Antiquity. The categories 'Arab' and 'Muslim' were still very plastic at the beginning of the Conquests, and they drew much of their conceptual strength from the late-antique milieu of the conquered lands. The Conquests imposed a parasitic élite on the wealthiest provinces of the Middle East, which sat idly on the infrastructure of the deposed empires, such that the economic and socio-

political patterns of Late Antiquity were left to repeat apace – albeit somewhat distorted over time.

In many respects, the High Caliphate was a late-antique endeavour. The Caliph achieved the highest degree of interdependence between sacred and profane elements within the polity: the culmination of late-antique theocratic and autocratic impulses. The ruling dynasty was shocked into action by the civil war of the late seventh century, and began to rationalise the organs of state, the better to control its unruly Muslim subjects. Its reforms privileged both Islam and its Arabic language, but in effect it was little more than the adaptation of late-antique systems to new political realities.

We have seen the ways in which Islamdom inherited and subtly manipulated late-antique features; we have seen how these features were lost or transformed. It seems reasonable, then, to speak of an 'Islamic Late Antiquity' running from the initial Conquests until the tenth century, which oversaw the sluggish transition from a post-Hellenic world dominated by Roman and Persian empires to a distinctively Islamicate medieval period populated by smaller, independent dynasties.

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