

MEM Awards

Remarks by the Recipient of the 2014 MEM Lifetime Achievement Award
Written for the Annual Meeting of Middle East Medievalists
and Read *in Absentia* by Matthew S. Gordon
(November 22, 2014, Washington, D.C.)

Patricia Crone*
Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton

When I discussed with Matthew what I should talk about, he said he'd like to hear some manner of reflection on my work, career, books, students, and the state of the field, or some combination of these things. Well, I doubt that I shall be able to talk about all these things, but let me start by telling you a story.

One summer towards the end of my time at school, one of my sisters and I went to the theatre festival at Avignon, and there for the first time in my life, I met a live Muslim, a Moroccan. I had decided to study the Muslim world without ever knowingly having set eyes on an Arab or Persian or heard Arabic or Persian spoken. There weren't any of them in Denmark back then: it was Gilgamesh who had seduced me. I discovered him in my teens and wanted to be an ancient Near Eastern archaeologist, but for a variety of reasons

I became an Islamicist instead. Anyway, I met this Moroccan in Avignon, and he told me the story of the Battle of Siffin: the Syrians were losing and responded by hoisting Qurans on their lances, the battle stopped, and so Ali lost. It never occurred to me to believe it; I smiled politely and thought to myself, "when I get to university I'll hear a different story." I got to Copenhagen University, but no Islamic history was taught there, only Semitic philology, which I did not want to do, and history, meaning European history, which I did do and enjoyed, but which was not where I wanted to stay. Eventually I got myself to England, and there I was accepted by SOAS and heard Professor Lewis lecture on early Islamic history, including the Battle of Siffin. He told the story exactly as my Moroccan friend had told it. I could not believe it. It struck me as obvious that the narrative was fiction,

* Middle East Medievalists is deeply saddened by Patricia Crone's passing in July 2015. Several colleagues have written reminiscences in her memory to be found in the "In Memoriam" section of the journal below.
[A. B.]

and besides, everyone knows that battle accounts are most unlikely to be reliable, least of all when they are told by the loser. I thought about it again many years later, in 2003, when one of Saddam Hussain's generals, Muhammad Saeed al-Sahhaf, also known as comical (not chemical) Ali, persistently asserted that the Iraqis had defeated the Americans and put them to flight, so that there weren't any American troops in Iraq any more. At the very least one would have expected Lewis to say something about the problematic nature of battle narratives, and was this really true? But no: it was a truth universally acknowledged that, during the Battle of Siffin, the Syrians hoisted Qurans on their lances and thereby stopped the battle, depriving the Iraqis of their victory.

I think this is the biggest academic shock I've ever suffered, but I didn't say anything. I never did, I was too shy. And then I encountered John Wansbrough. He read Arabic texts with us undergraduates, clearly thinking we were a hopeless lot, but he was the first person I met at SOAS who doubted the Siffin story. As it turned out, he doubted just about everything in the tradition. I was fascinated by him. I wanted to know how he thought we should go about writing about early Islamic history, so I continued reading texts with him as a graduate, but I never got an answer. Once, when we were reading Tabari's account of Ibn al-Ash'ath's revolt in the mid-Umayyad period, Wansbrough asked: "what year are we in?" I thought he simply meant "what year has Tabari put this in?," but when I replied year 82," or whatever, he acidly retorted, "I see you have the confidence of your supervisor," meaning Bernard Lewis, my supervisor, whom he deeply disliked. I think his question was meant to be

understood as, "Is all this really something that happened in year 82 (or whenever) or is it stereotyped battle scenes interspersed with poetry that could be put in any heroic account in need of amplification?" I don't know, for he did not explain. He never did. He was an *imam samit*.

From all this you can see two things. First, it was not exposure to Wansbrough that made me a sceptic or radical or whatever else they like to call me. I was a sceptic already in Avignon, years before I came to England, without being aware of it. In my own understanding I was just thinking commonsense. And secondly, Islamic history was not studied at an advanced level. I don't know how the Battle of Siffin is taught these days, but I cannot imagine it is done with the credulity of those days and, at least in England, Lewis must take part of the credit for this, for he was very keen for Islamicists to become historians.

After I'd finished my thesis, Michael Cook and I finished *Hagarism* (1977) which I assume you have heard about and don't propose to talk about; and next, in between some articles, I wrote *Slaves on Horses* (1980), which was the first third of my thesis, drastically rewritten. Then it was *Roman, Provincial and Islamic Law* (1987), which was a drastically rewritten version of my thesis part two and which I loved researching because the literature on the Greek, Roman and provincial side was so superb. The legal learning possessed by these late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German and Italian scholars was incredible, and on top of that they were wonderfully intelligent and lucid. The First World War and now it is all gone. Apparently it isn't even done to admire them any more. A perfectly friendly

reviewer of my book on law cautioned his readers that I was an admirer of these scholars, as if it were self-evident that they were bad people. I don't see why.

In any case, *Meccan Trade* came out in the same year. It was delayed by a report so negative that I withdrew it and sent it to Princeton University Press. The author of the negative report said that I should have my head examined, that nothing I'd written would win general acceptance and that I'd never get a job in America. This last was particularly hilarious since it had never occurred to me to apply for one there. Serjeant was also outraged by *Meccan Trade*. He wrote a furious review in which he accused me of all sorts of misdeeds. But today the book is perceived as being about the location of Mecca, to which I devote a page. I've even heard somebody introduce me as a speaker and list *Meccan Trade* among my books with the comment that it is about the location of Mecca, to which I had to say sorry, no, actually *Meccan Trade* is about Meccan trade.

After *Meccan Trade*, or at the same time (both this and other books took a long time to reach print), I published *God's Caliph* with Martin Hinds. It was a short book, but Calder nonetheless thought it was long-winded: I admit I found that hard to take seriously. It was as usual: the reviewers found fault with this, that and the other, and you let it pass. The one thing I really disliked about *God's Caliph* was the massive number of misprints, which Martin Hinds was no better at spotting than I was.

It must have been after *God's Caliph* had gone to press that I wrote *Pre-Industrial Societies*, which I hugely enjoyed doing because I had to read about all kinds of places that I didn't know much about, and

also because I wrote without footnotes. It saves you masses of time. PIS, as I called it (pronouncing it *Piss*) was barely reviewed and took a while to gather attention, and it too was riddled with misprints, but the misprints should now have been eliminated and a fresh print-run with a new cover is on its way.

The next book I wrote was *The Book of Strangers: Medieval Arabic Graffiti on the Theme of Nostalgia* (1999), which was completely new to me when I started translating it. I inherited it from Martin Hinds and was captivated by it, but had trouble with the poetry in it. However, Shmuel Moreh came to Cambridge shortly after I'd started, and he was well versed in Arabic poetry, so I asked him if he'd help me, and he would. So we translated it together and I took responsibility for the rest.

That book almost generated another Siffin story. The author is traditionally identified as Abu 'l-Faraj al-Isfahani, but he himself says that he was in his youth in 356/967, which makes him considerably younger than Abu 'l-Faraj [who allegedly died in 356/967 – A. B.]. Yaqut, who said he did not know how to resolve the problem, noticed this already. There is only one way to resolve it: the author is not Abu 'l-Faraj. The book doesn't have much in common with Abu 'l-Faraj's works either. But a specialist in Abu 'l-Faraj insisted that it was him and came up with the explanation, also tried by older scholars, that Abu 'l-Faraj was senile when he wrote the book, so that he had forgotten when he was young. Honestly, the things that Islamicists will say!

The next book was also a joint project and also connected with Martin Hinds and the so-called "Hinds-Xerox" which Martin

had received from Amr Khalifa Ennami and which Michael Cook used for his section on the Murji'a in his *Early Muslim Dogma*. Martin Hinds was working on the last section of the manuscript when he died. I could have finished that last section, but it seemed a bad idea to translate yet another fragment. What should be done was a translation of the whole epistle. But I couldn't do that on my own – there were parts of the manuscript that I simply could not decipher. So I asked my former colleague in Oxford, Fritz Zimmermann, if he would participate, and thank God, he would. So we started by writing a translation each and then amalgamating them, with long pauses over passages that seemed impossible. Fritz had some great brain waves, and somehow we managed to get a complete typescript together. Then there was all the rest, where the fun for me lay in comparing Salim and the Ibadi epistles that I had been able to buy in Oman. *The Epistle of Salim b. Dhakwan* was published in Oxford in 2001. Very few people are interested in the Ibadis so it has not exactly been a bestseller, but I learned an extraordinary amount from writing it.

After that, I wrote *Medieval Islamic Political Thought*, which the Americans called *God's Rule*, though it is disagreeably close to *God's Caliph* and not particularly apt in my view. That book started as exam questions in Cambridge. Carole Hillenbrand was our external examiner, and when she saw the questions, she asked me if I wanted to write a volume of political thought for her Edinburgh series. I liked the idea, envisaging the book as much smaller than it actually became. I also thought I could do it fast because I thought I knew the field inside out, but that was only true of some of the subjects I wrote about. I had to do

a lot of work on the Ismailis, for example because I did not know the sources well enough. I was also acutely aware of having inadequate knowledge of the last century before the Mongol invasions and don't think I managed to get that right. I suppose I was running out of patience. I wasn't under any pressure, for I had refused a contract. I usually did until I was close to the end.

My book on political thought was the first book of mine that was uniformly well received. All the others had a controversial element to them that the reviewers didn't like, if only for my refusal to accept that Abu'l-Faraj al-Isbahani had forgotten when he was young. Mercifully, there were also reviewers who found that a ridiculous argument. Not long afterwards they gave me the Levi della Vida medal and I also received several honorary doctorates. Altogether, it was clear that I was no longer an *enfant terrible*.

My latest, and probably also last, book is *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran: Rural Revolt and Local Zoroastrianism* (2012), which had its roots in my teaching in Oxford and which was very exciting to write because it was about villagers, whom we rarely see in the sources, and because their form of Zoroastrianism was quite different from that of the Pahlavi books. That book was also well received, it was awarded no less than four book-prizes, for its contribution to Islamic studies, to Iranian studies, to Central Asian studies, to historical studies in general.

If I had not fallen ill, I would have started a book on the Dahris, Godless people on whom I have written some articles, and who are certainly worth a book. But I don't think I have enough time.