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A PLEA FOR THE PERIODIZATION OF ISLAMIC HISTORY*

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WHY PERIODIZATION? Why should we break up the grand course of Islamic history into periods, neatly defined by dates and labelled with specific characteristics? The science of Islamic studies already has become dangerously morselled because of the specialization necessitated by subject matter, such as language, literature, history, sociology and economics, theology, mysticism, law, philosophy, sciences and medicine, art and archaeology, epigraphy and numismatics. Why should we add to this process of atomization a further element of division, with the ever present threat of over-specialization in one field and ignorance in most of the others?

If I had been endowed with the gift of cynicism, I would say: we need periodization in order to do without it, or, to put it more positively, periodization is most valuable when we are aware of its limited validity. When, in 1860, Jacob Burckhardt published his Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien, he coined a concept of great persuasiveness and general acceptance. However, he was followed in 1927 by Charles Homer Haskins' The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century, and meanwhile it has become commonplace to speak about the Carolingian and other medieval renaissances. In an article in The American Historical Review (vol. 57, 1951, 1-21), entitled “Still Another Renaissance?” Professor Robert Sabatino Lopez of Yale University shows how the term renaissance was applied to various periods of the Middle Ages, in opposition to which it had been originally created. He himself adds a new renaissance of his own discovery, namely that of the tenth century. However, it is certainly true to say that despite this watering down of an originally precise term, the word renaissance fulfilled and still is fulfilling a useful service to the understanding of the course of human history. Despite all medieval antecedents, an absolutely new and specific culture developed in Italy during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, in which the renaissance, or revival, of classical arts, literature and ideals was a dominant feature. It was the emphasis on this aspect by Burckhardt which induced later generations of scholars to scrutinize the continued existence of the classical tradition and trends of revival and recovery in other times and countries as well. Thus we see that the limited validity of a term does not necessarily diminish its value both as a means for the characterization of a certain period and as an inducement for a critical examination of others.

With this consideration in mind, which is both a precaution and an encouragement, we turn to Islamic history. We are bound to dissolve this long stretch of time into its organic units for one simple reason. For the sake of truth. Great forces of continuity were active in the history of the Islamic peoples. But continuity does not imply uniformity. During the last thirteen and a half centuries the Islamic world went through definitely distinct phases. If we do not keep these phases apart, we incur the danger of abstracting a general picture of Islam which never was a historic reality, and, vice versa, depriving the various Islamic cultures of their specific merits and contributions.

Let me illustrate this by one, albeit very central problem, the question of how far Islam was able to absorb and digest the heritage of Hellas. This subject was discussed in the early decades of this century by such scholars as Ernst Troeltsch and Hans Heinrich Schaeder, whose attitude was largely negative, and C. H. Becker and Werner Jaeger, who took a more positive view. In our own time not only professional students of the Greek heritage in Islam, such as Richard Walzer and Abd al-Rahman Badawi, but many general Islamicists have taken part in this discussion. Suffice it to mention the names of Rudi Paret, Bertold Spuler, G. E. von Grunebaum and above all that of the lamented Jörg Kraemer in his


The solution is along the lines of periodization. If we recognize the four hundred years approximately between 850 and 1250 as a distinct and specific culture, provisionally labelled The Intermediate Civilization (this term will be explained presently), then we shall find that the assimilation by it of the Greek heritage was remarkably successful in breadth and depth as well as in duration. The Islamic Hellenism of that period certainly differed essentially from the humanism of modern times, but Hellenistic it was. This is first evidenced by the unique position and wide diffusion of the medical profession with its secular scientific training and its interconfessional character. As late a book as the thirteenth century “History of the Physicians” by Ibn Abi Usaybi’a betrays this scientific and interconfessional attitude. The Geniza documents show that even small provincial towns in Egypt harbored one or several Jewish doctors, who most probably had also Christian or Muslim colleagues. Although doctors then, as today, were expensive, one applied to them frequently even for trifling stomach troubles. This efflorescence of medicine, to which we could add the equally remarkable prospering of pharmacology, was due not to the general desire of human beings to preserve their health. At the beginning of the twentieth century there was not a single Arab physician with scientific training in a country of ancient civilization as Yemen. The exaggerated appreciation of medicine by the population at large during the tenth through the thirteenth centuries was due to the spirit of the Intermediate Civilization, the belief in the truth and efficacy of science.

Secondly, the basic concepts of the universe, its astronomical, geographical and biological aspects, were essentially Hellenistic. Thirdly, Greek logic and dialectics permeated the whole of Islamic thinking. Almost every Islamic book written, say, after A.D. 1000 bears the stamp of this influence. Compare the two classics of Islamic pietism, Abū Ṭalib al-Makki’s Qūṭ al-qulābā and Ghazālī’s Iḥyā. The latter copied the former to a very large extent.

But while the “pre-Hellenistic” Abū Ṭalib’s work was a rather unsystematic heap of quotations, Ghazālī, an ardent, albeit critical, student of Greek philosophy, created a masterpiece of disciplined and well organized exposition.

Finally, the touchstone of a civilization is the harmony, certitude and completeness of world view attained by its outstanding representatives. To us, the amalgamation of the Greek and indigenous heritages may appear in some cases as difficult, but there are enough examples of excellent men who were perfectly at home in the two worlds as they understood and needed them. Such different personalities as Miskawayh and al-Birūnī, who were active during the heyday of this period, and Ibn Rushd and Maimonides, who lived near its end, may serve as illustration. Four hundred years is a very long stretch of time, comparable to the duration of the prevalence of classical humanism in Europe (1500-1900). The fading out of the Hellenistic tradition from most of the later Islamic cultures does not reflect on the vital importance it had during the era of the Intermediate Civilization. We only must get accustomed to the idea that Islamic history consists in a series of different cultures, each with its own set of values and specific types of personalities.

This alertness to the change of times and difference of epochs also will enable us to define more clearly and more correctly the limits between one cultural unit and its successor. It has been commonplace with us to speak of an Arabic as opposed to an Islamic era of Islamic history. Since J. Wellhausen published his classic Das Arabische Reich, we have become accustomed to the terms “The Arab Kingdom” and “The Islamic Empire,” the advent of the ‘Abbasids forming the dividing line. We find this distinction in such general works as Carl Brockelmann’s History of the Islamic Peoples and Bernard Lewis’ short, but meaty and stimulating, The Arabs in History. B. Lewis goes so far as to compare the victory of the ‘Abbasids and the changes coinciding with it to the French and the Bolshevik revolutions. Is this correct? Was 750 really such a great watershed? Or is it not rather necessary for us to reassess and revise our traditional division of Islamic history, which, whatever we may say, has been orientated up till now far too much on a change of dynasties. As a matter of fact, such doubts are not new. Aḥmad Aḥmīd, the Egyptian
historian, following others, expressed in his *Duha 'l-Islām* the opinion that, even without the transition of the caliphate from the Umayyads to the 'Abbasids, the same or similar changes would have taken place as those usually described in our history books. Where then is the dividing line between Arabic Islam and the subsequent era, which we have provisionally characterized as the Intermediate Civilization?

At this point permit me to make a personal remark. After completing the printing of the fifth volume of al-Balādhūrī’s *Ansāb al-Ashrāf*, which in fact involved preparations for the publication of the whole work, I decided to embark on the study of the 'Abbasid period. I did so simply because I felt that there we were on slippery ground. What we used to say at that time about such questions as the vizierate, the most characteristic innovation of the 'Abbasids, or the 'Abbasid state in general or the transformation of society under their rule seemed to be too general and unfounded. The fruit of my labors in those days is apparent in some later publications such as “The Origin of the Vizierate and its True Meaning,” or “A Turning-point in the History of the Muslim State” or “The Rise of Near-Eastern Bourgeoisie in Early Islamic Times” (all included now in my *Studies in Islamic History and Institutions*, cf. above). Preoccupations in other fields, first an important assignment outside the University, later on work with immigrants from rural Yemen, and during the last fifteen years, the intensive study of the documents of the Cairo Geniza, forced me to abandon any concentration on the early 'Abbasids. However, one lasting impression remained with me from those days of intensive study and it is renewed again and again whenever I touch this period. The first hundred years or so of the 'Abbasids did not see the eclipse of the Arabs, but were the very apogee and consummation of Arabism. It was the period during which the superiority of the Arabs was codified in Islamic religion. The Arab caliphs were still the rulers. Their viziers and other servants were nothing but freedmen, who could be humiliated, dismissed or executed at will. Islamic law provided at that time that only Qoraysh could rule the world and that no non-Arab Muslim was supposed to marry an Arab woman. The knowledge of the Arabic language was declared an intrinsic part of the Islamic faith. All these provisions have come down to us in works written by non-Arabs. This complete self-effacement of the Persians, the Jews and other ancient peoples is indeed the most characteristic aspect of this century. The world was exclusively Arabic. There was only one object really worthy of study: the Arabs and their Prophet, which meant in terms of subjects: Arabic language, poetry, gnomology, genealogy and history, as well as Koran, Ḥadīth and Fiqh. Abū Nuwās, the poet, and Sibawayhi the grammarian, and countless others occupied with Arabic letters, were Persians. Marwān ibn Abī Ḥafṣa, the panegyrist of the 'Abbasids, and Abū 'Ubayda, who boasted that two horses never met either before or after the advent of Islam, namely in the battles of the Arabs, without his knowing of them, were both of Judeo-Persian origin. However, these facts do not prove the rising importance of the subject population, but the opposite, its undoing, the renouncing of its identity and the adoption by it of Arabism.

Greek influence still was slight during the first century of the 'Abbasids so that it cannot be regarded as a constituent factor in the civilization of Arabic Islam. To be sure, some Greek elements were present everywhere, even in the Ḥadīth, more pronouncedly in the Mu'tazila and the beginnings of the Kalām. Djiāḥīz used Aristotelian texts, and there is of course Abū Ya'qūb al-Kindī, “the philosopher of the Arabs,” who was active around the middle of the ninth century. Such great men as Djiāḥīz and al-Kindī were of course Januses standing on the threshold of two periods, but they, even al-Kindī, essentially belong to Arabic Islam. For al-Kindī's interest was in the practical sciences rather than in philosophy and as far as he dealt with philosophy, he treated it—as Richard Walzer has pointed out—as the handmaid of theology.

In short, the great watershed of Islamic history is to be sought around not 750, but 850. If an exact date is demanded I should suggest 838, the year of the foundation of Sāmarrā, the garrison city of the Turkish guards of Mu'taṣīm. This foundation symbolizes the end of Arabic supremacy and the beginning of the domination of the Middle East by persons and peoples of Turkish extraction. Secondly, this unparalleled enormous undertaking was confided to al-Zayyāt, a man coming not from the ranks of the scribes, nor from the Persian aristocracy, but from the rising merchant class—also a fact indicative of new developments. Thirdly,
the art of Sámarra betrays a mixture or juxtaposition of styles, a new type of art which should be regarded as imperial rather than local, as the beginnings of something specifically “Islamic” and not merely as a continuation of pre-Islamic practices.

Since it could lead us too far afield to discuss all the other aspects of periodization, I should like to submit herewith an outline of the proposed division of Islamic history into organic units.

1. Arabism and Arabic Islam. 500-850 A.D.

The dominant feature of this era is the rise of an Arab nation through the miraculous creation of a literary language comprising a vast multitude of tribes. Islam itself, with its Arabic Koran, is to be regarded as part and parcel of that miraculous linguistic process. This concept of Islam as the self-realization of the Arab nation has been dealt with by me in detail in a paper called “The Four Faces of Islam,” the introductory essay to my Studies in Islamic History and Institutions.

The particular role of Qoraysh in this process, so emphatically underlined by the provision of Islamic law mentioned before, should not be overlooked. These experts in the great transit trade, in the organization and movement of caravans and in the forming of ever changing alliances, proved to be excellent leaders in both war and peace. A study of the strategy and logistics of the wars of conquest has convinced me that the Arab victories were due not only to religious zeal and lust for booty, but to superior military leadership. It was a victory of business executives over professional generals.

The complete success of the Arabization process was due not only to the fact that the Arabs were the conquerors and masters, for most conquering nations did not succeed in imposing their language on the subject population. It was their infatuation with their beautiful language and their general receptiveness for values of culture which made the first period of Islam one of Arabic civilization, albeit many elements of the religion of Islam, both kóranic and post-kóranic, were of foreign origin. It was the period of the rise of the Arabic people as well as of the conquests and inner consolidation of primitive Islam.

2. The Intermediate Civilization. 850-1250.

Intermediate, not Intermediary, for that civilization created values of its own and was not a mere transmitter of an ancient heritage. This civilization was intermediate in time between Middle Eastern Hellenism and European Renaissance, in character between predominantly secular late antiquity and outspokenly clerical medieval Europe, and intermediate in location, because it bordered in the East on the civilizations of India and China and in the West on those of Europe and Africa and assimilated significant elements from all the four. The period is characterized by a comparatively free, monetary economy, by the predominance of the middle class, by the wide diffusion of the Greek secular sciences and by an extremely rich and flexible creativeness in the field of religion.

3. Institutionalized Islam, territorial, mostly non-Arab civilizations. 1250-1800.

The time of military feudalism and state bureaucracy, of state monopolies, of supervision of the economy and of artisans guilds, which represented new creations and formed no continuation of the pre-Islamic corporations. Everything becomes organized, religion—through a large salaried officialdom, through schools, colleges, convents and Sufi fraternities, and sciences—in neatly arranged encyclopedias and handbooks, often of great merit. Religious creativity is largely replaced by obscurantism, and true ecstatic mysticism by speculative theosophy. In the later part of this period markedly diversified cultures are emerging, which differ from each other not only by language and partly also sectarian schisms, but by many other traits, especially in art and architecture, as well as in their attitude to philosophy and the sciences.

4. Transition to National Cultures, Mainly Inspired by Sources other than Islam. 1800-.

The beginning of western impact on the Islamic peoples has been dated as coinciding with the peace of Karlovitz in 1699, which showed the Ottoman Turks that they must learn from Europe if they wanted to survive, or with the battle of Plassey in 1757, which put Bengal under English suzerainty, or more commonly with Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798. A still more realistic watershed
would be the eighteen-fifties, when steamboats and railways brought East and West physically near to each other. The reaction to this impact was a certain degree of united effort to defend Islam, which effort, however, should not be mistaken for an Islamic revival. Apologetics is no creative theology and the driving ideas behind all effective movements in the Islamic world during the last one hundred years were of foreign origin, such as liberalism, secularism, nationalism, fascism, socialism and communism. However, this is a period of transition and formation. No one can predict today the future role of Islamic religion in this process. Under these circumstances it is highly reassuring that some of our most prominent Islamists in various countries have not abandoned this field entirely to the political scientists, economists and journalists, who by profession are called upon to deal with current events, but bravely keep watch and try to dissect the present situation in the light of Islam. Thus, the still unfinished period through which the Muslim world is passing in modern times also has to be regarded as a distinct and specific division of Islamic history.

In conclusion, periodization is not meant merely as a didactic device. It is a scientific prerequisite. The four periods of Arabo-Islamic history represent four different types of civilization. No Muslim living today is able to create art of the type found in the time we characterized as the Intermediate Civilization or to think in terms of the philosophers of that age. This is only natural. No European is creating today art in the spirit of the Gothic or the Renaissance or engages in scholastic philosophy—despite all neo-Thomists and despite all our knowledge of the esthetic and technical aspects of medieval art.

It was only the European prejudice or legend of the immovable East as well as insufficient familiarity with the sources which induced people to take Islamic civilization as a single unit stretching with only insignificant variations from the times of the Arab prophet to the socialism of Nasser or the constitutional birth-pangs of Pakistan. Time has come that we rid ourselves of that prejudice and assign to each of the Islamic civilizations its proper place. Once the problem is clearly conceived and stated, the way is free for a closer examination and fuller definition of the characteristics of each period.

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OTTOMAN TURKISH NAMES:
THE CHOICE OF ENTRY WORDS FOR ALPHABETICAL LISTING

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Bibliography and Abbreviations


İnal = İnal, İbnülemin Mahmud Kemal. Osmanlı Devrinde Son Sadrazamlar. İstanbul, Milli Eğitim Basını, 1940-53. ["The last Grand Viziers in the Ottoman period"].

IA = İslam Ansiklopedisi. İstanbul, 1941-. "In progress. ["[Turkish] Encyclopaedia of Islam"].

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1 This paper was read at the 175th Annual Meeting of the American Oriental Society, held in Chicago, April 13th, 1965. Some additions have been made to include comments on PTP 2, the Anglo-American Rules of 1967 and the Kitap Kataloğu Muralla, which became available later.