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Introduction

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The following story, which appears in the *History* of Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), is one of many that describe how the ʿAbbāsid caliph Abū Jaʿfar al-Manṣūr (r. 136–58/754–75) chose the site for his new city of Baghdad. The event is said to have taken place in year 763 of the Common Era, some thirteen years after the revolution that brought the ʿAbbāsids to power.

> It was reported on the authority of Muḥammad b. Ṣāliḥ b. al-Naṭṭāḥ, on the authority of Muḥammad b. Jābir and his father, who said: When Abū Jaʿfar decided to build the city of Baghdad, he saw a monk, to whom he called out. When he responded, he asked him, 'Do you find in your books [a prediction] that a city will be built here?' 'Yes', said the monk, 'Miqlāṣ will build it.' Abū Jaʿfar exclaimed, 'I was called Miqlāṣ when I was young!', to which the monk said, 'Then you must be the one to build it!'
>
> He [the narrator] then continued: Likewise, when Abū Jaʿfar decided to build the city of al-Rāfiqa, which is in territory that once belonged to the Byzantines, the people of [the nearby city of] al-Raqqa objected and resolved to fight him, saying, 'You will ruin our markets, take away our livelihoods and reduce our houses.' Abū Jaʿfar was determined to take them on, and wrote to a monk in the [nearby] monastery, asking: 'Do you know anything about a city that will be built here?' The monk replied, 'I have heard that a man called Miqlāṣ will build it,' so Abu Jaʿfar said, 'I am Miqlāṣ!' So he built it on the model of Baghdad, except for the walls, the iron gates and the single ditch.[1]

The double anecdote, which sits near the middle of the chronological range of this first volume of the *New Cambridge history of Islam*, anticipates many of the themes and issues of this and succeeding volumes in the series, such as state (and city) building, the role of non-Muslims in Muslim societies, the role

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[1] I translate loosely from Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh al-rusul waʾl-mulūk*, ed. M. J. de Goeje et al., 15 vols. in 3 series (Leiden, 1879–1901), series III, p. 276.

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of caliphs and dynastic politics. Three themes are especially significant, however, and these may profitably be put here in question form.

How do we know what we know of early Islam?

The alert reader will have noticed that while al-Manṣūr's building plans are said to date from 763, the *History* in which we read of these plans was written by a historian who died in 923, about 160 years after the accounts he relates (I leave aside the question of our historian's informants, many of whom lived considerably earlier). The same reader might wonder if there was anything earlier to read, or if al-Ṭabarī's description of Baghdad and al-Rāfiqa can be corroborated by archaeological evidence. The unfortunate fact is that although we do happen to possess some excellent archaeology for al-Rāfiqa (which lay on the Euphrates in present-day Syria),[2] one cannot do better than al-Ṭabarī for the founding of Baghdad; no earlier source has more to say about the foundation of this or any other early Islamic city. Meanwhile, we have no archaeological evidence from Baghdad with which to confirm his description: civil wars, economic decline, Mongols and modernity have conspired to obliterate and seal eighth- and ninth-century layers of the settlement.

Does this matter? After all, one might reasonably base a history of the French Revolution of 1789 upon Georges Lefebvre's *The coming of the French Revolution*, which was published in 1949. The difficulty for us is caused not merely by the passing of time. It lies more in questions of method, purpose, perspective and scope. For all that he was a great historian, al-Ṭabarī was no Georges Lefebvre; he was a great historian by the standards of the day, which, being considerably lower than the Annales school of post-war France, made ample room for myths, legends, stereotypes, distortions and polemics. It is hard to believe that al-Manṣūr conversed with a local monk about his plans for Baghdad, and this for several reasons, one of which is that other Islamic cities are outfitted with similar foundation stories. Surely the nature and date of our sources *must* matter; as the editor of an earlier Cambridge *History* put it: 'It is by solidity of criticism more than by the plenitude of erudition, that the study of history strengthens, and straightens, and extends the mind.' 'For the critic', continued Lord Acton, 'is one who, when he lights on an interesting statement, begins by suspecting it.'[3]

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[2] On al-Raqqa and al-Rāfiqa, see S. Heidemann and A. Becker (eds.), *Raqqa II: Die islamische Stadt* (Mainz am Rhein, 2003).

[3] J. E. E. D. A. (Lord) Acton, *Lectures on modern history*, ed. J. N. Figgis and R. V. Laurence (London, 1906), p. 15.

And suspicious we have become. This – the realisation that what we know about early Islam is less certain than what we thought we knew, and that writing history in this period and region requires altogether more sophisticated and resourceful approaches – is one of a handful of notable advances made in Islamic studies since the original *Cambridge history of Islam* was published in 1970. Now it is true that Islamic studies has long tolerated and occasionally cultivated a critical spirit; Ignaz Goldziher, arguably the greatest Islamicist of all, had published his revolutionarily critical work on early Islam some five years before Lord Acton's Inaugural Lecture.[4] The two scholars were breathing the same air. Still, these and other critical approaches to Islamic history were marginalised for much of the twentieth century, giving way to a less subtle and more credulous positivism; to Acton's dismay, 'the weighing of testimony' was *not* held 'more meritorious than the potential discovery of new matter'.[5] It was only in the last quarter of that century that things changed, as Orientalist positivism fell into disrepute, and historical criticism was put at the heart of understanding early Islam. To some extent, this more critical attitude towards our written source reflects broader academic trends in the 1960s and early 1970s, when adjacent fields, such as the academic study of Rabbinic Judaism, raised their standards of evidence. This said, Orientalism in general and Islamic studies in particular have been relatively insular fields, and the revisionism developed from within, especially through the publication of a small handful of books, which all appeared between 1973 and 1980, and, to lesser and greater degrees, all threw into question the very possibility of reconstructing the first two centuries of Islamic history.[6] Although relatively tame by the standards of more highly developed fields (such as scholarship on the Hebrew Bible and Christian origins), these books sparked off a great deal of controversy, and although their approaches and conclusions remain controversial, it can scarcely be doubted that they served to rouse Islamic studies from something of a post-war slumber.

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[4] I. Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien* (Halle, 1889–90), trans. S. M. Stern and C. R. Barber as *Muslim Studies* (London, 1967–71).

[5] Acton, *Lectures*, p. 16.

[6] A. Noth, *Quellenkritische Studien zu Themen, Formen und Tendenzen frühislamischer Geschichtsüberlieferung* (Bonn, 1973), trans., rev. and expanded by A. Noth and L. I. Conrad as *The early Arabic historical tradition: A source critical study* (Princeton, 1994); P. Crone and M. Cook, *Hagarism: The making of the Islamic world* (Cambridge, 1977); J. Wansbrough, *Quranic studies: Sources and methods of scriptural interpretation* (Oxford, 1977); J. Wansbrough, *The sectarian milieu: Content and composition of Islamic salvation history* (Oxford, 1978); P. Crone, *Slaves on horses: The evolution of the Islamic polity* (Cambridge, 1980); see also P. Crone, *Meccan trade and the rise of Islam* (Princeton, 1987; repr. Piscataway, NJ, 2004).

So if it was once good enough to offer cursory comments on the principal genres of the Islamic historical tradition (as did the original *Cambridge history of Islam*, whose sedate and authoritative tone gives little indication that the post-war consensus was about to fracture), it is no longer good enough. This is why the reader of this volume will find not only a very different approach to the first two centuries of Islam, but no fewer than three chapters (15, 16 and 17) devoted to a myriad of problems of evidence and interpretation, some of which are solved, but many of which remain very controversial. Few – if any – of the controversies will be settled here; the volume editor sees it as his responsibility to ensure only that the volume reflects the state of the field in the early twenty-first century. Although this means that gaps in our knowledge have to be filled by further research and that scholars continue to disagree on both major and minor matters, the reader can still take solace in knowing that the field of early Islamic history is as exciting as any other. Recorded history scarcely knows a period more creative of religious, cultural and political traditions than the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries. The editor will regard this volume a success if its readers come to share some of this excitement.

What, in broad strokes, is the quality of our evidence for the period covered by this volume? It is mixed. On the one hand, sixth-century Byzantium enjoys some respectable coverage, thanks to a handful of high-quality and contemporary histories that cover war and politics relatively well, including events in the east, especially the Byzantine–Persian wars that dominate the century. Written, as they generally were, in Constantinople, these Greek sources are complemented by another handful of works, these written by the Christians of Syria and Iraq in Syriac, which provide a local perspective on the *histoire événementielle*. There are, of course, problems of interpretation and perspective, but the fact remains that at least some politics and warfare can be described in some detail.[7] Meanwhile, long-term processes of economic exchange and settlement, which were conventionally ignored by historians of earlier generations, can be reconstructed to some degree by the numismatic record and the burgeoning field of Mediterranean archaeology. There are real gaps, of course, but all this contrasts sharply with the situation further east. While late Roman and early Byzantine studies prosper, bringing new texts to bear on old problems and new interpretations and methods to old texts,

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[7] For an example of some detailed coverage of war, see G. Greatrex, *Rome and Persia at war, 502–535*, ARCA Classical and Medieval Texts, Papers and Monographs 37 (Leeds, 1998); for some sense of the archaeology on offer, see C. Wickham, *Framing the early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800* (Oxford, 2005).

Sasanian studies do not, at least aside from the relatively narrow sub-fields of sigillography and numismatics. Very little indigenous historical writing survives; and this, combined with the fact that archaeology there lags considerably behind its Mediterranean analogue, severely handicaps all attempts to write detailed Sasanian history. (For all that it has contributed to a boom in the academic study of Islam, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 has done little to advance the study of pre-Islamic Iran.) It is an unfortunate and remarkable thing that we must rely so heavily upon ninth- and tenth-century Muslim authors writing in Arabic to provide us with a narrative history of the sixth- and seventh-century Sasanian state, in which Middle Persian and Aramaic were the principal literary and administrative languages, and Zoroastrianism and Nestorian Christianity its privileged religious traditions. Not entirely dissimilar things can be said of pre-Islamic Arabia, which produced virtually no narrative worthy of the name, and which is currently even more innocent of serious archaeology, especially in the west.[8] Although the epigraphic evidence is now accumulating, what we know of the pre-Islamic Ḥijāz derives in very large measure from what later Muslims, who were usually writing at something of a chronological, geographical and cultural distance, believed, and chose to have their readers believe.

If the sixth-century historiographic state of affairs is mixed, that of the seventh century is worse: the flow of contemporaneous sources slows to a trickle, and even the Byzantine historical tradition falters.[9] The Arabic sources pose as many questions as they answer, and although the attack made in the 1970s and 1980s against their reliability has been met with resistance in some quarters,[10] a consensus about how to use them for reconstructing detailed history remains remote. What this means, then, is that the period most productive of spectacular history – of prophecy and revelation within Arabia, and sweeping conquest outside it, of state and empire formation in Syria – proved spectacularly unproductive of durable historiography. Lacking primary sources from within the Islamic tradition, we must perilously rely either on non-Islamic testimony, which, though earlier, is frequently given to problems of perspective and bias,[11] or on relatively late Islamic ones, which rely on a mix of accounts, some orally transmitted, others textually transmitted, some both. Al-Ṭabarī's history is the most important of these. It can reasonably be called one of the greatest monuments of pre-modern historiography in any language, and it is our best single source for the rise and disintegration of the unified state. And because the early history that it narrates was both deeply controversial and monumentally significant – what could be of greater moment than Muḥammad's prophecy and the political events it set into motion? – it freely mixes prescription and description, polemics and facts, myth, legend and stereotype. Put more broadly, in writing his massive and universal *History*, al-Ṭabarī was both recording and interpreting the rise and disintegration of the unified state. The ʿAbbāsid family continued to supply caliphs during and for centuries after al-Ṭabarī's day, but they were now usually ineffectual, and within a generation of his death, Baghdad would be occupied by Iranian mercenaries. Baghdad survived, but al-Manṣūr's foundation had been abandoned, and much of the city lay in ruins after two civil wars (al-Rāfiqa had long been eclipsed by al-Raqqa). Filled as it is with caliphal *Kaiserkritik*, al-Ṭabarī's work can be read as both triumphalist anthem and nostalgic dirge.

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[8] Whereas things are looking up in the east: see D. Kennet, 'The decline of eastern Arabia in the Sasanian period', *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy*, 18 (2007).

[9] See, however, J. F. Haldon, *Byzantium in the seventh century: The transformation of a culture*, rev. edn (Cambridge, 1997), pp. xxiff.

[10] See below, chapter 15.

[11] See R. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as others saw it: A survey and evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian writings on early Islam* (Princeton, 1997).

For the history of the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries, our evidence improves. There are several reasons why. For one thing, the range and quality of the written sources improve: we now have a variety of genres of historical writing, in addition to belles-lettres and poetry, and the yawning chronological, cultural and political gap between event and record narrows; much history is either contemporary or nearly so, and some of it was written by those in a position to know this history well, such as administrators and bureaucrats. For another thing, official and unofficial documents begin to survive in some numbers, even if it is true that many are embedded in historical and literary texts. Finally, the lean material evidence of the seventh and eighth centuries gives way to a somewhat more generous spread of art-historical and archaeological sources. For example, much of the urban fabric of Sāmarrāʾ, which served as capital during the period 221–79/836–93, still survives; although Fāṭimid Cairo may be altogether harder to discern than Mamlūk Cairo, some of it *is* still there. ʿAbbāsid Baghdad is not.

The quality of our evidence thus improves with the passing of time, and the tenth century is far less obscure than the seventh. But what is the historian to make of this evidence? What model is he to use? Is disinterested, 'scientific' history even possible? To judge from the vigorous anti-Orientalist literature that appeared in the 1960s and flourished in the 1970s,[12] one might have thought the ground prepared for repudiating altogether the project of reconstructing the past. In the event, the study of Islamic history has remained relatively conservative, with positivism – of a modified sort – continuing to enjoy pride of place. This takes us to a second important change of perspective.

What is Islamic history, and how does Islam relate to Late Antiquity?

Al-Manṣūr designed and built his city as caliph (Ar. *khalīfa*), God's 'deputy' or 'representative', who exercised His authority on earth. Just as God's authority was indivisible, so in al-Manṣūr's day was the caliph's: he possessed both spiritual and temporal authority, which in practice meant everything from leading the prayers to leading his armies into battle. To judge from the evidence, he was considered, *inter alia*, 'God's rope' and the pivot around which the world moved, an idea that was given architectural expression in the very design of his city, a design which would have been so familiar to al-Ṭabarī's reader that a simple allusion would do: the 'model of Baghdad' meant a circular city plan. *Madīnat al-Manṣūr* (al-Manṣūr's city) thus consisted of an elaborately arcaded ring, which, perforated by four gates leading to the principal cities of the empire in the north-west, south-west, south-east and north-east, housed the state's administrative and bureaucratic agencies, and at its very centre stood the congregational mosque and caliphal palace. God's single and universal rule on earth, delegated to His caliphs, was thus given symbolic form.[13]

Much of this first volume can be construed as an attempt to understand the forces that first created and later dissolved this enormously powerful and persuasive idea. In ways made abundantly clear by the Islamic historical tradition, its inspiration lay in part in the career and ideas of Muḥammad himself, who operated in a cultural milieu (north-west Arabia) that was relatively naive of the main currents of Late Antiquity; it was he, the tradition maintains, who put in place the patterns by which his successors (the caliphs) would (or should) model themselves. There is much truth to this: the early

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[12] See, for example, E. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978); A. L. Macfie, *Orientalism: A reader* (New York, 2000); and R. Irwin, *For lust of knowing: The Orientalists and their enemies* (London, 2006).

[13] For the pre-Islamic antecedents, see C. Wendell, 'Baghdad: Imago Mundi and other foundation lore', *IJMES*, 2 (1971).

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caliphate can hardly be understood without reference to Muḥammad's legacy of prophecy, social engineering and conquest, not to mention Arabian styles of politics. But it is also the case that in attenuated and largely untraceable ways, some of the creative forces for al-Manṣūr's idea lay much further afield, such as in fourth-century Byzantium, when Constantine and his successors married monotheism to empire building; this was a vision that was refined during the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries, in part as a result of internal divisions and in part as a result of Byzantium's rivalry with the Sasanian state of Iraq and Iran, where Zoroastrianism generally prevailed. Such as it was, the Sasanians' embrace of monotheism came later and remained very mixed, but they, too, eventually had a formative influence upon the Islamic imperial tradition: as early as the first decades of the eighth century, Iraqi styles had filtered into Syria, and the floodgates opened after the ʿAbbāsid revolution, when the seat of the caliphate was moved from Syria to Iraq. In fact, al-Manṣūr's Round City was an easy ride from the last Sasanian capital of Ctesiphon (al-Madāʾin), and its circular design harks back to Sasanian city plans. Umayyad rule in formerly Byzantine Syria, ʿAbbāsid rule in formerly Sasanian Iraq – the cultural ambidexterity that resulted is one of the most striking features of the early Islamic tradition.

Early Islamic history, it follows, cannot be properly understood unless it is made part of the religious and political world of the Late Antique Near East. When al-Manṣūr is given to ask local monks for their views on his building plans, we are reminded of precisely that: Muslims and non-Muslims lived in the same world, their experiences intersecting and their traditions intertwining. (Christian books contain prophecies that Muslims fulfil, the legendary 'Miqlāṣ' of al-Ṭabarī's account probably alluding to an eighth-century Manichaean figure from the area near Baghdad-to-be.) This idea – that although early Muslims did break away from the pre-Islamic world, they also accelerated patterns of change already in process within it – is the second of the field's notable advances of the last thirty-five years. Important exceptions aside,[14] the study of Late Antiquity remains fairly closely related to the study of late Roman and early Byzantine Christian societies (especially their

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[14] In addition to P. Brown, *The world of Late Antiquity* (London, 1971), see S. A. Harvey, *Asceticism and society in crisis: John of Ephesus and the* Lives of the Eastern Saints (Berkeley, 1990); G. Fowden, *Empire to commonwealth: Consequences of monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, 1994); E. K. Fowden, *The barbarian plain: Saint Sergius between Rome and Iran* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1999); A. H. Becker, *Fear of God and the beginning of wisdom: The School of Nisibis and the development of scholastic culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* (Philadelphia, 2006); and J. Walker, *The legend of Mar Qardagh: Narrative and Christian heroism in Late Antique Iraq* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2006).

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cities),[15] so whereas the transition from Byzantine to Islamic rule in Egypt and Syria–Palestine is becoming considerably clearer,[16] that of the lands east of the Euphrates remains more poorly understood. This said, that early Islam 'belongs' to Late Antiquity has become nearly axiomatic among serious scholars.

Here, then, there is another contrast with the original *Cambridge history of Islam*, which was conceived and executed shortly before 'Late Antiquity' had been framed as a distinct cultural and political phase of history.[17] Although earlier scholarship was deeply familiar with the Byzantine and Sasanian (or, in geographical terms, the Syrian and Iraqi/Iranian) influences that would shape Islamic history, an implicit 'Islamic exceptionalism' prevailed, and the volume accordingly began with a single chapter on 'pre-Islamic Arabia'. The *New Cambridge history of Islam* reflects a generation's progress. Just as the concluding volume of the *Cambridge ancient history* integrates the rise of Islam into a more inclusive vision of historical change,[18] so this volume begins with four chapters that lay out the cultural and political history of Late Antiquity in detail; subsequent chapters, which address how Islamic history was made in the empire's provinces, also give some sense of the diverse cultural geography that early Muslims walked. As the birthplace of Muḥammad and Islam, western Arabia naturally deserves special treatment, and so it has it in part I. But it has become increasingly clear that western Arabia was less sheltered from the prevailing winds of Late Antiquity than previously thought: Muḥammad was part of Heraclius' and Yazdegerd's world. What is more, as soon as the conquests had decelerated, Muslims would abandon Arabia as their political capital for Syria and Iraq, and the articulation of much early Islamic doctrine and ritual is a phenomenon of the Fertile Crescent rather than the Arabian Peninsula.

Writing early Islamic history thus means in some measure tracking one distinctive monotheist trajectory among several others (Frankish–Papal, Byzantine and Eastern Christian) in western Eurasia.[19] What does this mean

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[15] On models of 'transformation', see J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, 'Late Antiquity and the concept of decline', *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 45 (2001); see also R. Martin, 'Qu'est-ce que l'antiquité tardive?' in R. Chevallier (ed.), *Aiôn: Le temps chez les romains* (Paris, 1976).

[16] And this in no small measure due to a series of collections and monographs published as Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam (Princeton, 1992–).

[17] Brown, *The world of Late Antiquity*; the most recent conspectus is G. W. Bowersock, P. Brown and O. Grabar (eds.), *Late Antiquity: A guide to the post-classical world* (Cambridge, MA, 1999).

[18] A. Cameron, B. Ward-Perkins and M. Whitby (eds.), *The Cambridge ancient history*, vol. XIV: *Late Antiquity: Empire and successors, AD 425–600* (Cambridge, 2000), chap. 22.

[19] See J. Herrin, *The formation of Christendom* (Princeton, 1987).

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for this volume? One thing should be made clear: ‘Islamic history’ is much more than the history of a religious tradition, and those religious ideas, practices or institutions that were without clear and important social or political dimensions will figure here only marginally. Put another way, understanding the development of Muslim societies at least in part turns on an appreciation for the Sunnī–Shīʿite divide and how it came about, but not on a detailed understanding of how Shīʿite law or ritual differs from Sunnī analogues, much less on precisely how Twelver Shīʿa differ from Ismāʿīlī Shīʿa in those matters. The religious and cultural traditions that took root under Islamic rule require separate study, and so they are discussed in volume 5. For the purposes of this volume, Islamic history is the social, religious and cultural history that Muslims made, chiefly (but not exclusively) as rulers of what remained throughout almost all of this early period a predominantly non-Muslim world. As chapters in a subsequent volume make clear,[20] conversion is a poorly understood process, but it seems that Muslims remained in the numerical minority in many if not most of the empire’s lands through the ninth century. Early Muslims were political imperialists, but only seldom religious missionaries.

Of course calling the history that Muslims made ‘Islamic history’ is not to suggest that their history was necessarily any less conditioned by environmental, economic, social or military factors than the history made by non-Muslims. It clearly was conditioned by these variables, and the contributions that follow will frequently measure them, at least as far as they can be measured; one can scarcely understand many of the problems of empire building in south-west Asia without understanding its geography and topography. That is why the geography of the southern and eastern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern lands is carefully described in chapter 1. Nor is it to say that Muslims were necessarily any more committed to religious ideas than were contemporaneous Jews, Christians or Zoroastrians, to name only the leading traditions; indeed, many Muslim rulers were frequently taken to task by their opponents and critics for having failed to discharge fully their religious obligations, whatever these may have been. But it certainly *is* to say that Muslims understood themselves to have made history in exclusively religious terms. This is not simply because religious systems in Late Antiquity were generally as hegemonic as bourgeois liberalism and market capitalism currently are in the developed West, but because this value was given compelling paradigmatic authority in the eighth- and ninth-century construction of the

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[20] See volume 3, chapter 15 (Bulliet) and volume 4, chapter 5 (Wasserstein).