Review

Reviewed Work(s): Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity by Patricia Crone
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*Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic
Polity.* By PATRICIA CRONE. Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press, 1980. Pp. 302.
$39.50.

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
Qur³ān 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 Alex-
andrines or sophisticated Nestorians at home at the
King of Kings' court, all these have been conjured
away at a stroke and replaced by faceless ʿulūj and
naṣārā (p. 12).

Slaves on Horses picks up the historical
narrative about where *Hagarism* leaves off and
traces Muslim political life through two cen-
turies, 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 ori-
gins of Islam, Miss Crone does accept their
information in her history of the Muslim
polity. While noting that "this apparent lack of
historigraphical morality may meet with some
disapproval," she argues that her inconsistency
"arises from the nature of Islamic histori-
ography itself" (p. 3). All surviving information

about the first centuries of Islam was trans-
mitted orally in small bits which were extremely
susceptible to manipulation. Due to the enor-
mous changes Islam underwent in the course of
the Arabian conquests, Crone postulates mas-
sive 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 trans-
mission 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 inter-
pretation 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 com-
pelled 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 ʿAbbāsids 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 ᶜAbbāsids 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 dis-
appearance of [Umayyad] tribal and factional
ties, the Muslim state had become too big: the
ᶜAbbāsids 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-Mahdī
(r. 158–69/775–85) and culminating with a full
scale military slave (mamlūk) institution under
al-Muᶜtaṣim (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 "cul-
tural destruction" which made them depend on
Islam for legitimation. Yet, Islam had none to
offer them; the "Islamic deprivation of legiti-
mating 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 mawlā 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 devel-
oped 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 func-
tional 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 *mamlūk* institution soon spread" (p. 79). But why did it spread, why were other Muslims also unable to find "legitimating 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 *mamlūk*s 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 *ʿAbbāsid 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 Ḥabīb's *Kitāb al-Muḥabbar* "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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Journey to the Lord of Power. By IBN ʿARABĪ. Translated by RABIA TERRI HARRIS. New York: Inner Traditions, 1981. Pp. 116. $9.95 (cloth), $8.50 (paperback).

Modern criticism and scholarship have barely touched the surface of the thought of Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn (al-) ʿArabī (1165–1240), the Murcian Sufi *al-shaykh al-akhbar* ("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 *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam: The Bezels of Wisdom*