

REVIEW

Review of Origins of the Islamic State: Sovereignty and Power in the Middle Ages

Maria Gajewska

The Origins of the Islamic State: Sovereignty and Power in the Middle Ages conference was hosted by the UCL Institute of Archaeology on the 16th–17th of February, 2017. As a part of the ‘Rethinking the Islamic State’ research initiative (links below), the conference explored the concept of the Islamic State both in the past and in the present, examining historical symbols of power, as well as their re-tellings in contemporary media. This dual focus allowed the speakers to not only outline some recent developments in the fields of Islamic history and archaeology, but also to engage with some relevant contemporary political issues. Such links between the past and the present, while often controversial, provided the overarching theme of the conference.

Keywords: Islamic; Middle Ages; history; UCL; politics; society; economy

Review

On the 16th and 17th of February 2017, UCL Institute of Archaeology hosted a conference on the Origins of the Islamic State. Organised by Corisande Fenwick, it was financed through the British Academy Rising Star Engagement Award, whose interest in the project was likely motivated by the ongoing relevance of the subject. Throughout the conference, the Islamic State was tackled both as a historical and a contemporary phenomenon, the sessions providing an opportunity not only to foster interdisciplinary cooperation, but also to highlight the links between the past and the present. The thirteen papers presented emphasised

the need to nuance and contextualise the Islamic past and its modern reception. Many tackled under-researched issues and posed novel questions, proving the study of Islamic history to be a dynamic and exciting discipline. Corisande Fenwick referred to these issues in the introductory address, stressing the need to disentangle some common pre-conceptions about Islamic history, as well as the recent disciplinary developments, which facilitate doing so.

The keynote address, titled *Early Islam in Comparative Perspective: How Different Was the Caliphate?*, was given by Andrew Marsham from the University of Edinburgh. In defining the past as political and divisive, he argued that putting Islam in a comparative perspective could problematise its definition as unique and, consequently, somewhat ahistorical. He pointed to the

tendency to overemphasise the differences between Islam and other religions, forgoing intra-religious variation. Addressing this through a comparative analysis of accession and power rituals, he concluded that the ritual structures prevalent in early Islamic contexts were a mosaic of contextual influence, both pre-Islamic and contemporary. While Islam influenced and transformed these ritual templates to fit some unique tenets, the rituals themselves were not completely original, instead proving products of the historical and political context of the time. In his response, David Wengrow situated the paper in an anthropological context, evoking Maurice Bloch's theory of religion as the legacy of a failed state and applying it to the early Islamic past (Bloch 2008).

Annliese Nef (University of Paris) continued the theme of tackling preconceptions which pervade the study of the early Islamic society. In *Thinking the Islamic State anew*, she argued that addressing the 'origins of the Islamic state' is, perhaps, neither possible nor necessary. Drawing on anthropological theory, she emphasised the links between society and state, focusing in particular on Bourdieu's theory of shared categories and their role in forming a state identity (Bourdieu 2000). Arguing that 'thinking Islamic state anew' implied re-thinking not only Islam but also the concept of state, she concluded by stressing the inherent difficulty of discussing the origins of any state as it is rooted in a fluid social reality.

Changing focus from politics to economy, Hugh Kennedy (SOAS) in *The early Islamic state as an economic actor* discussed the role of the *amsar* in shaping the Islamic fiscal system, pointing both to the links between Islamic taxation and earlier polities, as well as to their uniqueness. In stressing the non-mercantilistic state approach to commerce, he tackled the notion of the early Islamic state as 'despotic', pervasive especially in older scholarship. Kennedy emphasised how, while this economic model was developed by Islamic rulers, it did not stem from

any Islamic 'essence', but was rather rooted in earlier, Roman and Sasanian systems, adapted to the economic realities of the early Islamic empire.

Contextual understanding of history was the focal point of the next paper, *Conceptualising the Study of Early Islamic Elites*, given by Peter Verkinderen and Hannah Hagemann of Hamburg University, research associates in 'The Early Islamic Empire at Work' project. In recognising the concept of 'elites' as both vague and eurocentric, they attempted to redefine the term within the early Islamic context. They focused on the linguistic and economic implications, emphasising the importance of theorising history.

The next address marked a return to economic matters. Marie Legendre (SOAS) discussed the historical evidence for taxation in 'Abbasid Egypt in her paper on *Paying for the Caliphate: Fiscal Practice in the documents of the 'Abbasid period and the continuing formation of the Early Islamic State*. She charted the adoption, development, and abandonment of different types of taxes, speculating on what prompted the change. In drawing attention to the relative lack of interest in Coptic and Arabic papyri, she stressed the need for more research on post-Umayyad documents.

This address was followed by a definition of taxes as not only means of collecting revenue but also of categorising people and defining their status. The subsequent paper – *Taxation and protest against the early Islamic empire* – tackled these social implications of taxation in greater detail. Delivered by Ed Hayes of the University of Tübingen (soon of Leiden University), it problematised *zakat*, the Muslim alms tax, emphasising the tensions between its roots as charitable giving and gradual conversion to a source of state revenue.

On the second day, the emphasis shifted from the historical themes raised on the first day towards archaeology and material culture. Corisande Fenwick's (UCL) opening paper on *How to Found an Islamic State:*

Rulership, Authority, and City – building in Medieval North Africa emphasised the peripheral and politically fragmented nature of North Africa beyond Roman Ifriqiya. In enumerating the post-Umayyad regional dynasties, she emphasised some common tropes of the unifying monarchs (e.g. Eastern heritage, links to Islam, support of specific Berber tribes), pointing to the establishment of new cities as one of the defining characteristics of an Islamic ruler in the period, thus explaining the medieval urban boom.

The links between architecture and state power were further explored by Andrew Petersen (University of Wales Trinity St David) in his address on *The Malwiya of Samarra: Symbol of Caliphal Authority*. He conceptualised the unique architectural style of the minaret as means of emphasising the links between political and religious authority, especially as Samarra was built primarily to display caliphal power. This highlighted the early Islamic use of material culture to communicate social realities.

Continuing to stress the associations between religious and political power, as represented through material culture, Simon O'Meara's (SOAS) *When the mosque was an extension of the palace: the mihrab as a throne-room?* explored the meaning of the qibla, introducing the notion of a 'second qibla' facing the throne of the king or the caliph. Drawing on late historical examples, he emphasised the clear associations between the qibla and the throne, though concluding that the 'second qibla' was probably secondary to the official, religious one.

Xavier Ballestin (Universitat de Barcelona) focused on textual sources, rather than material culture. He spoke of medieval Al-Andalus in *When the man of Ma'afir ruled al-Andalus: caliphal legitimacy and power exercise in the Tenth century*. In contrasting the supposed Quraishi legitimacy of the Andalusian caliphs with the humble background of Al-Mansur and outlining his ascension to rule, Ballestin pointed to the fluid nature of caliphal power.

Problematizing the Caliphate further, Han-Hsien Liew (Harvard University) spoke of *Revelational Politics: Justifying the Necessity of the Caliphate in Medieval Sunni Theological Writing*, presenting a summary of theological views on political power (differentiated from views expressed in legal literature or hadith). In problematising the need for a caliphal rule (in addition to Qur'anic teaching) to govern the faithful, he summarised the different, historical explanations; noting how they were generally derived from hadith or ijma, not the Qur'an itself. Liew's suggestion that this may have been an attempt to distance Sunni theology from Shia Qur'anic justifications of the imamate was the first reference to theological divisions within Islam.

This was a good introduction to the final two papers, which highlighted concerns with the simplified and monolithic vision of Islam presented through different media. Philip Wood from Aga Khan University discussed *Teaching early Islam: The gap between school and the Internet*, pointing to the lack of historical or ethical focus in the teaching of Islam at GCSE level, with the subject tackled as part of the Religious Studies curriculum, thus treated acontextually and unproblematized. This leaves students unable to critically evaluate the interpretations of Islam available on the Internet, since not only are they often controversial but also they refer to history, usually omitted from the British curriculum.

In extreme cases, such a rift between formal and informal education can lead to susceptibility to highly controversial narratives. These were described by Hugh Kennedy (SOAS) in the concluding keynote lecture on *Daesh-Isis: the use and abuse of early Islamic history*. He stressed the importance of recognising Daesh historical narratives as an 'intellectual project', in order to respond to them more effectively. In providing a comprehensive overview of the sort of imagery and terminology employed, he urged academia to consider such views through factual, historical evidence.

Returning to the contemporary relevance of the topic was a necessary reminder of early Islamic history's existence outside of academia. While all the speakers provided novel and often controversial insights into the scholarship on early Islam, it was Kennedy's paper that Corisande Fenwick mainly referred to in her concluding address. Again, she stressed the importance of intellectuals and the relevance of their work in rectifying extreme distortions of both early Islamic history and contemporary Islam. This provided a measure of hope that the work discussed may contribute to both discrediting organisations such as Daesh and dispersing contemporary prejudice against Islam; providing a more impartial view, open to discussion and re-interpretation.

More information on the conference is available at:

<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/research/directory/rethinking-islamic-state>.
<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/calendar/articles/2016-17-events/origin-islamic-state-conference>.

Glossary

Amsar (sing. *misr*): In early Islam, referred to settlements that were established by Muslim warriors in conquered lands. Frontier outposts, also administrative

territorial units run by an appointee of the caliph.

Ijma: Consensus or agreement. One of four recognized sources of Sunni law, utilized where the Quran and Sunnah (the first two sources) are silent on a particular issue.

Mihrab: Ornamental arched niche set into the wall of a mosque to indicate the direction of Mecca. Muslims face the mihrab during prayer so that they pray facing Mecca.

Qibla: Direction Muslims face during prayer (toward the Kaaba in Mecca), or a prayer wall in the mosque into which the mihrab (niche) is set, indicating the direction of prayer.

Adapted from: Oxford Islamic Studies Online, www.oxfordislamicstudies.com.

Competing Interests

The author's undergraduate dissertation was supervised by Dr Corisande Fenwick, the conference organiser.

References

- Bloch, M** 2008 'Why religion is nothing special but is central'. In: *Philosophical transactions of The Royal Society B: biological sciences*, 363(1499): 2055–2061. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2008.0007>
- Bourdieu, P** 2000 *Pascalian Meditations*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

How to cite this article: Gajewska, M 2017 Review of Origins of the Islamic State: Sovereignty and Power in the Middle Ages. *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology*, 27(1): Art. 17, pp. 1–4, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/pia-524>

Submitted: 15 March 2017 **Accepted:** 19 September 2017 **Published:** 11 October 2017

Copyright: © 2017 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

U[*Papers from the Institute of Archaeology* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.

OPEN ACCESS 