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"MUSLIMS" AND "ISLAM" IN MIDDLE EASTERN LITERATURE OF THE SEVENTH AND EIGHTH CENTURIES AD: AN ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE OF WEST EUROPEAN ORIENTAL SCHOLARSHIP

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ABSTRACT

The article presents a short overview of the works of researchers affiliated with the new German Oriental Institute called Inarah, known for its unconventional revisionist interpretations of the origins of Islam. On the grounds of archaeological, epigraphic, numismatic, and literary sources, the Inarah scholars attempt to challenge the traditional Islamic account of history and dogmatics in relation to the early stages of the Muslim faith, its evolution, and the first contacts of the Arab-Muslim empire with the western world. This article focuses on selected results of studies by the Inarah Institute concerning the emergence of the terms "Islam" and "Muslims" in non-Arabic, Middle Eastern literature (prevailingly Christian) of the seventh and eighth centuries AD.

The Middle Eastern authors from the seventh and eighth centuries, the first two centuries of Islam, have left a rich and diverse literary heritage, illustrating an unhindered development of culture and unrestrained religious activities. The Inarah Institute's critical linguistic and historiographical analysis attempts to prove that texts before the early eighth century do not contain any mention of "the Muslim character of power in the Arab empire" and that, when referring to Arabs, "the original source texts use neither the term 'Islam' nor 'Muslims'" (Ohlig 2007: 223–325). In this way, the revisionists deny the common version of history, undermine the historical credibility of the Muslim tradition, and criticise conventional oriental scholarship in the West for a supposed lack of critical scientific approach in its studies on the origins of Islam.

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RÉSUMÉ

L'article présente un bref compte-rendu des travaux menés par les chercheurs assemblés à l'Institut oriental allemand Inarah, réputé d'avoir une approche révisionniste et réformiste par rapport aux origines de l'Islam. Basant sur des sources archéologiques, épigraphiques, numismatiques et littéraires, les scientifiques d'Inarah défient les dogmes et la version islamique traditionnelle de l'histoire en se référant aux débuts de la foi musulmane, à ses évolutions et aux premiers contacts de l'empire arabo-musulman avec l'Occident. L'article résume certaines conclusions formulées suite aux recherches effectuées par Inarah, relatives à l'apparition des notions telles que « Islam » et « Musulman » dans la littérature non-arabe (chrétienne pour la plupart) du Proche-Orient du VII^e^ et VIII^e^ siècles.

Les auteurs du Proche-Orient du VII^e^ et du VIII^e^ siècles, époque de deux premiers centenaires de l'Islam, ont laissé un héritage littéraire riche et complexe, révélant le développement éclatant d'une civilisation et des activités religieuses incontrôlées. Les analyses critiques d'Inarah concernant ces textes, menées du point de vue tant linguistique qu'historiographique, essaient de prouver que les sources écrites, datant d'avant le début du VIII^e^ siècle, ne mentionnaient jamais « le caractère musulman du pouvoir dans l'empire arabe » et que, quant aux Arabes, « les textes de source originaux n'emploient jamais ni le terme 'Islam' ni le terme 'Musulmans' » (Ohlig 2007: 223–325). Par conséquent, les révisionnistes mettent en cause la version habituelle de l'histoire, doutent de la crédibilité de la tradition historique musulmane et dénoncent le manque d'approche scientifique dans l'enseignement occidental usuel sur l'Orient, relatif aux origines de l'Islam.

INTRODUCTION

The Inarah (Ar. 'enlightenment') Institute for Research on Early Islamic History and the Qur'an is gaining increasing prominence in the West, where it has been active for several years. Affiliated scholars in Arabic and Semitic studies have mostly been German, but also include Orientalists from France, Spain, USA, and other countries within the western cultural domain. The cornerstone of the Institute's scientific research is the philological theory of the German Semitist Christoph Luxenberg (published in 2000), whose re-reading of the meaning of the Qur'an is based on the linguistic background of the Syro-Aramaic language.[1] Following its initial release, Luxenberg's theory sparked a storm of comments in

1 Luxenberg 2000 was later followed by three German editions of the book between 2004–2011. In 2007, it was published in English.

the scientific circles of oriental scholarship and beyond. Currently, the research of the Inarah Institute is not limited to linguistics, but is conducted in parallel with such fields as the history of Islam, Muslim dogmatics, literature, Arab-Muslim culture, archaeology, and numismatics.[2] It is worth noting that many of the investigations by this revisionist school coincide with an earlier theory that was published independently by two Israeli researchers, Yehuda D. Nevo and Judith Koren, in a complex revision of the oldest Islamic history (Nevo & Koren 2003: 103–135).

The Middle Eastern authors (mostly Christians) from the sevent and eighth centuries, the first two centuries of Islam, have left a rich and diverse literary heritage, illustrating an unhindered development of culture and unrestrained religious activities. To date, a number of critical papers devoted to the non-Arab literature of this period have been published. Among these is the bulky, nearly 900-page work of Robert G. Hoyland, entitled *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian writings on early Islam* (1997). His analysis of the Syrian, Greek, and Coptic texts (as well as those in other languages) corresponds largely with the traditional Muslim, widely recognised version of historical events. Similar conclusions have been drawn over the last hundred years by many experts in the Middle Eastern literature of Late Antiquity (mainly Syrian literature), such as H. Suermann (1983; 1998), H.J.W. Drijvers (1994), and G.J. Reinink (1993).

The results of those studies are openly questioned by the Inarah revisionists. Their critical linguistic and historiographical analysis of Middle Eastern texts from the seventh and eighth centuries attempts to prove that the written sources before the early eighth century do not contain any mention of "the Muslim character of power in the Arab empire" and that, when referring to Arabs, "the original source texts use neither the term 'Islam' nor 'Muslims'" (Ohlig 2007: 223–325). In other words, neither non-Arabic nor Arabic literature implies in any way that the Middle East of the seventh and eighth centuries found itself under the rule of a new great religion, namely Islam. This assertion contrasts sharply with the version of the early Islamic era universally accepted today, which is based almost entirely on the Islamic sources of the Abbasid period. Revisionists deny this version of history, undermine the historical credibility of the Muslim tradition and criticise conventional oriental scholarship in the West for a supposed lack of critical scientific approach in its studies on the origins of Islam.

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2 For more on the activities of the Inarah Institute, see Grodzki 2010; also available in the Polish language, see Grodzki 2009.

LITERARY SOURCES OF THE SEVENTH AND EIGHTH CENTURY

In its numerous publications, the revisionist school examines works of Christian literature from the first two centuries of Islam: West and East Syrian historical chronicles, sermons, correspondence of the clergy, documents of the ecclesiastical administration, theological treatises, apocalyptic works, Syrian, Greek, Byzantine, Coptic, Maronite, and Jewish writings, as well as other documents. Among them are famous works repeatedly cited in the literature to prove the reliability of the traditional Islamic sources, including *Liber haeresorum* ("Book of heresies") by John of Damascus (*c*.675–749), *A History of Heraclius* by the Armenian chronicler Sebeos (mid seventh century), the writings and chronicles of Jacob of Edessa (*c*.640–708), the letters of the east Syrian (Nestorian) Patriarch Iso'yabh III (d. 659), the letters of the Greek theologian Maximus the Confessor (580–662), the sermons of the Patriarch of Jerusalem Sophronius (560–638), the sermons of Pseudo-Ephraem (second half of the seventh century), the apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius (second half of the seventh century), and the writings of the Patriarch of Constantinople Germanus I (d. 733).

In a series of analytical publications,[3] Karl-Heinz Ohlig, one of the main ideologues of the Inarah Institute and a German professor of religion and history of Christianity at Saarland University, endeavors to demonstrate that the Christian literature of the seventh and eighth centuries does not use the term "Muslims" in relation to the new Arab rulers (Ohlig 2008). In the original texts, the most frequently recurring terms are "Ismaelites" (from the biblical figure of Ishmael, Abraham's first son), "Hagarenes" (Syriac *Mhaggarê*; from the biblical figure of Abraham's maid, Hagar, mother of Ishmael), or "Saracens" (from the biblical figure of Abraham's legitimate wife, Sarah). The very term "Arabs" in its Syriac form *Ṭayyāyê* (the terms *Ṭayyāyê* and "Ismaelites" were both already used in literature with reference to the Arabs before the seventh century) is significantly less frequent. According to the German Orientalist, the Arabs are also not mentioned by the Byzantine sources as followers of a new religion. Instead they were initially described as vassals of Constantinople (Lat. *confoederati*) and later as enemies, but never with any reference to Islam.[4] Ohlig claims that a mistake

3 Seven bulky volumes of multiple-author publications, printed by Hans Schiler until the beginning of 2012.

4 Christian treatises sometimes also described the Arabs with the term "pagans" (e.g. the acts of the synod of Dairin in 676). In Ohlig's opinion, this term should not, however, be automatically understood in the sense of *terminus technicus*. As the Christian literature from the still pre-Islamic period shows, the term "pagans" was also often used to describe Christian practitioners of some unorthodox cults, old customs or rituals prevalent amongst the followers of Christianity itself, including Christians of Arab descent. By the turn of the 4th and 5th centuries, Saint Jerome of

made by Orientalists when analysing and translating old texts has been to identify the aforementioned terms by default as meaning 'Muslims', relying uncritically on the transmission of the Muslim tradition. Thus, the words "Islam" and "Muslims" – according to the German revisionist – "creep" into the translations of scientific texts, although they do not appear originally in the source materials of the seventh and eighth centuries. To give an example, the aforementioned historian Robert G. Hoyland systematically translates and interprets the Syriac term *mhaggarê* as 'Muslims',[5] while in reality it means nothing more than 'the sons of Hagar' and has no direct religious connotations.

Revisionists claim that the Middle Eastern Christian literature of the seventh and eighth centuries seems not to take notice of the fact that the ruling Arab sovereigns followed a new great non-Christian religion, namely Islam. The authors – mostly clerics, theologians, and chroniclers – consistently focused on Christian themes in their work, describing the disputes within Christianity itself and discussing the differences between various Christological factions. Ohlig argues that if the new Arab rulers had presented themselves to the society as Muslims or followers of a new religion, this would have definitely made waves in the Christian literature, which could not remain indifferent to this fact. Perhaps the silence of the authors can be explained by the specificity of the literature of the period (mainly theological treatises, sermons, letters, chronicles, hagiography, acts for erecting monasteries, and philological treaties). However, it should be noted that even these materials, when they occasionally refer to general political and religious conditions, make no mention whatsoever of Islam nor the Muslims. It is difficult to explain why contemporary monks and bishops, many of whom took long voyages and possessed extensive knowledge of the political situation, would indulge in long passionate disputes devoted to theological differences between the Chalcedonian and Monophysitic churches, for example, when endangered by a new religion apparently disseminated by the ruling elites and threatening Christianity as a whole.[6]

Stridon (345/347–419/420) was already criticizing the "pagan cult of the stone", as the Patriarch of Constantinople Germanus I (d. 733) would also do. And as late as the first half of the 8th century, John of Damascus (675–749) perceived the Ismaelites as Christian heretics for clinging to elements of pagan traditions (including the cult of Aphrodite). Pagan practices of this kind, including the old Arab cults, were abundant at that time, as pointed out also in the sermons of Isaac of Antioch (d. 460). (Ohlig 2008: 310–312)

5 Hoyland does this in order to distinguish it from another term *Ṭayyāyê*, which is translated as 'Arabs'. However, it does not change the fact that the original meaning of the text is distorted.

6 See also Schick (1987), a paper for the *Conference on the History of Bilad al-Sham in the Umayyad Period* (as cited by Nevo & Koren 2003: 92–93). Schick points out that in the 30s of the 7th century, life in Syria and Palestine was going on as usual, and the Christians "were not concerned by the fact that they were being conquered".

As argued by the revisionists, the silence surrounding the emergence of Islam cannot be explained by the authors' fear of persecution. Indeed, the new Arab rulers were repeatedly subjected to severe criticism in the Middle Eastern literature of that time – but in no case did that criticism suggest that a new religion was involved. For example, the rich Christian apocalyptic literature at times makes comparisons between the new Arab state and the apocalyptic beast from the Old Testament's Book of Daniel. Ohlig (2007: 309) holds that if the new Arab rulers were promoting a new, different faith from Christianity, the authors of these dark visions surely would not have failed to oppose them with strong polemics and pick them to pieces. All the more so as the theological treatises of that period broadly and minutely held forth on the differences dividing the Monophysites, Dyophysites, Monoenergists, Monotheletes, and members of other marginal Christian theological currents.

HISTORY PROJECTED INTO THE PAST

It is worth noting that by the ninth century, the perspective in literature already looked different. Christian authors remarked on Islam, seeing it as a new heterodox non-Christian religion. They described and criticised it extensively, even though the authorities of the Arab-Muslim empire were already firmly legitimised, theologically speaking, and probably more decisive in fighting their adversaries.

Moreover, according to the theory of the revisionists, the lack of information in the literary sources of the seventh and eighth centuries about the new religion of Islam and its Muslim followers is all the more striking in light of the fact that for hundreds of years leading up to that point, all religious and political events, even minor ones, were carefully described by both lay and clerical authors. For example, the late antique chronicle of Joshua the Stylite (from the early 6th century), reporting on the years 395–506, recounts in detail all the political, military, and religious events of the region, including battles, sieges, ambushes, and raids (Nevo & Koren 2003: 107–108). The literary works immediately preceding the Islamic era also give thorough accounts of events that are only of secondary importance to their authors. For example, the biographical *Life of the Nestorian Rabban Bar-'Idta* (d. 612) bears testimony to the confrontations between Persia and Byzantium, although these events are only of marginal significance for the narration of the story. Antioch of Mar Saba, in a letter written between 614 and 628, reports on the attack on his monastery, during which the Arabs tortured and killed monks in order to obtain information about the valuables hidden in the convent. Yet, as Nevo and Koren (2003: 109, 134–135) emphasise, several years later when the Arabs assumed power from the Byzantines and the Sassanids, supposedly spreading a

new and hitherto unknown religion, the events surrounding these epochal political and religious changes (which seem essential for all the Middle Eastern peoples) were either completely ignored by the literature or only treated marginally. Thus, a Syriac book entitled *The Life of Maruta* (a biography of a Jacobite Metropolite from the era of the Arab conquest of Syria) devotes only a few words to the Arabs and the campaign of the emperor Heraclius. The biographical work *The Histories of Rabban Hormizd the Persian* (a Nestorian monk who lived at the time when power was seized by the Arabs) mentions these political events only when referring to a person called 'Ali, the governor of Mosul, whose son was cured by Hormizd of a disease (Nau 1909: 52–96; Nöldeke 1893). The so-called *Khuzistan Chronicle*, an anonymous work written between 670 and 680 that presented itself as the history of the church (and containing so many descriptions of the developments concerning the Byzantine-Persian wars that the historian Sebastian Brock considers it to be the "chronicle of the end of the Sassanid era"), mentions the Arab invasion only casually, and not before the conclusion (Brock 1976).

The revisionists also highlight in their polemics the fact that the early Islamic literature has survived to our times not in the form of original source materials, but in the form of copies transcribed repeatedly over the centuries by scribes and translators (Ohlig 2008: 224–225). Adhering to a principle that was generally accepted in those times, copyists usually updated texts according to their own level of knowledge. They introduced modifications and comments, and reworked the text as well, adding or removing fragments and making many other interpolations of the original. For this reason, as emphasised by the revisionists, literature dating originally to the seventh or eighth centuries can contain references to future facts or employ a conceptual framework not yet in use at that time. Accordingly, when original texts referred to Saracens or Ismaelites, the scribes in the ninth and tenth centuries replaced these terms with the word "Muslims". As Nevo and Koren (2003: 6–7) point out, we are not dealing with actual reporting on the events of the seventh century, but with the imagined pictures of authors living in the ninth century about what they "thought had happened or wanted to believe had happened or wanted others to believe had happened". And so the terms "Hagarenes", "Ismaelites", and "Saracens" – as they originally appeared in the literature – were intentionally or unintentionally identified by copyists (and to this date by many modern scholars) with the meaning of "Muslim" and translated accordingly.

An example is the chronicle of the Coptic bishop John of Nikiu (end of 7th century), which was written in Egypt by the end of the seventh century (Nevo & Koren 2003: 233–234; Charles 1916). In its final pages, the chronicle mentions "Muslims" in relation to the followers of the Arab religion. Most contemporary scholars of Islam consider this to be a confirmation that the author of the

chronicle recognised the existence of Islam as a new faith. Yet, according to the alternative interpretation, some unanswered questions contradict this reasoning. The Coptic chronicle survived to our times only in its Ethiopian translation, as a manuscript with a note that the translation from the Arabic version was completed in 1602. Textual analysis of the transcription of proper names, as well as the way in which certain words were transcribed, reveals that the chronicle was likely written originally in Greek, with fragments in Coptic. The original manuscript has not survived. The author of the translation into Arabic attached to the manuscript a list of contents in which the term "Muslims" is consistently used when referring to the Arabs. Of particular significance here is the fact that, as Nevo and Koren (2003: 234) point out, the terms "Islam" and "Muslims" used by the Arab translator are not historically testified in Arab texts from before the end of the seventh century. The word "Islam" appears for the first time in the year 691 in an inscription of the Jerusalem Dome of the Rock, erected by the decree of ʿAbd al-Malik (646–705). The term "Muslim" is chronologically even later; it does not appear in the Arab sources preceding the Abbasid dynasty, including official and unofficial inscriptions, coins, and administration letters. Hence, one may conclude that the Arabic translation of John of Nikiu's chronicle was likely done much later than the original Greek/Coptic manuscript, already after the Muslim tradition had formulated the official account of the Arab history and the origins of Islam – that is to say, in the ninth century or later. Hence, as Nevo and Koren (2003: 234) claim, it should not be a surprise that the Arabic translator (presumably a Christian) tended to use the contemporary terms "Islam" and "Muslims" in reference to the Arabs and their religion.[7] According to the revisionist school, in the late seventh century the terms "Islam" and "Muslims" were not even in use by the Arabs themselves.

The revisionists point out that Byzantine literature (including Syriac-Chalcedonian literature) does not report anything about the teachings of Islam until the first half of the eighth century (Nevo & Koren 2003: 212). Only then did the Syriac authors notice Islam as a new emerging religion, not as a faction of Christianity. Sebastian Brock (1984: 199–203) believes that it is only from the Syriac Orthodox patriarch Pseudo-Dionysius of Tell-Mahre (818–845) that we learn with certainty about Islam as a new separate religion. The same applies to the term "Muslim". According to the revisionists from the Inarah Institute, not even one Syriac or Greek source describes the Arabs in the seventh century as "Muslims".

7 Nevo and Koren (2003: 234) write that nowadays researchers do usually the same when translating Syriac texts.

MISINTERPRETATION OF SOURCES AND THE ALTERNATIVE ACCOUNT OF HISTORY

The revisionist school also criticises modern "conventional" oriental scholarship for misinterpreting information contained in the literature of the seventh and eighth centuries (Ohlig 2008: 224). The criticism targets far-fetched, unreasonable interpretations of original texts that overlap in meaning with the official Muslim historiography. Thus, when a seventh-century chronicle speaks of ships, for example, certain conventional Orientalists tend to suggest straightaway that what is meant is a particular battle cited in the Muslim literature; when there is a mention of riots, they are automatically associated with the first Arab *fitna*. Similarly, information contained in apocalyptic texts (which were numerous in the Middle East in the 7th century) is often wrongly interpreted as hard historical fact that researchers strive to confirm by referring to Muslim sources written three centuries later. At the same time, however, no major historical value is assigned to analogical apocalyptic texts dating from the sixth century or earlier, on the grounds that they merely hold theological value.

According to the revisionists, a similar misinterpretation takes place with allegorical works. Christian authors describe the Arabs and events associated with them using biblical motifs and well-known images, mostly from the Book of Genesis, the Book of Daniel and other parts of the Old Testament, as well as from the Apocalypse of St John. In this sense, their work should be regarded as an allegorical interpretation of the Holy Scriptures and not as a record of actual historical fact. Therefore, as the revisionists argue, when the Arabs are illustrated as a people who came from the wilderness and the desert, this statement should not automatically be read as referring to the Arab conquests, but metaphorically for the biblical archetype of the progenitor of the Arabs – Ishmael – who lived in the desert. Similarly, when an allegorical text speaks of "a king from the South", the geographical reference made is not necessarily a specific one; instead it may be a simple attempt by the author to locate the Arab reign within the framework of an apocalyptic vision of history, by using a theme borrowed from the Book of Daniel.

The problem with the occurrence of the terms "Islam" and "Muslims" in the literature of the first two centuries of *hijra* is just one of many axioms of modern Islamic scholarship challenged by the revisionist school. The ideologues of the alternative account of the origins of Islam deny virtually the whole widely recognised version of the history of this religion. They call on the scientific community to undertake critical studies of the Qur'an, following the methods of scientific criticism which were and are applied to the sacred books of other religions. For example, an Orientalist associated with the Inarah Institute, publishing under

the pseudonym Ibn Warraq, suggests an a priori rejection of the Muslim Hadith as material that is historically much later than the seventh century and largely unreliable (Ibn Warraq 2007: 213).[8] In his opinion, the existence of an oral transmission reaching back to the earliest Islamic period is a myth sustained by the Muslim tradition that does not allow for a critical, scientific reconstruction of the true course of events in the first centuries of the *hijra*.[9] Putting the sources of the Islamic tradition to the test of scientific criticism was also one of the postulates raised by the Egyptian proponent of hermeneutics and professor of Islamic studies, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (1943–2010), who sympathised with the moderate mainstream of Islamic revisionism.[10]

For the main ideologues of Inarah (Karl-Heinz Ohlig, Volker Popp, Christoph Luxenberg, and others), the absence of the terms "Islam" and "Muslims" in the literary source materials of the seventh and eighth centuries is not an accidental fact, but constitutes an important element of the alternative account of history (Popp 2007a: 16–123). Already in the 1970s, the American historian of religion John Wansbrough (1928–2002) suggested that Islam could not have appeared suddenly in the early seventh century, but that Arab beliefs evolved gradually, taking the form of a separate, non-Christian religion over a period of a century and a half (Wansbrough 1977).

A similar thesis was put forward in the late 1990s by two Israeli archaeologists studying the Negev desert, Nevo and Koren (2003: 170–205). In their theory, upon assuming power in Greater Syria in the third decade of the seventh century, the immigrant Arab population was mostly pagan. Shortly thereafter, some of the Arab rulers (or all of them) adopted so-called basic monotheism with essential elements of Judeo-Christianity. This faith was theologically oriented around the figure of the biblical patriarch Abraham. Over the next 100–150 years, these beliefs gradually transformed into an independent faith, Islam as it is defined today. However, until the end of the first century of *hijra*, most of the Arab immigrant population still remained pagan.[11]

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8 It is necessary to mention here that the historical-critical approach to studies on the Hadith was to a large extent initiated over a century ago by the Hungarian scholar of Islam, Ignaz Goldziher, considered as one of the fathers and founders of modern Islamic studies in the West (e.g. through his flagship work *Muhammedanische Studien*, published in two volumes in Halle in 1889 and 1890). He was followed by many prominent scholars, including Joseph Schacht (1902–1969), who was known for his invention of the critical "common link" method regarding the Hadith, which was successfully applied by many scholars of the Orient. Inter alia, see Schacht 1967.

9 These arguments have been raised repeatedly by Orientalists (e.g. in Humphrey 1991: 83).

10 On 6 November 2007, Prof. Abu Zayd visited Warsaw University, lecturing on "Reformation of Islamic Thought".

11 On the same subject, see Ohlig 2007: 310–312.

A slightly different view is presented by the historian of religion and theologian Volker Popp of the Inarah Institute. In his opinion, the motherland of the Arab newcomers from the seventh century should not be traced back to the Arabian Peninsula, but to Mesopotamia, to the east of Greater Syria (Popp 2007a; 2007b). Popp believes that the Middle Eastern literature of the seventh and eighth centuries contains only rare non-biblical, measurable indications of the geographical origin of the Arab rulers. These few indications point usually to "the land of Arabia", which was already known in pre-Islamic times and in the late antique literature as the area stretching between the Nabateans' lands and mid-northern Mesopotamia. The German historian claims that no earlier than the late eighth century did there appear the first literary materials pointing to a link between Islam and the Arabian Peninsula, namely the existence of Medina and, even later, Mecca (whose geographical location would still remain undefined for a long time).

The authors of this alternative account of Islamic history maintain that traces of the genesis of this religion lead to central Mesopotamia and further east to the Persian provinces of Khorasan and Merv (Popp 2008: 83–92). Beginning in the third century AD, these provinces became the destination point of a forced resettlement of thousands of Arab Christians from Antioch and other parts of Greater Syria, at the order of Persian Sassanid rulers. Historical annals contain references to a more or less unspecified people called 'Arabi, living in the period before Islam in the region of the ancient city of Hatra (nowadays in northern Iraq).[12] Christian communes who resettled in the Sassanid Empire for several centuries of life in exile did not lose their early Christian faith, but they did not take part in the ongoing evolution of the Christian doctrine either – due to their lack of contact with the western church. In the second decade of the seventh century, as a result of the victorious military campaign of the emperor Heraclius

12 As Volker Popp writes, on inscriptions from the 7th century found in the region of Hatra the ruler describes himself as "the king of Hatra (*mlk hdr*) and the whole (a)'R(a)B", which in the local language (from the Semitic family) meant "west, the Western area" (i.e. lying west of the river Tigris). This would mean that the land defined as Arabia lay within the al-Jazira in Mesopotamia. The Athenian historian and traveler Xenophon (430–355 BC) writes, describing the march of the army of Cyrus the Younger (with several thousand Greek mercenaries) from Sardis to Babylon in 401 BC, that soldiers "passed through Arabia, keeping the Euphrates to their right". It means that the land referred to as "Arabia" was located in central Mesopotamia. Also, the Roman historian Pliny the Younger situated this land "east of the Euphrates and south of the Taurus mountains". Hence, the '*Arabī* people were inhabitants of the west Sassanid province of Hatra who communicated – according to Popp – in the language defined by the Qur'an as *lisān* '*arabī mubīn* (Q. 16:103, 9:90). In the administrative letters of Darius (521–486 BC) and other Persian rulers, the land known as *Arabāya* stretches between Assyria and Egypt, which coincides with the description of Herodotus and additionally includes the Syrian Desert. For the Romans, the name *Arabāya* also meant Nabatean land. (Popp 2007b: 15–16; Hoyland 2001: 2–3)

over the Persians and the total defeat of the Sassanid Empire, the ʻArabi population – displaced centuries before – set out on a return journey (*hijra*), out of the house of slavery and bondage, back to the promised land and Jerusalem.

Thus, in the revisionist theory underpinned by theology, the displaced ʻArabi brought with them on their return back to Greater Syria regressive Christian pre-Nicaean theology (from before the First Council of Nicaea in 325) with admixtures of non-Christian monotheistic beliefs. This theology was later to underlie the dogmatic foundations of the future Islamic religion. At the same time, in the seventh century the indigenous sedentary Arab population of Greater Syria was mostly Christianised, adhering to the east and west Syriac rites (Monophysitic/Jacobite). This applies above all to the rulers of the Umayyad period, including Muʻawiya (602–680), who – in the theory of the Inarah Institute – was a Christian. Popp (2007b: 60–63) writes that it is hard to determine which faction of Christianity Muʻawiya was in favor of. However, since Christian texts from the seventh century (both east and west Syriac) praise him, he must have been tolerant, staying out of theological disputes. The same applies to his local governors (Ohlig 2007: 318).[13]

The revisionists also highlight the fact that the Middle Eastern chronicles of the seventh and eighth centuries that have survived to our times are not only silent about the emergence of a new great religion (i.e. Islam), but they are also very restrained in their accounts of the Arab conquests, military campaigns, and battles, which – according to the traditional Muslim account of history – occurred after the death of the Prophet Muhammad.[14] Ohlig (2007: 317–318) believes that on the basis of the Syriac literature preceding the eighth century, one cannot speak of Arab conquests at all. Only occasionally do there appear mentions of local battles (sometimes with the names of towns), which were fought during the Arab takeover of the autonomous rule in the third decade of the seventh century. According to the revisionist school, the Arabs took control of the eastern provinces of the Byzantine Empire almost without a fight, because

13 Christian texts also indicate that prior to Muʻawiya's reign, due to the military and administrative withdrawal of the Byzantines from Greater Syria, many regions fell victim to chaos and disorder; only Muʻawiya restored order after taking power, and for this he was lavishly given accolades by Christian authors. However, after the takeover by ʻAbd al-Malik, the Arab reign began to be perceived by Christian authors as evil. There again appear references to apocalypses, combined with the hope that Arab power would soon reach its end.

14 It should be noted that ancient and mediaeval chronicles go beyond a factual description of events in their chronological order. Historiographic facts are woven into these chronicles amongst dozens of stories, accounts, legends, comments, and interpretations of events in the spirit of the represented religion or political discourse. Nonetheless, these old chronicles also contain hard historical facts, to which references are sometimes made indirectly.

Byzantium decided not to defend these lands and had withdrawn from them much earlier (this process had been going on since at least mid-fifth century, and it was completed by the end of the sixth century) (Koren & Nevo 1991: 100–102; Jones 2003: 411–412). No major battles were fought, and there were only local skirmishes with troops summoned by local nobles. According to the revisionist theory, contrary to the stories of violent Muslim conquests of Syria, Egypt, and southern Iraq, neither the written sources of the seventh century nor archaeological finds provide evidence that the Arab military campaigns actually took place. The Arabs did not have to conquer these lands, because they had inhabited them and governed them already since the sixth century (Popp 2007b: 122). After the year 622, only (or as much as) the administrative status of this region changed. Syria ceased to be the Byzantine buffer zone governed by Arab vassals and became an independent state.[15]

Ohlig claims that the Arabs assumed formal control over the area of western Syria after the Byzantine Empire excluded this region from its administration in 622, and in practice only after the death of the emperor Heraclius in 640. As for eastern Syria, the Arabs finally came to power after the fall of the Sassanid Empire. (Ohlig 2008: 10–34) The revisionists do not dispute the fact that in many places the takeover depended on forceful means. They argue, however, that the clashes were local and of a marginal nature, and that the dates of skirmishes and the names mentioned by the non-Arab literature of the seventh century do not match the information put forth by the Islamic tradition. Ohlig maintains that in order to reconcile these contradictions, oriental scholars in the West were long accustomed to misinterpreting facts and arbitrarily associating the names of some battles with other ones (e.g. the name of Gabitha is associated with the name Yarmuk) (Ohlig 2007: 318; Nevo & Koren 2003: 6). For example, in *A History of Heraclius*, the chronicle of the well-known seventh-century Armenian chronicler Sebeos, a concise description of an unnamed and undated military confrontation between the Ismaelites and the Byzantines is commonly interpreted as the Battle of Yarmuk, which took place between Muslims and the Byzantines in 636. As Nevo and Koren note, the description of this confrontation, as well as of other battles, is similar in its superficiality to the narration typical of the Muslim tradition – it consists mainly of stereotypes and narrative topoi repeated many types in the same way, including very general topographic descriptions that are useless when it comes to determining the location of the battle. Thus, according

15 Popp describes the newly formed autonomous Arab state as "ephemeral", for its permanent political power was to involve for a long time only Jerusalem, Damascus and Merv (the latter was 'Abd al-Malik's homeland), where the 'Arabi religious movement was focused (Popp 2007b: 154).

to these two Israeli researchers, the description of the Battle of Yarmuk in the Muslim sources does not contain anything that could distinguish it from other mythical confrontations. The topography of the river matches nearly every river in the region, and references to a cliff and strong currents have no great value in identifying the place of the battle. (Nevo & Koren 2003: 6, 125–127)

CONCLUSION

The publications of the revisionist school repeatedly point out that already in the nineteenth century, the Hungarian Orientalist Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921) showed that there existed no hard scientific evidence confirming the historical value of the early Islamic literature (Goldziher 1901). Similar conclusions were reached a hundred years later by John Wansbrough (1987: 14–15), who stressed that the traditional Muslim literature from the ninth century should not be seen as a statutory interpretation of historical knowledge about the events from the seventh or eighth centuries. Sulayman Bashir (1947–1991), a Palestinian historian, went a step further when he noted (1984) that many events in the life of the Muslim community reported in the traditional sources are de facto stories written two centuries later and do not have a lot (or anything) in common with the actual facts of the first period of Islam. Revisionists define this phenomenon as the reverse projection of history or the historicisation of facts. They emphasise that the modern account of the genesis of Islam, commonly recognised in the East and West, is based exclusively on written sources of the Muslim tradition written down in the ninth century. This means that historical knowledge concerning the course of events in the seventh and eighth centuries is reconstructed on the basis of reports of authors who lived 150–200 years later. In the words of Nevo and Koren, this proves a complete lack of historical criticism and should be unacceptable to rationally oriented scientists – all the more so as archaeological, epigraphic and numismatic evidence testifies to a completely different version of history. In their flagship book, they write, "Non-contemporary literary sources are, in our opinion, inadmissible as historical evidence. If one has no source of knowledge of the 7th century except texts written in the 9th century or later, one cannot know anything about the 7th century: one can only know what people in the 9th century or later believed about the 7th." (Nevo & Koren 2003: 9–10)

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