Review
Reviewed Work(s): Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity by Patricia Crone
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Published by: The University of Chicago Press
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/544235
Accessed: 08-10-2018 03:35 UTC

Patricia Crone has again written an original and brilliant history of early Islam. Her first book, Hagarism (co-authored with M. A. Cook), was the most creative study about Islam in many years: in it, the standard account of Islam’s origins is turned inside-out. Rather than accept the version presented by Muslim historians and ignore non-Muslim accounts (written in Greek, Hebrew, Syriac, Armenian, Aramaic, and Coptic), the authors follow the non-Muslim sources to wherever they lead. The result is a wildly different view of early Islam where, for example, Muhammad and the Qur’ān almost disappear and Islam appears as a “Judaizing” movement.

Although its revision of Islamic history naturally attracted the most attention, most of Hagarism discusses the ways in which Muslims interacted with the people they conquered. This is a major contribution, for, in general, historians of Islam have imitated the early Muslim chroniclers in ignoring the societies that fell to the Arabian conquerors. In Miss Crone’s colorful words:

The Syrian pillar saints dispensing grace to local Arab tribesmen, the Coptic peasants, riotous Alexandrines or sophisticated Nestorians at home at the King of Kings’ court, all these have been conjured away at a stroke and replaced by faceless ‘ulūj and nasārā (p. 12).

Slaves on Horses picks up the historical narrative about where Hagarism leaves off and traces Muslim political life through two centuries, A.H. 41/A.D. 661 to about A.H. 227/A.D. 842.

In striking contrast to her rejection of the Muslim chroniclers for understanding the origins of Islam, Miss Crone does accept their information in her history of the Muslim polity. While noting that “this apparent lack of historiographical morality may meet with some disapproval,” she argues that her inconsistency “arises from the nature of Islamic historiography itself” (p. 3). All surviving information about the first centuries of Islam was transmitted orally in small bits which were extremely susceptible to manipulation. Due to the enormous changes Islam underwent in the course of the Arabian conquests, Crone postulates massive revisions of the Islamic corpus toward the end of the first/seventh century.

In contrast, she believes that political information mattered less and so was less revised to meet changing needs. Bits about politics went “through an undisturbed transmission such as the religious tradition did not enjoy” (p. 10). Thus, she accepts the accounts of the Muslim chroniclers in this study, but she is not content merely to paraphrase them. Complaining that most scholars do too little with the ancient sources—she calls their work “Muslim chronicles in modern languages and graced with modern titles” (p. 13)—Crone approaches the sources intent on discerning the life they hide. The result is a fresh and exciting piece of research, a far more successful interpretation of early Islamic history than that of her nearest competitor, M. A. Shaban.

The author is particularly aware of the anomalous nature of the Arabian conquests: their religious motivation, Arabia’s ecology, the army’s tribal organization, and the fact that the subject peoples’ high civilization gave these conquests a unique tone and permanently influenced Muslim history. The victories compelled the Arabian conquerors to maintain a tribal organization to govern the huge areas that fell under their control; eventually this system ossified and the Abbasids attempted to replace it with a government based on the Islamic vision. But this failed; the Abbasids were unable to come up with a political rationale for their existence and their power. The basic Abbasid problem “was not the fairly simple one of creating the machinery required for imperial rule, but rather that of giving meaning to such rule” (p. 62). They could not do this because “it was in traditions marginal to mainstream Islam that the ‘Abbāsid found their intellectual resources, while at the same time, it was to the Muslims at large that they had to make themselves acceptable” (p. 64). As a result, Abbasid rule came to depend less on persuasion and more on force. Yet, “as the
creed of the ‘Abbāsids wilted, the institutions which it was meant to support began to fall apart” (p. 70), leading to a confrontation between the state’s main supporters and an increase in provincial rebellions. “On the disappearance of [Umayyad] tribal and factional ties, the Muslim state had become too big: the ‘Abbāsids had found no alternative ways of keeping it together” (p. 71).

Vulnerable and isolated, the Abbasids turned to their dependents, mainly freed slaves and foreigners. These elements acquired growing political importance beginning with al-Mahdi (r. 158–69/775–85) and culminating with a full scale military slave (mamlūk) institution under al-Mu’tasim (r. 218–27/833–42).

The creation of the mamlūk institution consisted in a simple fusion of the two components which had hitherto remained discrete, servile status and alien origin. Freedmen reared in an Islamic environment and free mercenaries recruited abroad, for all that they became extremely common in the Muslim armies, were so to speak approximations to the ideal type: the classical mamlūk is characterized by both personal dependence and cultural dissociation (p. 74).

For Miss Crone, “what was remarkable . . . was not that freedmen were used [in public office], but that within a century of the [Abbasid] revolution they had control” of the state (p. 68). Indeed, she finds the dependence on slaves so self-evidently logical that she offers no explanation of this phenomenon—startling by most lights—but rather goes to some length to explain why it took “so long” (p. 75) for the system to reach the Abbasid metropolis.

The final pages explain how military slavery became “a specifically Muslim institution”; Muslim dynasties which developed in the lands conquered by the Arabians experienced “cultural destruction” which made them depend on Islam for legitimation. Yet, Islam had none to offer them; the “Islamic deprivation of legitimating resources” (p. 80) compelled Muslim dynasties to depend on force. Thus, slave soldiers spread through the Middle East, where they became a basic instrument of statecraft and remained so until modern times.

Judging by the title of this book and its opening sentence (“this work presents an explanation of how and why slave soldiers came to be a central feature of the Muslim polity” [p. 3]), Crone’s first concern here is with the institution of military slavery. Having recently published a book which also focuses on this topic (Slave Soldiers and Islam: The Genesis of a Military System), I should like to dwell on her treatment of it.

Our studies complement each other in two ways: we approach the topic differently, and we come to similar conclusions. Miss Crone is expert on early Islam and her interest in military slavery follows from her conclusion that it was the culmination of Muslim political institutions. I am interested primarily in the role of Islam as a political force and chose to work on military slavery because it provides an excellent vehicle for assessing the significance of Islam in public affairs; I worked on the first incidence of slave soldiers in the third/ninth century to test my theories. Our studies converge on military slavery in the early Islamic period.

We agree on many points, finding great significance in the tribal nature of the Arabian conquests and in the mawla status; unlike virtually all other historians, we both view military slavery as a result of weakness in the Islamic polity. Crone ascribes it to an “Islamic deprivation of legitimating resources,” and I point to the consequences of a permanent gulf between Islamic ideals and realities.

While admiring Miss Crone’s account leading up to the establishment of military slavery, I find her discussion of this institution deficient. The Muslims were not the only peoples to lack “legitimating resources”; yet they alone developed the institution of military slavery. Surely, then, something else must be considered to explain their relying on slaves in this highly unusual manner. Miss Crone considers this “not particularly remarkable” (p. 68), but it is indeed very remarkable! Non-Muslims never developed this institution, though they may have occasionally imitated some of its features. Relying on slaves rather than on some functional equivalent requires careful and full explanation; but Miss Crone blithely sails over this crucial problem.

Slaves on Horses explains how the Abbasids came to need military slaves but not how the
institution then spread to other dynasties. Apparently, the example of the caliphs sufficed: "once endorsed by the caliphs, the mamlić institution soon spread" (p. 79). But why did it spread, why were other Muslims also unable to find "legitimizing resources" for their governments? Crone views military slavery as a key institution of Islamic public life, but she nowhere shows how it came to acquire this role; thus, she fails to achieve her goal of explaining "how and why slave soldiers came to be a central feature of the Muslim polity."

Concentrating on the problems created by legitimization, Crone comes to wrong conclusions. If I understand the following quote correctly, she believes that military slavery developed only in the lands conquered by the Arabians because they alone experienced cultural discontinuity.

Within the Muslim world the ubiquity of the mamlićs in the Middle East is balanced by their total absence beyond the frontiers of the culturally destructive conquests, where the rulers could continue to seek their legitimating resources in the pre-Islamic traditions (p. 80).

A note adds that "the kings of Muslim Java, unlike those of Muslim Persia, had aristocracies instead of slaves" (p. 263). But this is nonsense: with the possible exception of southeast Asia, all the regions of the Muslim world witnessed flourishing systems of military slavery—especially sub-Saharan Africa, Anatolia, and the Indian subcontinent.

Title and opening statement aside, this is not a book about "slaves on horses." It is rather, as the subtitle indicates, about political developments in early Islam. I cannot fathom why Crone emphasizes slave soldiers when they play only a marginal role in her study and are peripheral to her proven interests. Is it that books with "slave" in the title attract interest? Like many other historians of Islam (Shaban with his Ahbābī Revolution comes first to mind), Miss Crone has disserved her readers by not providing an accurate title to her book.

This problem notwithstanding, Slaves on Horses has much to commend it: in brief compass, Miss Crone presents a lively synthesis of early Islamic history. She writes with verve: who else would claim that Ibn Habīb's Kitāb al-Muḥabbār "must rank with the Guinness Book of Records among the greatest compilations of useless information" (p. 10)? Comparisons with Iceland, Western Europe, Central Asia, and other regions are insightful and enlightening. If only more historians had such knowledge and courage.

At the same time, much is irritating. Miss Crone writes elliptically and often obscurely. She makes no allowances for readers unfamiliar with the terminology and details of Muslim history. As in Hagarism, a great mass of undigested research accompanies the slender text: this book contains only 84 pages of text (for no apparent reason divided into eleven chapters!) and over 200 pages of apparatus criticus, including 108 pages of appendixes and 71 pages of notes. I object to the interminable lists of names in the appendixes; they add little to the text and much to the price. Why append hundreds of capsule biographies to a sophisticated historical sketch? If they have a purpose, it is not made clear.

Patricia Crone has shown daring and imagination in her first two books: they are wild cards that probably will have little influence in the study of Muslim history, but they are fascinating.

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Modern criticism and scholarship have barely touched the surface of the thought of Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn (al-) 'Arabī (1165–1240), the Murcian Sufi al-shaykh al-akhtar ("greatest master"). We still stand at a loss before the range, complexity, and sheer quantity of his writings, and, until recently, he has remained nearly inaccessible in English. R. W. J. Austin’s translation of Fūṣūṣ al-Hikam: The Bezels of Wisdom...