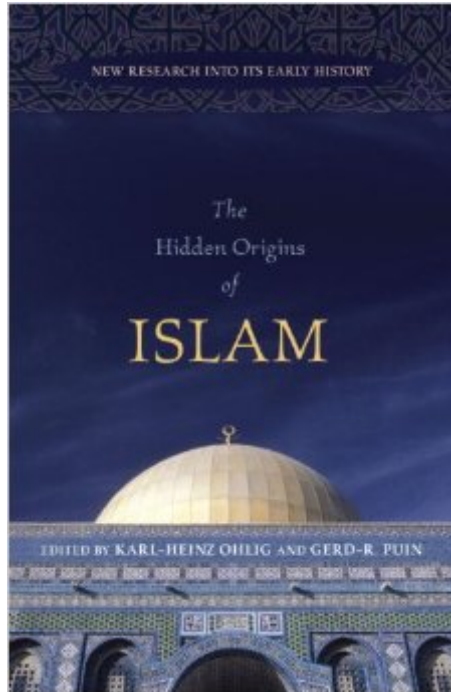


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The Hidden Origins Of Islam: New Research Into Its Early History



Synopsis

Despite Muhammad's exalted place in Islam, even today there is still surprisingly little actually known about this shadowy figure and the origins of the Qur'an because of an astounding lack of verifiable biographical material. Furthermore, most of the existing biographical traditions that can be used to substantiate the life of Muhammad date to nearly two centuries after his death, a time when a powerful, expansive, and idealized empire had become synonymous with his name and vision - thus resulting in an exaggerated and often artificial characterization of the prophetic figure coupled with many questionable interpretations of the holy book of Islam. On the basis of datable and localizable artifacts from the seventh and eighth centuries of the Christian era, many of the historical developments, misconceptions, and fallacies of Islam can now be seen in a different light. Excavated coins that predate Islam and the old inscription in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem utilize symbols used in a documented Syrian Arabic theology - a theology with Christian roots. Interpreting traditional contexts of historical evidence and rereading passages of the Qur'an, the researchers in this thought-provoking volume unveil a surprising - and highly unconventional - picture of the very foundations of Islamic religious history.

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Customer Reviews

"The Hidden History of Islam" contains ten essays. The two editors Puin and Ohlig reserve to themselves the ninth and tenth essays, respectively. In addition the chronic editor Ibn Warraq has the fifth slot. The famous, or perhaps notorious, Christoph Luxenberg has the second. The

remaining six are from scholars you may or may not have heard of. Volker Popp's essay is the first, and at over 100 pages easily the longest. This purports to be a history of Islam "as others saw it" (in Hoyland's terms). Luxenberg's essay explicates the inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock. The third essay, Claude Gilliot's, seeks to confirm the Syriac Hymnody / Lectionary theses of Lueling and Luxenberg. The fourth is de Premare's essay on 'Abd al-Malik's and al-Hajjaj's Qur'an. Ibn Warraq's contribution is a summary of others' scholarship, of the sort he has written elsewhere. The sixth and seventh essays deal with the language and script of early Arabic during the first century AH. The eighth essay by Alba Fideli details a variant text-type in palimpsests of suras 2 and 5. Puin offers a speculative essay on some names in the Book. Ohlig ends it with an overview of the nature of Christianity in Syria before Islam. Overall, the book argues for early Islam as a rebellion of extremist Syrian Christianity against Nestorian Christianity: first restoring what one might term a neo-Arianism, then turning against Byzantine (and Monophysite) Christianity, and finally under al-Hajjaj defining itself as a new faith. Of these, I have found Popp's essay to be overly revisionist, like the thesis of Nevo / Koren, or once upon a time Crone. Luxenberg needs to understand the state of the Qur'an's text, and the significance of the Dome's architecture - or, if he does understand the state of the question, then he needs to take sides. As they stand and as the scholarly consensus stands, both initial essays are castles on air. Gilliot's essay does not, in my opinion, succeed in confirming Luxenberg. After these semi-scholarly miasmata, it is a breath of fresh air to stumble upon a translation of de Premare. This essay is now being cited elsewhere, for instance in David Powers's "Muhammad is not the father of any of your men"; and reading it, you see why. It is a modern-day classic to rank with the best of Schacht and well above Juynboll. My only complaints are in its brevity; there are other evidences it could have cited and did not. Ibn Warraq does not keep up this pace, but his latest summary does contain some data he didn't include in his earlier summaries. The sixth and seventh essays didn't hold my interest, but perhaps others will find them useful. Fideli's work is vitally important in showing us that variant texts did exist; and if you are working with the suras in question, you will definitely need it. Puin's essay is a nice little thought-experiment, but as with Luxenberg's essay here it does depend on when and where the relevant suras were written. Another breath of fresh air comes at the end. We've long needed an essay on how Christians in the relevant areas - Syria, Arabia, and Iraq - understood and lived their faith. Ohlig has given us that. Therefore I count two essays which are critically necessary for everyone (4 and 10); two essays for philologists (6, 7); one essay for text-critics and Qur'an-skeptics (8); and one essay for fans of Ibn Warraq (5). The other four essays, I find generally unhelpful; because they require a history of the Qur'an independent of the Sira, and none such exists. I do hold out hope that the four

scholars involved will help us to find one.

Throughout history autocrats have recognized the value of religious ideas and feelings for promoting social cohesion and support for government. Accordingly, autocratically governed empires have promoted official religions and have styled themselves as protectors of their religions and as agents their gods. In many cultures the origins of religious concepts are obscure. During the first two and a half centuries of Christianity the religion was independent of and often persecuted by the (Roman) government. Only under Constantine in 312 and following did the government identify with and exploit Christianity. (There is a nice essay on this theme by Shaye I.D. Cohen at [...]). The book "The Hidden Origins of Islam" deals among other things with the relationship between the Arian form of Christianity in vogue among the Arab aristocracies of southern Iran and eastern Iraq in the 7th century, the formation of the Arab empire in the power vacuum left in those regions following the Byzantine defeat of the Persians in 622 CE, the tangible evidence concerning religious ideas in the Arab empire in the 7th century, and the appearance of Islamic literary documents (other than the Qur'an) in Arabic in the 9th century. I found the first chapter by Popp and the 2nd chapter by Luxenberg particularly compelling. It will be interesting to see if any of the scholars who work within the framework of the traditional Islamic stories of Islamic origins can find any basic flaws in the marshalling and interpretation of objective evidence presented in this book and in related studies by scholars such as Kalisch.

The final result of all this must be left to professional historians, yet some of the facts will simply not go away. Following the historic method of Mommsen, the scholars gathered here present some facts that will make your head hurt. Let me first establish the contrast between "traditional Islamic history" and the facts as they appear on the ground. In "traditional Islamic history," the Khalif Mu'awiyya fought big battles for Islam, and so did his three followers: Abd-el Malik and the rest. Unfortunately, "traditional Islamic history" appears to be a special kind of fiction, because the coins and inscriptions found on the ground make it quite obvious that Mu'awiyya and his three successors had never heard of Muhammad, the Koran, Islam, or the word "Khalif" = "ruler." What is even worse, they were all Christians! Of course, the history of Arab Christianity -- although quite long and interesting -- is not something that modern Muslims like to deal with. On the contrary, as in Egypt, they have implemented stringent controls over education, which forbid the teaching of pre-Islamic Egyptian history, which to my mind was much more interesting than the "post-Islamic" history. As a result of this explosive book, we have to face the possibility that Muhammad never

existed, that the Koran was pasted together from Syriac-Aramaic Christian sources, and that the whole thing was a bundle of bushwah created to defend the now "Islamic" empire. I don't think you need me to tell you that Muslims will not be "happy" about this book. And I am not qualified to see where all this will go (not being an expert in the participle gerundial in Syriac.) I would also warn you that this book is Hard. Probably not for beginners. One interesting fact: the collapse of the Sassanian dynasty led to the collapse of Zoroastrianism in Iran. The living religions were Nestorian Christianity and a lot of Buddhism in Eastern Iran.

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