

# In Search of the Early Islamic Economy\*

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## Editors' Note

*Michael Bonner passed suddenly and tragically on May 25 of this year while at work on a late draft of the present article. We are grateful to his spouse, Dr. Daniela Gobetti, for granting us permission to publish it in its current form. We opted to do so, not simply because it was well along in the production process, but more to the point, on the strength of its content. It is our understanding that Michael had intended to produce a full, book-length study on the basis of these same ideas and arguments. The present article, if somewhat programmatic, builds on Michael's recent scholarship on the "economy of poverty" and Arabian trade, among other topics. His stated goal was to raise new and pressing questions on a much-neglected topic and, in doing so, situate his discussion in the context of the most recent developments in imperial economic history—in this case as they relate to the early Islamic realm. It is our conviction that here, as in all of his previous published work, Michael advances the study of early and medieval Islamic history forward many paces.*

## The Early Islamic Empire and Its Economy in Comparative Perspective

In recent decades many historians have taken to viewing the empires of the past from comparative perspectives, and in doing this they have devoted considerable attention to the economic sphere.<sup>1</sup> Much of this work has come from historians of the Roman

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1. Recent contributions to this literature include J. Burbank and F. Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); C. A. Bayly and P. F. Bang, "Introduction: Comparing Pre-Modern Empires," *Medieval History Journal* 6 (2003): 169–87; P. F. Bang and



empire,<sup>2</sup> not surprisingly since these were among its pioneers. But nowadays historians also bring comparative perspectives to the empires of medieval China, the early modern Muslim empires of the Ottomans and the Mughals, and many others.<sup>3</sup> In all this activity, however, the early Islamic empire or “classical” caliphate has had a low profile,<sup>4</sup> even though it seems an excellent candidate for comparison on many fronts.

Likewise, the modern historiography of the early Islamic world itself has not often featured comparative approaches—at least from the perspective of empire—in the half-century since Marshall Hodgson’s *Venture of Islam*.<sup>5</sup> Some interesting exceptions have come from scholars who are not, in the first instance, historians of Islam.<sup>6</sup> Important comparative work has been done in environmental and ecological history and related areas.<sup>7</sup> But in the end it seems that many historians prefer not to describe the early Islamic polity as an empire at all. Behind this reluctance lies a tendency to view the early Islamic polity as *sui*

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C. A. Bayly, eds., *Tributary Empires in Global History* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); P. F. Bang and D. Kołodziejczyk, eds., *Universal Empire: A Comparative Approach to Imperial Culture and Representation in Eurasian History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); A. J. S. Spawforth, ed., *The Court and Court Society in Ancient Monarchies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); J. Duindam, T. Artan, and M. Kunt, eds., *Royal Courts in Dynastic States and Empires: A Global Perspective* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); J. Duindam and S. Dabringhaus, eds., *The Dynastic Centre and the Provinces: Agents and Interactions* (Leiden: Brill, 2014); A. Monson and W. Scheidel, eds., *Fiscal Regimes and the Political Economy of Premodern States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

2. More recently, such work includes P. F. Bang, “Rome and the Comparative Study of Tributary Empires,” *Medieval History Journal* 6 (2003): 189–216; idem, “Trade and Empire—In Search of Organizing Concepts for the Roman Economy,” *Past and Present* 195 (2007): 3–54; W. M. Jongman, “Rome: The Political Economy of a World-Empire,” *Medieval History Journal* 6 (2003): 303–26.

3. E.g., L. de Ligt, “Taxes, Trade, and the Circulation of Coin: The Roman Empire, Mughal India and T’ang China Compared,” *Medieval History Journal* 6 (2003): 231–48; D. Kołodziejczyk, “Khan, Caliph, Tsar and Imperator: The Multiple Identities of the Ottoman Sultan,” in Bang and Kołodziejczyk, *Universal Empire*, 175–93.

4. Exceptions include H. Kennedy, “The Islamic Near East in Islamic Late Antiquity,” in Monson and Scheidel, *Fiscal Regimes and the Political Economy*, 390–403.

5. M. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974, but written earlier); idem, *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam and World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

6. For instance, C. W. Wickham, “Tributary Empires: Late Rome and the Arab Caliphate,” in Bang and Bayly, *Tributary Empires*, 205–13.

7. R. Bulliet, *Cotton, Climate and Camels in Early Islamic Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). See also A. M. Watson, *Agricultural Innovation in the Early Islamic World: The Diffusion of Crops and Farming Techniques, 700–1100* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), and critiques of it, including M. Decker, “Plants and Progress: Rethinking the Islamic Agricultural Revolution,” *Journal of World History* 20 (2009): 187–206; and L. I. Conrad, “Ṭā‘ūn and Wabā’: Conceptions of Plague and Pestilence in Early Islam,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 25 (1982): 268–307. Environmental and ecological issues figure in M. McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce, AD 300–900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), and C. Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). See also A. W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), and W. Beinart and L. Hughes, *Environment and Empire*, Oxford History of the British Empire Companion Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

*generis* and thus beyond comparison. Indeed, it is often proposed or assumed that Islam's founding structures and principles were unique to it and marked it off from other empires and polities. In this way a kind of "Islamic exceptionalism"<sup>8</sup> has planted itself in scholarly discourse and public opinion.

One reason for this exceptionalism involves present-day concerns about "universal caliphate," "political Islam," and other notions beyond this article's scope. Another is the well-known problem of the literary sources for the first two centuries of Islam. We have material evidence for this era, including coins, inscriptions, and documents written on papyrus and other materials. But when we try to set this evidence within a narrative frame—whether for economic or any other kind of history—we have no choice but to rely on the great corpus of writings in Arabic that have come down through a process of combined oral and literary transmission and that deal with this formative era. And here, as we all know, debates have raged for generations over the reliability, authenticity, and interpretation of these sources. These debates, while necessary and useful, have had the side effect of marginalizing certain historical questions and approaches, including comparisons of the caliphate with other polities and empires.

In what follows I hope to extend these debates over the literary sources to the economy of the early Islamic world. I also propose to discuss some of the ways in which we think about that economy; problems that this area of research has encountered; and possible new paths involving, among other things, comparison with other imperial structures. However, I can only discuss a limited number of issues. This essay will serve as the basis for a larger project, which will include fuller treatments of "economy," "empire," the relation between these two, and many other questions.

At the same time, I have the sense that I am dealing here with some fundamental matters. I agree with those practitioners of economic history (and other kinds of history) who insist that work of this kind needs to be based squarely on reliable data, typically (or to the extent possible) of a concrete, empirically verifiable nature. I also agree that we now have considerable amounts of such data for the early Islamic world, thanks to archaeology, papyrology, numismatics, and related fields. I still think, however, that we cannot bypass the problems of the early literary sources, many (though not all) of them in the Arabic language, to which I have already alluded. This is not only because these may, at times, provide unreliable information on revenues from taxation, agricultural and industrial production, trade routes, and so forth. It is also and above all because we need to have a governing narrative or, perhaps more realistically, a set of narratives within which to place our data. To take an often-cited example, we now know a great deal about the economy, government, and administration (especially at the local level) in Umayyad Egypt, thanks to the work of papyrologists and others. However, for a number of reasons it is difficult for us to integrate this knowledge into the larger history of the Umayyad Caliphate. Here, to an unusually large extent, local knowledge has a firmer foundation than nonlocal and

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8. See C. Robinson, "Reconstructing Early Islam: Truth and Consequences," in *Method and Theory in the Study of Islamic Origins*, ed. H Berg, 101–34 (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

“imperial-level” knowledge, which necessarily requires narratives that are both broad and detailed.

It is true that we already have historical narratives regarding the rise of Islam. However, some recent historiographical work has had the effect not so much of undermining those narratives as of demonstrating how varied, subtle, and at times conflictual they can be. Meanwhile, this historiographical work has concentrated on political, religious, and juridical aspects of the early Islamic world, and only rarely on economic aspects. I believe that it is necessary to bridge this gap, so as to bring the economic domain more fully into our discussions of the early Islamic empire or caliphate, and at the same time to give a fuller accounting of economic history itself.

### **Markets in the Early Islamic Economy**

Some, though not all modern observers would probably agree that the first few centuries of the Islamic era in the Near East and North Africa witnessed the unfolding of two related but distinct processes. The first of these had to do with markets in the sense of concrete, individual loci of exchange. This process involved a net increase in the degree of integration,<sup>9</sup> connection, and specialized articulation among individual markets throughout the region. The second process featured the market in the abstract, generalized, and modern sense so familiar to us now. It consisted of the emergence of an economy which, at least to some extent, functioned in harmony with some of the principles of modern liberal (or “neoclassical”) economics. In other words, when compared with its predecessors and contemporaries, the early Islamic economy had a greater share of the characteristics that we associate with the “free market.” But can we prove that these two processes actually took place? And if they did, how can we explain and contextualize them?

One obstacle in the way of answering these questions lurks in the already-mentioned problems with the literary source materials for early Islam. In this essay I wish to discuss several approaches that can allow us to put at least some of these literary sources to productive (if somewhat unconventional) use. One of these involves the occurrence—generally though not universally admitted nowadays—of an economic boom in the early caliphate, beginning around the middle of the second/eighth century and lasting into the fourth/tenth century in some areas and beyond that in others. Another has to do with the spread of the Arabic and Persian languages throughout the caliphate and their penetration, over roughly two centuries, into both city and countryside at all levels of society. I will maintain that this phenomenon, which has still not been adequately explained on sociolinguistic grounds, can be related to the history of markets and provides proof of their increasing integration though not, of course, of their free-market character. Beyond this we have, beginning in the later third/ninth century, the rich literature that we call “geographical,” in which markets and the economy (in some sense) have central roles. We also have other writings, mainly in Arabic, that deal with “economic” matters: not under that rubric, which at that time did not exist, but still relevant to these questions. Some of

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9. On this concept, see P. F. Bang, *The Roman Bazaar: A Comparative Study of Trade and Markets in a Tributary Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 12, 29, 114–15.

these writings belong to the broad category of juridical texts, others to that of humanistic belles-lettres (*adab*), and others to other categories.

Modern discussions often identify Islam itself as the main factor in these processes and events, indeed as the very phenomenon under investigation. And it is certainly true that many norms and practices that we identify as Islamic have direct bearing on this discussion. I wish to argue, however, that it was internal developments within the polity and the order of society that we identify as “Islamic” that resulted in the phenomena in question, including the two processes involving markets already mentioned. These developments involved religious and ethical precepts familiar to us from the Qurʾān, the Prophetic tradition (Sunna), biographies of the Prophet and other major figures, and so forth. However, they also involved other things. And while it is true that Islamic law, especially commercial law, had a major role, it is also true that a considerable period of time had to elapse before Islamic law extended its hegemony over marketplaces throughout the region—a period of time which corresponds to the formative era of the Islamic economy.

Accordingly, I will propose that certain elements of the nascent Islamic order, in addition to or even apart from the religious and juridical ones, played determining roles in the formation of what we may call the “Islamic marketplace.” One of these was the imperial project of the early caliphate, which included, in addition to a religiously based ideology, an administrative bureaucracy operating within a patrimonial order centered upon the caliphs, their families, and their followers. Another was the role of the caliphs themselves, together with their patrimonial households, in the workings of the marketplace and the economy. I will argue that the market-friendly character of Islamic law and commercial practice had its origins, paradoxically, in an imperial-patrimonial system which, we might think, ought rather to have been its adversary and nemesis.

### **Boom or Bust**

The study of the medieval Islamic economy lost momentum in the late 1970s, and while it has revived and flourished since then,<sup>10</sup> it has a more scattered character than it did before, in the sense that most of this work is now done on particular localities and regions, in accordance with a variety of methods and problematics. This is for excellent reasons: researchers have sought concrete data, and they have been successful in this endeavor. However, one characteristic that many of these studies have had in common since before the 1970s is a tendency to view the early Islamic economy in terms of either boom or bust.

The proponents of the “boom” view have painted an attractive picture that begins toward the middle of the second/eighth century. Here we have a huge landmass with a correspondingly broad surface of navigable sea, incorporated within a single entity which

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10. An excellent, indispensable starting point is M. Shatzmiller, “Economic Performance and Economic Growth in the Early Islamic World,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 54 (2011): 132–84. See also A. Walmsley, “Production Exchange and Regional Trade in the Islamic East Mediterranean: Old Structures, New Systems?,” in *The Long Eighth Century: Production, Distribution and Demand*, ed. I. L. Hansen and C. Wickham, 265–343 (Leiden: Brill, 2000); idem, *Early Islamic Syria: An Archaeological Assessment* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007); M. Morony, “Economic Boundaries? Late Antiquity and Early Islam,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 47 (2004): 166–94; J. Haldon, ed., *Money, Power and Politics in Early*

in its extent surpasses any other political system yet seen on the planet. The caliphate's inhabitants enjoy peace and relative ease of movement within its borders. Almost anywhere they go, they can make themselves understood in either Arabic or Persian. They participate in monetized fiscal and commercial systems. All these things encourage the inhabitants of the caliphate to travel for purposes of trade. And while there is nothing new about such journeys, they happen now on an unprecedented scale. A wide range of goods, from luxury products to everyday commodities, moves over both long and short routes. The consumers constitute a wider swath of society—including and beyond the elites—than the world has seen before. Customers also appear beyond the borders of the Islamic world. To satisfy this truly global demand, old centers of production flourish and new ones emerge. Meanwhile, the profession of merchant enjoys more respectability than previously, while the overall number of merchants increases, as does also, we may imagine (but never know for sure), their slice of the overall economic pie.

One of the best-known expressions of this view appeared a half-century ago in Maurice Lombard's *L'Islam dans sa première grandeur*.<sup>11</sup> This work provided, in broad strokes, an upbeat portrait of the early caliphate, with emphasis on its commercial networks. Rather than describe a world where trade routes plod from city to city and region to region, where contacts take place among distinct political, social, and religious groups, and where time is allocated into discrete historical periods, Lombard drew—quite literally—a series of connecting circles and spirals, taking form within overlapping and quickly changing units of time, among people whose linguistic, religious, commercial, and political affiliations change rapidly, slowly, or barely at all.<sup>12</sup> Lombard wanted to convince his readers that something new was going on here, with profound consequences for the entire Old World. Although some of the initial reception of this book was harshly negative,<sup>13</sup> since then many historians have agreed with much of it.

Other scholars, however, dissent from this view. They may concede that the early 'Abbāsīd era experienced growth, but they consider this growth epiphenomenal and outweighed by subsequent long-term decline. These writers, who include professional economists, point to the prohibition in Islamic law of lending on interest as a source of inefficiency. They also point to the prevalence in the Islamic world of short-lived partnerships instead of more durable firms, and they ascribe this supposed defect to the lack of a concept of corporation in classical Islamic law.<sup>14</sup> Going a step further, the advocates of the “bust”

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*Islamic Syria* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010); A. Schubert and P. Sijpesteijn, eds., *Documents and the History of the Early Islamic World* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

11. Paris: Flammarion, 1971, repr. 2014 with a preface by Hichem Djait; The text was assembled posthumously from Lombard's notes. English translation by J. Spencer, *The Golden Age of Islam* (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1975).

12. This helps explain why, according to Djait's preface to the recent reissue (p. 13), Fernand Braudel said that Lombard was “le plus doué, le plus brillant historien de notre génération, le seul qui fût incontestablement de la classe d'un Marc Bloch.”

13. C. Cahen in *Revue Historique* 502 (1972): 471–73.

14. T. Kuran, “Why the Middle East is Economically Underdeveloped: Historical Mechanisms of Institutional Stagnation,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 18, no. 3 (2004): 71–90; idem, “The Absence of the Corporation

narrative tend to identify Islamic institutions as the root of these ills. For instance, they view *awqāf* (sing. *waqf*), pious endowments, not in the positive way that Marshall Hodgson once did,<sup>15</sup> but as a cause of a long-term decrease in the revenue accruing to the state and in the capital available to private enterprise. This approach, which has been described as “institutionalist,” will come up again later in this article.

Other disciplines, including papyrology and archaeology, tend to focus more on local data and circumstances than on such “big picture” arguments, although they also arrive at big pictures of their own. We can see this in Alan Walmsley’s summary of the situation in Syria and, more generally, in other provinces of the early caliphate.<sup>16</sup> According to Walmsley, the circumstances of different places need to be reconstructed painstakingly from the ground up, all the more so because the Islamic world began with lots of diversity among its regions and provinces. In Syria the arrival of Islamic rule did not leave much of a mark on local archaeological records, at least at first. Trade and infrastructure continued as before, apparently unscathed. Local production and consumption went on in this way throughout the seventh century. Currency remained readily available. Toward the end of the seventh century came a spike in production and arguably in overall wealth. Large-scale change did not arrive, however, until the late eighth century. For example, at that point high-quality ceramics in Syria moved away from local traditions toward styles and techniques originating in other places such as Iraq and Khurasan. This process involved both importing new wares from those places and imitating them in local production. Now we finally arrive in a world that we can recognize, technologically, stylistically, and culturally, as Islamic.

Walmsley notes that the concerns of archaeologists differ from those of historians who work mainly with the Arabic literary tradition. He also notes that both kinds of work are necessary and may ultimately come together through an integration of “bottom-up” and “top-down” approaches. This point is crucial, although the integration of the two approaches may, in the end, prove rather difficult. It may also be the case that with regard to the economy of the early Islamic world, archaeological research is more advanced nowadays than is historical or, perhaps more precisely, historiographical research. If this article has more to say about the historical/historiographical side of things than it does about the archaeological (and papyrological and numismatic), it is because of my own predilections and experience, of course, but also because that historical/historiographical side needs more attention right now.

Meanwhile, we may add that even while much recent archaeological work tends to emphasize continuity from late antiquity to early Islam, it also points ultimately to historical change, if not rupture. For the changes visible in the archaeological record beginning

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in Islamic Law: Origins and Persistence,” *American Journal of Comparative Law* 53 (2005): 785–835 [798–99]; M. Coşgel, “Stagnation and Change in Islamic History,” University of Connecticut Working Paper 2007-47 (Sept. 2007), [http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1195&context=econ\\_wpapers](http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1195&context=econ_wpapers).

15. See also A. Greif, *Institutions and the Path to the Modern Economy: Lessons from Medieval Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), and below, n. 38. Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, 2:124.

16. Walmsley, *Early Islamic Syria*. See also G. Avni, *The Byzantine-Islamic Transition in Palestine: An Archaeological Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

around the turn of the third/ninth century are not merely stylistic; they are centrally important for political, economic, and religious history as well.

Other modern advocates of the historicity of an early Islamic economic boom privilege such terms as “market” and “free market.” In this view, Muḥammad was not only a merchant, as everyone knows,<sup>17</sup> but something like the CEO of a state-sponsored enterprise run according to sound business principles. In this way the early Muslim community achieved a balanced market economy.<sup>18</sup> In tandem with this argument comes the statement or supposition that Islam has always been compatible with modernity and that it acted in its early period as a harbinger of modern capitalism by instituting market-friendly principles long before these appeared in Christian Europe. This way of thinking goes back at least to the mid-twentieth century, when some Western scholars argued for parallels and connections between the commercial expansion of early Islam and the rise of modern capitalism in early modern Europe.<sup>19</sup> It has also been a concern for modern Muslim reformers.<sup>20</sup>

### **Empires and Their Economies**

One comparative discussion that has gone missing in modern work on the early caliphate regards the fundamental nature of imperial economies as a whole. For other imperial contexts, this discussion goes back at least to the 1970s and to work by the Greco-Roman historian M. I. Finley,<sup>21</sup> as well as to earlier writers including the sociologist Max Weber. For a long time it involved a debate between “modernists” and “primitivists”: can we apply modern economic analysis to ancient economies, as we do to modern ones? As Finley and others moved beyond this narrow binary, they referred not only to Weber but also to the anthropologists Marcel Mauss and Bronisław Malinowski and the economist Karl Polanyi.

Polanyi, as is well known, rejected the (to us) familiar notion that the market, in the sense in which neoclassical or liberal economists use the term, constitutes a natural or default mode of human behavior and organization.<sup>22</sup> Instead he thought of the market as “instituted,” that is, as the product of forces external to itself. Another, related principle was that of the “embedded” economy, namely, the idea that the economic realm is inextricably connected to elements deriving from culture, politics, religion, and so forth. Also of interest

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17. Even though we have this information mainly on the authority of Ibn Ishāq; much other early Arabic literature ignores or contradicts it.

18. B. Koehler, *Early Islam and the Birth of Capitalism* (London: Lexington, 2014); a more balanced and detailed treatment in G. Heck, *Charlemagne, Muhammad, and the Arab Roots of Capitalism* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2006).

19. S. D. Goitein, “The Rise of the Middle-Eastern Bourgeoisie in Early Islamic Times,” in *Studies in Islam and Islamic Institutions* (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 217–41; cf. M. Bonner, “The *Kitāb al-Kasb* Attributed to al-Shaybānī: Poverty, Surplus, and the Circulation of Wealth,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 121 (2001): 410–27.

20. C. Tripp, *Islam and the Moral Economy: The Challenge of Capitalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

21. Especially Finley’s *The Ancient Economy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973, 1985).

22. Most famously in Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston: Beacon, 2001). Much of Polanyi’s work relevant for this discussion is collected in *Trade and Markets in the Early Empires* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957).

is the identification, by Polanyi and others, of three principal modes of exchange. The first, redistribution, consists of extracting resources more or less forcibly from certain groups and redistributing them among others, a core activity of all premodern empires and indeed of all states. The second mode is reciprocity, whereby resources are transferred with the expectation that something else will be transferred in return at some unspecified, later time. Here the participants already know one another, and the transfer of objects is part and parcel of their relationship. The third mode consists of market exchange, in which goods or services are provided without either party (necessarily) being acquainted with the other. The process takes place, at least ideally, without constraint and without creating any obligations beyond the object of the transaction itself.

Here I do not mean to propose a Polanyian model for the early Islamic economy. Not only economists, but many specialists in the history of ancient empires, Assyriologists in particular,<sup>23</sup> have rejected Polanyi's ventures into these areas. Nonetheless, we may wish to consider applying certain elements of his approach to our study of the economy of the early Islamic world, especially because discussion of that economy has become so heavily weighted toward modern notions of market, wealth-seeking rational actors, and so forth. In other words, a partial and provisional "re-embedding" of the early Islamic economy may be in order, to help us see these phenomena in the context not only of the commercial and fiscal, but also of the political and religious domains.

In his masterful *The Ancient Economy*, which first appeared in 1973, Finley built on Polanyi's work, even though he barely mentioned it there.<sup>24</sup> Earlier treatments of this subject-matter, especially that of M. I. Rostovstevff,<sup>25</sup> had portrayed the Roman economy as a unified space where elites engaged in large-scale, rationally planned investment, development, and management in agriculture, industry, and commerce. Controversy around this view had already gone on for some time, including in the "modernist-primitivist" debate already mentioned. But Finley took things farther. He viewed the Roman economy in terms of its structures, which for him were as much political and cultural as economic. In his analysis, Finley focused on the notion of status, following Polanyi and, especially, Weber. Both of these stated that in the nineteenth century, class had replaced status as the most important social classifier in much of Europe, at the same time as market relationships became predominant; however, this had not been the case in earlier times and places, including the ancient empires. So in Finley's view, the ancient economy, though quite complex, was not really a market economy. He presented it through a series of status-related pairs: order and status, masters and slaves, landlords and peasants, town and country, and so forth.

The subsequent discussion of the Roman economy has been rich and varied. More recently there has been a trend to view it again in market terms; in particular, the economist Peter Temin has argued that the Roman economy was constituted by a series of integrated

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23. Though see J. Renger, "Economy of Ancient Mesopotamia: A General Outline," in *The Babylonian World*, ed. G. Leick, 187–97 (London: Routledge, 2007).

24. Finley attended Polanyi's economic history seminar at Columbia University from 1948 to 1953; see Ian Morris's foreword to the second edition of Finley's *Ancient Economy*, xi.

25. Rostovstevff, *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957).

markets operating outside state control, and thus “free.”<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, there has been a contrasting trend to argue that the Roman empire had a “tied” economy in the Polanyian sense, in which the state exerted control over the supply of staple foodstuffs to the capital and regulated and restricted traffic in strategic commodities such as materials for producing armaments, silks, and purple dyes. According to this view, trade in other commodities took place in the shadow of the state, though not under its direct control.

### **Institutionalism and New Institutional Economics**

We may recall that in the argument over boom or bust in the early Islamic economy, some proponents of the “bust” perspective have been described as “institutionalist,” because they point to institutional arrangements already present at the origins; or in other words, they posit an original and apparently endlessly durable “constitution” of Islam. Maya Shatzmiller has argued convincingly against these views by opposing the practice of relying on *a priori* generalizations generated by theoretical models that privilege political and economic institutions.<sup>27</sup> She instead advocates empirically based research and arrives at a model of an early Islamic economy undergoing growth and expansion. Along the way she provides estimates of its GDP for the years 700 and 1000 CE. Here the fundamental concept is *economic performance*, centered on growth and expansion.

At this point, however, we need to say more about the institutionalist approach. In fact, historians of the Islamic world have argued along these lines for many years, though more often with a focus on “principles” or “conditions” than on “institutions.” For example, Maxime Rodinson, in his *Islam and Capitalism* and elsewhere, began his discussion of Islamic economic life with its “religious conditions.”<sup>28</sup> Here principles derived from the Qur’ān, Sunna, and Islamic fiscal and commercial law set the stage *in advance*, perhaps not strictly so in terms of chronology, but logically and heuristically all the same. Accordingly, many economic characteristics of the Islamic world, throughout its historical existence, would have stemmed from those principles and foundational texts. And even if not all these principles were religious in a strict sense, Islam still imposed habits and outlooks that had (and may still have) a determining role.<sup>29</sup> More recently, as we have seen, others have argued for the reverse proposition: that Islamic law imposed principles and practices that turned out, in the long run, to have *negative* economic consequences. Either way, principles established at the foundation, perceptible to us now in Islamic law, shaped and determined the course of events.

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26. P. Temin, “A Market Economy in the Early Roman Empire,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 91 (2001): 169–81; *The Roman Market Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

27. Shatzmiller, “Economic Performance and Economic Growth,” esp. 142ff.

28. Rodinson, *Islam and Capitalism*, trans. B. Pearce (New York: Pantheon, 1974), 39–56, 111–57; idem, “Les conditions religieuses de la vie économique,” in *Wirtschaftsgeschichte des Vorderen Orients*, ed. B. Spuler, 18–30 (Leiden: Brill, 1977).

29. As C. Becker already said in “Islam und Wirtschaft,” *Islamstudien* I (Leipzig: Quelle und Meyere, 1924), 54–65, esp. 54.

Islamic law provides support for arguments of this kind. For instance, it states that prices in the market must remain beyond the control of individuals who might seek to manipulate them to their own advantage. Indeed, the maxim “Prices are in God’s hands”<sup>30</sup> seems to converge nicely with Adam Smith’s statement that whenever prices in the market become skewed, an “invisible hand” will intervene to reestablish balance. With regard to continuity with the past, Islamic law presents its doctrines and principles as having been transmitted through unbroken chains of authorities extending all the way back to the Prophet Muḥammad in Arabia. At the same time, however, Islamic legal texts do not make it easy to investigate the concrete circumstances of markets and exchange during this early period. For instance, the *Muwaṭṭa*’ ascribed to Mālik b. Anas (d. 179/795)<sup>31</sup> is generally thought, despite some modern dissent,<sup>32</sup> to express doctrines prevalent in Medina in the late second/eighth century. It cites authorities associated with that city from Mālik himself (or even later) all the way back to the Prophet. Its chapter on commercial law (*buyū*’) examines transactions involving sellers, buyers, and third parties. With regard to the setting, we see trade in grains and other foodstuffs, with slaves receiving especially detailed attention. But while these transactions could certainly be characteristic of a market in Medina, they could also be taking place in *any* Muslim and Arabic-speaking environment of the time. Apart from a few actions attributed to caliphs, ‘Umar I in particular, there is little mention of the marketplace’s organization and regulation.

Modern controversies surround the origins and early development of Islamic law. For the purposes of this article, the most important of these controversies include the thesis that the early caliphs not only established a system of courts and legal bureaucracy but also legislated on their own authority, using the term *sunna* to refer to a tradition linked to the Prophet Muḥammad but also embodied in themselves;<sup>33</sup> and the question of continuity between Islamic law and its predecessors, such as Arabian customary, Roman, Jewish, and Sasanian law. Accordingly, we may ask: while Islamic commercial law seems to have reigned supreme, at least formally, in the marketplaces of the ‘Abbāsīd Caliphate from the later second/eighth century onward, what system(s) prevailed earlier on? For instance, in the mid- to late first/seventh century, the overwhelming majority of the caliphate’s inhabitants were not Muslim, but they certainly bought and sold things and traveled in order to trade. What commercial systems and rules did they use? The likely answer is that they used whatever systems happened to be in place, dating from before the conquests; perhaps they modified or abandoned these systems whenever they dealt with the conquerors, but transactions of this kind can only have constituted a fraction of the total. What, then, were these older systems?

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30. A. Sabra, “Prices Are in God’s Hands,” in *Poverty and Charity in Middle Eastern Contexts*, ed. M. Bonner et al., 73–91 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).

31. Ed. M. F. ‘Abd al-Bāqī (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1406/1985), 2:609–86.

32. N. Calder, *Studies in Early Muslim Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993).

33. J. Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1950), 192–213; C. Décobert, “Notule sur le patrimonialisme omeyyade,” in *Umayyad Legacies*, ed. A. Borrut and P. Cobb, 213–54 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), esp. 241–42.

Until now this question has been considered, in large part, under the rubric of Roman provincial law. Here the idea is that pre-Islamic Near Eastern legal systems may have preserved certain aspects of older, local, non-Roman law, combined somehow with Roman law itself.<sup>34</sup> Modern work on this theory, at least relating to the seventh century and its environs, has focused on discovering the influence (if any) that such hybrid systems had on the formation of Islamic law over exploring how non-Muslims actually conducted their affairs before and after the coming of Islam. Meanwhile, modern discussions of Byzantine markets and trade in Egypt and Syria-Palestine tend to end with the Persian conquest in the 610s or with the Arab/Islamic conquests beginning in the 630s.<sup>35</sup> Studies of Sasanian commerce and trade in this era are even scarcer.<sup>36</sup> One thing emerges clearly from this work: namely, that principles and rules derived from the Qurʾān, Sunna, and Islamic law in general did not govern—and *could not* have governed—this vast economic and commercial space at the outset. Here as elsewhere, a certain amount of time had to go by before Islamic principles and institutions became hegemonic and assumed the forms familiar to us now.

From this fact we may proceed to two conclusions. The first is that we cannot avoid the modern debates over methods and approaches to the literary sources for early Islam, beginning with the sources for the early development of Islamic law. For example, when Shatzmiller opposes the practice of relying on *a priori* generalizations generated by theoretical models—in this case, models that privilege political and economic institutions<sup>37</sup>—we must agree. However, when she advocates, as an alternative, “empirically based research,” we need to ask this question: “Upon which empirically sound data is this research founded?” This is not to deny the existence of such data, by any means. Nonetheless, we ought to evaluate our source materials in light of recent work on historiography, source criticism, and other areas, which has shown such methodological sophistication and philological accuracy—even if these have not yet been applied to the economic realm. The second conclusion is that we need to devote our attention squarely to the Near Eastern marketplace, including in Arabia shortly before Islam and in the entire region during the era of the great conquests and the early caliphate. Precisely because our knowledge of this marketplace is so limited, we must avoid the temptation of imposing on it the better-known structures of Roman and/or mature Islamic law.

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34. P. Crone, *Roman, Provincial and Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). For subsequent discussion of the fifth-century “Syrian-Roman Lawbook,” see W. Selb and H. Kaufhold, *Das syrisch-römische Rechtsbuch*, 3 vols., Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Denkschriften der philosophisch-historischen Klasse 295 (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2002). See also P. Crone and A. Silverstein, “The Ancient Near East and Islam: The Case of Lot-Casting,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 55 (2010): 423–50, repr. in Crone, *Islam, the Ancient Near East, and Varieties of Godlessness*, Collected Studies 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 17–43.

35. This is generally true of the papers in C. Morrisson, ed., *Trade and Markets in Byzantium* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2012).

36. See Morony, “Economic Boundaries?”; E. de la Vaissière, *Soghdian Traders*, trans. J. Ward (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

37. Shatzmiller, “Economic Performance and Economic Growth.”

We may also inquire further into the very nature of institutions themselves, broadly speaking. Students of the early Islamic economy have worked with institutions and related concepts, as we have seen. They have not, however, done much with the “New Institutional Economics” (NIE) which has been discussed and deployed by historians of Rome, medieval Europe, and other areas.<sup>38</sup> As the late Douglass North, a leading figure of NIE, observed, “[present-day] economists hang on to a body of theory developed to deal with advanced economies of nineteenth-century vintage in which the problems were those of resource allocation,” but this approach is no longer adequate, especially for the history of earlier economies.<sup>39</sup> A minority of today’s economists would agree, at least in part, with North’s statement, as would many non-economists. But North, and NIE in general, goes farther. For North an “institution” is not a preexisting, determining framework. In some ways it seems close to the French term *institution* as deployed by Pierre Bourdieu,<sup>40</sup> although this concept does not seem to have a major role in North’s arguments. In any case, North takes care to distinguish “institutions” from “organizations.” The former “are the rules of the game in a society or, more formally, are the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction. . . . [T]hey structure incentives in . . . exchange, whether political, social or economic.” Institutions constitute “self-imposed constraints,” a definition which is “complementary to the choice theoretic approach of neoclassical economic theory”<sup>41</sup> instead of opposing it. Meanwhile, if institutions are the rules of the game, organizations are the players, consisting of “groups of individuals bound together by some common objectives.” The determining factor for the kinds of organizations that will come into existence in a given historical context is the relevant “institutional matrix.”<sup>42</sup>

If NIE eventually proves relevant to the study of the early Islamic economy, it will be because of its flexible concept of institution. If we maintain that Islamic economic practice and theory were (and maybe still are) based on a certain institutional matrix or matrices, or that they evolved from something of this kind, this does not mean that a particular set of rules and practices—such as we may find in mature Islamic law and in later Islamic commerce and fiscal administration—was present at the beginning and determined all of the following sequence of events. Instead we may say that there was indeed some institutional

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38. See P. F. Bang, “The Ancient Economy and New Institutional Economics,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 99 (2009): 194–206. The most important contributions to NIE include Douglass C. North, *Structure and Change in Economic History* (New York: Norton, 1980); idem, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); idem, *Understanding the Process of Economic Change* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); and A. Greif, *Institutions and the Path to the Modern Economy: Lessons from Medieval Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2006. See the detailed discussion and refutation of Greif in Shatzmiller, “Economic Performance and Economic Growth,” 134–37.

39. North, *Understanding the Process*, 168.

40. As in C. Décobert, *Le mendiant et le combattant: L’institution de l’islam* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1991), using *institution* in Bourdieu’s sense.

41. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*, 3–5. In other words, North maintains here that NIE does not contradict but rather enhances “mainstream” economic thinking. His later work shows less optimism on this score.

42. Ibid., 58–61.

matrix—or more likely, matrices—present at the outset, which we must then identify and contextualize. Here we have a different task from that of, say, historians of the Roman economy, in that we have to deal with a relatively short period that appears unsettled and transitional. We need to remember, however, that it did not necessarily appear that way to the economic actors of that time and place. More importantly, certain institutional matrices must have been present there. All these things changed over time, without doubt, and this is precisely where institutions, as conceptualized by NIE, can help.

In the rest of this article I will take up several issues, or episodes, relating to the early Islamic economy writ large. These amount to a representative sampling and not a thorough and exhaustive treatment. Two considerations underlie them from beginning to end. The first is the attempt to discover institutional matrices, with an emphasis on their dynamic, changing nature. The second has to do with the sources, especially those which may be described as literary and which use the Arabic language. When, as often happens, these sources give us information which seems conflictual or even contradictory, how can we go beyond the (possibly hopeless) task of reconciling them, or promoting one of them at the expense of the other?

### **The Impasse of Meccan Trade**

As noted earlier, the modern term “market” can refer to a physical place where activities of a certain kind typically happen and also, in a more generalized, abstract sense, to a system of exchange prevailing within a certain geographical space or even through all of space. We may think of these two meanings as poles at either end of a continuum, or in Peter Bang’s words, as “two ideal-types at either end of a broad spectrum of varying degrees of integration.”<sup>43</sup> Our everyday use of the term often falls somewhere in between. Modern discussions of the early Islamic economy as a whole have clustered around the general, abstract sense of “market,” while the discrete, concrete sense has prevailed in the archaeological literature. It seems, however, that confusion between these two senses of the term may have been present in one of the most important historical and historiographical debates in this area.

For some time there has been a consensus that when Islam first emerged in Arabia, it was already so market- and merchant-friendly as to instill commercial habits and ideals into its followers. This characteristic led to the economic boom that began in the second/eighth century, and ultimately to the pro-market attitude and behavior that Muslims have maintained ever since. How did this happen? Well before Muḥammad’s time, we are told, his tribe, the Quraysh, were great traders who established commercial networks so successfully that they became the peninsula’s dominant economic and even political actors. And even though the majority of Quraysh opposed Muḥammad’s teachings, they all, including Muḥammad himself, shared these market-oriented ways of thinking and behaving. According to one theory, the rapid accumulation of wealth in Mecca created inequalities and dislocations, so that the tribal system which maintained loyalty and

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43. Bang, *Roman Bazaar*, 140.

security began to unravel. The result was a crisis, at once social, economic, and spiritual, to which Muḥammad's teachings and the Qur'ān provided both a response and a cure.<sup>44</sup>

In 1987 these ways of considering the matter received a challenge in Patricia Crone's *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*.<sup>45</sup> Crone argued that pre-Islamic Mecca was not the favorable location for trade that modern scholars have made it out to be. In fact its barren soil and off-track location made it useless as a center of trade. Mecca never dominated Arabia's commerce with other countries and failed even to attract any notice from those countries. Meccan trade, if it existed, must have consisted of local distribution of leather, cheap cloth, livestock, and other such things. Crone based this demolition work on a devastating running critique of the Arabic literary sources for pre-Islamic Arabia.

While some of the responses to *Meccan Trade* consisted of outraged rejection of the entire thing,<sup>46</sup> others sought to overturn parts of the argument but not all of it.<sup>47</sup> And although there have been interesting contributions since then,<sup>48</sup> in overall terms there has not been much progress. As a result, it has seemed for some time that the argument over Meccan trade is over and done with. If we accept Crone's argument, then we agree that the entire edifice of pre-Islamic Arabian history, as constructed by twentieth-century scholars, has collapsed with no alternative edifice available to replace it. If we do not accept it, then we may maintain that Quraysh extended their commercial networks to the point that Mecca came to resemble the Italian merchant republics of later centuries;<sup>49</sup> that being shrewd businessmen, Quraysh grew rich; that this accumulation of wealth, together with increasingly individualistic behavior, led to a social and spiritual crisis in Mecca; and that the triumph of commercial values and market institutions in early Islam emerged from this sequence of events, or something like it, in western Arabia. In this way we find ourselves back where we were over half a century ago.

This controversy involves historiographical problems too complex to allow for any neat resolution, at least in such a brief space as this. Instead, I will attempt to find another mode of inquiry, another ground of debate, which perhaps can help us move forward.

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44. W. M. Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1953). This portrayal of spiritual crisis as a response to social dislocation resembles E. R. Dodds's later explanation for the triumph of Christianity in late antiquity in *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

45. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987.

46. Especially R. B. Serjeant's "Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam: Misconceptions and Flawed Polemics," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 110 (1990): 472–86, to which Crone replied in "Serjeant and Meccan Trade," *Arabica* 39 (1992): 216–40.

47. For instance, M. Lecker, "King Ibn Ubayy and the *Quṣṣāṣ*," in *Methods and Theories in the Study of Islamic Origins*, ed. H. Berg, 29–71 (Leiden, Brill, 2003).

48. G. Heck, *Charlemagne, Muhammad, and Arab Roots*; idem, "Gold Mining in Arabia and the Rise of the Islamic State," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 42 (1999): 364–95; P. Crone, "Quraysh and the Roman Army: Making Sense of the Meccan Leather Trade," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 70 (2007): 63–88, repr. in idem, *The Qur'ānic Pagans and Related Matters*, Collected Studies 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 21–51.

49. H. Lammens, "La république marchande de la Mecque vers l'an 600 de notre ère," *Bulletin de l'Institut Egyptien*, 5th ser., 4 (1910): 23–54.

### Narratives and Counternarratives

The idea that the manner in which a polity first comes into being provides a matrix for all of its subsequent history has a highly respectable pedigree, including such authorities as the ancient Roman historian Livy and his Renaissance Florentine disciple Machiavelli. No one, however, interprets this principle more generously than do modern historians of Islam, who often present the entire edifice of Islamic civilization as having taken form, ineluctably, from the circumstances of its foundation. For the economic realm this approach yields the argument that Islam was (and is) friendly to commerce and the free market because Muḥammad was a merchant, Mecca was a trading city, the Qurʾān and Sunna established principles for conducting commerce, and so forth.

As already mentioned, arguments of this kind rely on a body of Arabic texts that did not appear in the form in which we have them until the later second/eighth century and in most cases considerably later than that. Modern controversies around them have focused on whether their narratives may be taken as “authentic,” in the sense of corresponding to events that actually happened in the world. Meanwhile, the arguments over method and interpretation have focused on such areas as politics, jurisprudence, and theology, and only rarely on economy. Yet there is no reason why this should be so. In other words, a modern treatment of the early Islamic economy needs to enter these methodological debates over the sources, just as much as do treatments of politics and religion.

Readers of ancient and medieval source materials know that different authors, while discussing identical or similar topics, often bring different, competing agendas and biases to bear on them. The authors may come from similar linguistic, political, or religious traditions and backgrounds, or they may not. Either way, they often express their differences without identifying their adversaries, and at times without even identifying the cause of dissension itself. What matters here is that such differences and tensions often exist in our source materials, and that practically by definition they are obscure to us.<sup>50</sup> Recovering them is accordingly a major part of our task. To do this we must recognize contested territory when we have it before us, and we must reconstruct the relevant narratives and counternarratives as best we can.<sup>51</sup> Some recent work—not, however, devoted to economic history—offers examples of how this may be done.<sup>52</sup>

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50. J. Lassner, *Islamic Revolution and Historical Memory* (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 1986); idem, *The Middle East Remembered* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); T. El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); A. Borrut, *Entre mémoire et pouvoir: L'espace syrien sous les derniers Omeyyades et les premiers Abbassides (v. 72-193/692-809)* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); N. Haider, “*Waṣīya* of Abū Hāshim,” in *Scholars and Scholarship of the Islamic World*, ed. A. Ahmed et al., 49–83 (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

51. Or “alternative pasts”; see Borrut, *Entre mémoire et pouvoir*, 5.

52. See Lassner, *Islamic Revolution and Historical Memory*; idem, *Middle East Remembered*; El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography*; Borrut, *Entre mémoire et pouvoir*; Haider, “*Waṣīya* of Abū Hāshim.” S. J. Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet: The End of Muhammad's Life and the Beginnings of Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), builds on discordant views in the sources regarding the time of the Prophet's death to reconstruct a detailed narrative and counternarrative, and draws historical consequences from this tension.

Looking back at the controversy over Meccan trade, participants in the debate have agreed on one thing—namely, that pre-Islamic Arabia was deeply contested territory of some kind. At issue, among other things, has been whether Quraysh sought and achieved commercial dominance throughout Arabia. For those who think they did, Quraysh's political preeminence seems a logical (if not always explicitly stated) corollary. For those who think they did not, pre-Islamic Arabian tribal politics and commercial networks remain a puzzle.

Elsewhere I have discussed an Arabic narrative tradition about “the markets of the Arabs before Islam.”<sup>53</sup> This tradition describes an annual series of markets or fairs that extended throughout the Arabian peninsula. According to the tradition, the series began in north-central Arabia at Dūmat al-Jandal. It then moved across Yamāma and the eastern coastlands and Oman and on to Ḥaḍramawt and Yemen before reaching its culminating point at the annual fair of ʿUkāz. Mecca and Medina did not belong to the sequence; in spatial terms, the closest they came to it was at ʿUkāz, not far from Mecca but separate and distinct from it.

This tradition provides a counternarrative to the better-known narrative(s) that we find in many sources, among which the history of Mecca by the third/ninth-century author al-Azraqī may be taken as representative. Al-Azraqī also describes an annual sequence of markets before Islam, but his is much shorter than the one in the “markets of the Arabs.” In al-Azraqī this sequence assumes the form of a circle and culminates in the pilgrimage, for which the markets seem to function as prologue or “warm-up.”<sup>54</sup> In the “markets of the Arabs,” by contrast, the sequence is longer, both in space and in time, and takes the form not of a circle but of an inwardly directed, accelerating spiral, culminating in the fair of ʿUkāz (and not the pilgrimage). Furthermore, this spiral describes a moral trajectory that begins at a low point, Dūmat al-Jandal, where the local ruler enjoys a proprietary role in the market, levying taxes and selling his goods before anyone else, thus fixing prices. Even worse, the market at Dūma specializes in prostitution and slavery. The sequence thus begins at a point of total commodification: instead of good deeds requited or benefits reciprocated, we have persons deprived of their social status and the use of their own bodies. Even for free participants, exchanges are constrained by the selfish activity of a ruler, who is, in turn, hampered in his sovereignty and autonomy.

The next few points in the sequence come under the partial control or protectorate of the Sasanian empire. Here Arab rulers enjoy the same privileges as the ruler of Dūma. In Ḥaḍramawt we find the absence of any sovereignty whatsoever, together with the necessity for visitors of finding “protection.” By contrast, the tradition expresses admiration for the markets at ʿAdan and Ṣanʿāʿ, where the rulers do not exact taxes and refrain from any activity at all.

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53. “The Arabian Silent Trade: Profit and Nobility in the ‘Markets of the Arabs,’” in *Histories of the Middle East*, ed. A. Sabra et al., 23–51 (Leiden: Brill, 2010); “Time Has Come Full Circle: Markets, Fairs and the Calendar in Arabia before Islam,” in *Scholars and Scholarship of the Islamic World*, ed. A. Ahmed et al., 15–47 (Leiden: Brill, 2011); “Commerce and Migration before Islam: A Brief History of a Long Literary Tradition,” in *Iranian Language and Culture*, ed. B. Aghaei and M. R. Ghanoonparvar, 1–27 (Malibu, CA: Mazda, 2012).

54. Al-Azraqī, *Akhbār Makka* (Mecca: Dār al-Thaqāfa, 1385/1965), 1:182–87; Bonner, “Time Has Come Full Circle,” 36–40.

The sequence reaches its moral high point at ‘Ukāz. Here the negative aspects of the earlier markets, from greedy “kings” to extorting tribal chiefs, are absent. Whereas at Dūmat al-Jandal everything was a commodity, at ‘Ukāz market participants trade commodities, including luxury goods and everyday items such as “leather of ‘Ukāz.” The medieval sources single out ‘Ukāz in terms such as these: “The tribes of the Arabs used to congregate at ‘Ukāz every year and used to hold their boasting contests there (*wa-yatafākharūna fihā*). Their poets would attend [the market] and would vie with one another with their most recent compositions. Then they would disperse.”<sup>55</sup> The tradition thus associates the fair of ‘Ukāz with the twin themes of generosity and competitiveness. ‘Ukāz was also a place where questions of leadership were decided, even though—or precisely because—it lay under the control of no one. In former times, the kings of Yemen used to send agents to ‘Ukāz to find out who was “the most valiant of the Arabs” and then “to cultivate him and offer him presents.”<sup>56</sup> Meanwhile, other “kings” gave presents and “shares of the profits” to the “nobles.” *Ribḥ*, the usual Arabic word for “profit,” is tied here to the evaluation of nobility and the constant competition among “nobles” for prestige, recognition, and royal gifts. One effect of ‘Ukāz, and ultimately of the market sequence as a whole, was thus to transform the proceeds from commerce and taxation into prestige-enhancing gifts.<sup>57</sup>

Al-Azraqī is evidently aware of this “counternarrative” because he echoes its details, accommodating them within his own Mecca- and pilgrimage-centered narrative. What, then, are the differences here between narrative and counternarrative? The world of the “markets of the Arabs” differs starkly from the world of Islam in its ethics (boastful self-aggrandizement) and politics (limited and fragmented sovereignty). It favors an archaic morality, exalting gift-giving and competition for noble status over what we now call commoditization and market exchange. However, the sequence also features such activities as transporting and selling goods. In the end it brings together international maritime trade, desert-crossing caravans, and local production and traffic, all within a single grand sequence.

We find a similar contrast within early Islam itself. The Qurʾān and Sunna regulate behavior in the marketplace, laying down principles that we can indeed interpret as favoring the “free market,” for instance by insisting on transparency in transactions and by protecting weaker actors from stronger, tendentially predatory ones. But at the same time, the Qurʾān prescribes a morality based on generosity and reciprocity.<sup>58</sup> It uses lots of commercial metaphors, as is well known, but this does not mean that it imposes a morality based on what we moderns call free-market principles.<sup>59</sup> These differences and similarities between the tradition on the markets, on the one hand, and fundamental texts of early Islam, on the other, point to tensions between competing ideologies within the contested space

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55. Abū ‘Ubayd al-Bakrī, *Muʿjam mā istaʿjam* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2008), 3:218; Yāqūt al-Rūmī al-Ḥamawī, *Muʿjam al-buldān* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1955–57), 4:142.

56. Al-Marzūqī, *Kitāb al-Azmina wa-l-amkina* (Hyderabad: Dāʾirat al-Maʿārif, 1914), 2:165.

57. Bonner, “Arabian Silent Trade.”

58. M. Bonner, “Poverty and Economics in the Qur’an,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 35 (2005): 391–406.

59. A. Rippin, “The Commerce of Eschatology,” in *The Qur’an as Text*, ed. S. Wild, 125–35 (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

of pre-Islamic Arabia.<sup>60</sup> Alternatively, perhaps it is better to view both market sequences together as harbingers of the nascent Islamic order. Either way, we find ourselves in a (to us) largely unfamiliar Arabian environment, historiographically more promising than the impasse of Meccan trade.

Another contrast here between narrative and counternarrative has to do with the role of Quraysh. The modern arguments over Meccan trade may have obscured whatever it was that authors such as al-Azraqī actually had to say on this score. But it is clear, in any case, that al-Azraqī and others like him assign a major role in peninsular trade to Quraysh. In the tradition on the markets, by contrast, Quraysh are present and respected but in the end only one collective player among many. Other groups, especially Tamīm, have more prominent roles. This goes against what we think we know about tribal politics and the pilgrimage in Arabia before Islam.<sup>61</sup> However, the point here is not to claim that one or the other of these versions is historically accurate, but rather to explore the contours of this contested terrain.

One of the most attractive characteristics, historiographically speaking, of the counternarrative of the Arabian markets is its dynamism, as it sweeps up merchants, tribesmen, townsmen, gifts, commodities, and moral values into its spiraling movement. This circuit of markets and fairs is idealized, of course, but it may also correspond to movements that actually took place. It has similarities to, and likely connections with, fairs and markets in contemporary Byzantine Syria.<sup>62</sup> It also bears an uncanny similarity to events that happened soon afterward, especially the wars of the *ridḍa*, which, in the admittedly fragmented picture we have of them from Muslim historiography,<sup>63</sup> also constituted a grand movement around Arabia, this time proceeding counterclockwise instead of clockwise and featuring armies instead of traders and battles instead of seasonal fairs.<sup>64</sup> We may find it useful to think of these things in terms of Douglass North's "institutional matrices." In any case, in this way we obtain access to territory that the impasse of Meccan trade has prevented us from entering.

It is important to emphasize again that as of right now, *we still do not have a clear narrative*, based on undisputed data and facts, for the politics and economy of Arabia at this crucial time. What we do have, for better or worse, is a set of intertwining controversies and arguments, some of them dating from that time itself or soon afterward, and others dating from the modern era. Accordingly, we have no choice but to work with these arguments

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60. Bonner, "Time Has Come Full Circle," 40–44.

61. M. Kister, "Mecca and Tamīm," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 8 (1965): 113–63.

62. L. de Ligt, *Fairs and Markets in the Roman Empire: Economic and Social Aspects of Periodic Trade in a Pre-Industrial Society* (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1993); A. Binggeli, "Annual Fairs, Regional Networks, and Trade Routes in Syria, Sixth-Tenth Centuries," in Morrison, *Trade and Markets in Byzantium*, 281–96. The tradition on the "markets of the Arabs" describes such markets in Umayyad southern Syria; al-Marzūqī, *Kitāb al-Azmina wa-l-amkina*, 2:169–70.

63. M. Bonner, "The *Ridda* in East Arabian Perspective," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Middle East Studies Association, Denver, November 24, 2015.

64. The chronology of the *ridḍa* is problematic, but Muslim historical writing preferred to describe it in the order Ḥijāz—Yemen—Oman—Baḥrayn—Yamāma.

and controversies, hoping to discover narratives that will accommodate the data and facts that we actually do have.

### **An Imperial Economy**

Now we turn to a later set of episodes. The combined era of the Rāshidūn and Umayyad caliphs (11–132/632–750) is critical for understanding the history of the economy of the Islamic world overall. Under what conditions and within what structures did this economy operate during that formative era? When and how did the boom of the early ‘Abbāsīd era get underway?

We may begin with a brief look at the early caliphate through a comparative lens. The caliphate assumed distinctive positions with regard to religion, law, military organization, and claims to legitimacy, although even in these areas it actually had much in common with its immediate predecessors.<sup>65</sup> In its basic organization and structure, however, the caliphate belonged to the venerably ancient club of land-based tributary empires. Taken together, these constituted a type that lasted from Sargon of Akkad in the later third millennium BCE down to the Chinese and other empires of the early modern and even the modern era.<sup>66</sup> Their tributary character relates to the first element in the Polanyian triad, namely, redistribution: they extracted resources, typically though not only through taxation, from certain segments of the population and then redistributed these resources to other segments. The recipients generally included courts (including bureaucracies), armies, and religious establishments (also often including bureaucracies). These processes took place on a massive scale and required enormous investments in labor, technological and organizational input, and other resources.

What about the other two elements of the Polanyian triad? Reciprocity has always played a major role, for instance, in relations between imperial aristocracies and other groups, and within those aristocracies themselves. Of most concern to us now, however, is market exchange. In the eyes of some observers, including Polanyi himself, market exchange and redistribution are incompatible, at least tendentially. Accordingly, to the extent that a premodern empire or state functioned through redistribution, it did not (and presumably could not) function through market exchange. We see this in Polanyi’s identification of certain merchants as “factors,” agents of the ruler or the state, rather than independent entrepreneurs—even though these merchants were active in markets (in the physical, concrete sense). This view of the incompatibility of imperial redistribution with market exchange is shared both by antimarket Polanyians and certain promarket economists, for whom redistribution seems grossly inefficient and unlikely to have produced such grand results as the Roman empire<sup>67</sup> or, we may suppose, the early caliphate.

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65. G. Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

66. Bang and Bayly, *Tributary Empires in Global History*, including Wickham, “Tributary Empires”; Bang, *Roman Bazaar*, 59–62, 122–23.

67. As in Temin, “Market Economy.”

The role and nature of markets accordingly have an important place in these debates among historians of empire. For instance, it is sometimes argued that for various technological, political, and cultural reasons, tributary empires were unable or unwilling to intervene in or to control systematically the marketplaces within their own territory beyond restricting traffic in strategic commodities such as, in the case of Rome, materials for armaments, silks, dyes, and foodstuffs destined for the capital city. It is similarly maintained that such empires were unable to accomplish on their own all the tasks necessary for keeping themselves functioning. For example, peasants in the countryside made over a large portion of their produce to the state in the form of taxes. When, as often, the state wanted its tax payments in cash, the agricultural surplus had to be transformed into coin, for which markets were necessary. And even if the state agreed to receive payments in kind, the logistics of collection and transportation were generally too much for the imperial authorities to handle by themselves. Markets were thus part and parcel of the imperial system, as were also intermediary figures such as provincial notables and well-connected merchants. At the same time, although local markets may very well have behaved the way we now expect them to, by setting prices in accordance with the forces of supply and demand, they were not, at least by modern standards, well integrated, neither among themselves nor with the provincial and imperial centers.

Here I will argue that a similar situation prevailed in the early caliphate, though with some distinctive characteristics. For in addition to the shared features just discussed, each tributary empire had characteristics of its own. In the case of Rome, once the tributary surplus had been accumulated, it was disbursed mainly to three categories of recipients: first, the imperial court and its dependents; second, the residents and physical infrastructure of the capital and perhaps a few other great cities; and third, the armies stationed along the frontiers. This process of allocation was characteristic of Rome, if not utterly unique to it. The early caliphate, meanwhile, stood out for its relation to its own internal markets, as we'll see shortly. It also stood out for its manner of recruiting and financing its armies, as already mentioned, a topic which we cannot reexamine here in any detail, but which leads us to consider the following.

All empires are built on conquest, or at least on expansion of some kind, and they achieve this in different ways. In this regard the early caliphate was exceptional in its astonishingly rapid expansion. This quick pace had consequences, including a considerable variety among the caliphate's provinces, visible afterward in their fiscal organization. Another consequence was a peculiar kind of decentralization, especially during the Umayyad era (41–132/661–750). Part of the problem here is that our Arabic literary sources provide less information about Syria, the imperial center, than about certain other provinces, but in any case, these matters remain obscure. How regularly did provincial governors forward their fiscal surplus to the capital in Syria? What resources did the Umayyad caliphs have available at hand? How far did their writ really extend?

One answer came in K. Y. Blankinship's *The End of the Jihād State*.<sup>68</sup> Blankinship argued that since the Umayyad caliphs lacked access to much or even most of the revenues from

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68. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994.

the far-flung provinces, they came to rely, to an unhealthy extent, on their metropolitan province of Syria. But since these resources could not suffice for all the palaces, monuments, bureaucrats, armies, and so forth, how did the central state finance itself? Blankinship's response lies in his title. The Umayyad caliphate was a "jihad state" because of its devotion to foreign expansion. Lacking revenues from the provinces, it relied on spoils of war arriving from newly conquered territories. And arrive they did: the chronicles tell about fabulous hauls of precious metals, slaves, and other goods. But then expansion met its inevitable limits, rebellions and civil wars flared up, and new, formidable adversaries emerged. No longer able to afford the large armies it needed, the Umayyad caliphate tottered and collapsed.

It seems clear that the Umayyad state could never have lived from depredation alone. Nonetheless, Blankinship was right to identify it as a conquest polity. And here we arrive at an important difference between the two tributary empires under comparison, the Roman and the early Islamic. The Romans, as mentioned, stationed their legions along the frontiers. This involved lots of coming and going between the frontiers and their local hinterlands, but not so much of it between the frontiers and the imperial capital and heartlands. The Umayyad armies, by contrast, were constantly on the move from center to periphery and back again. The "camp cities" (*amṣār*) in the central provinces housed fighters waiting to be called up for service on the frontiers. Some of these eventually settled in the frontier provinces, whereas others returned to the *amṣār*. In addition to army regulars, unpaid volunteers (*mutaṭawwi'a*) also choked the highways. Accordingly, the great routes in the Umayyad realm saw the constant movement of supplies, matériel, fighters and their families, and camp followers, including, of course, merchants. It seems likely that these highways would have had a higher concentration of military traffic on average than the old Roman ones, though this is something incapable of proof.

In territories that had previously belonged to the Sasanian and Byzantine empires and that now belonged to the caliphate, there were already roads, including the ones that we refer to nowadays as constituting the "silk route." But now some of these, together with other, newer roads, became what I would call, collectively and anachronistically, a "superhighway," a product both of the initial movement of conquest and of the ensuing large-scale movement of persons and goods. Here it is important to emphasize that the frontiers were vital to the Umayyad state, not only for expansion and defense, but for the fiscal survival of a cash-starved imperial center and the legitimization of an unpopular regime. We may also note that like their near-contemporaries the Carolingians, the Umayyads rulers were mobile and peripatetic.<sup>69</sup>

This superhighway network had a role in the economic boom that began in the mid-second/eighth century, if not earlier. Yet it was expenditure by the state, especially military expenditure, that created it in the first place. A similar thing had already happened in the later Roman republic and early empire (principate), where the great roads, built by and for armies, contributed toward commerce and trade. In both cases, military

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69. Borrut, *Entre mémoire et pouvoir*, 390, 397–411; cf. M. G. Chang, *A Court on Horseback: Imperial Touring and the Construction of Qing Rule, 1680–1785* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007).

expenditure by the state provided, more or less unintentionally, infrastructure for civilian commerce. But there were also differences. One of these had to do with the speed and care of construction. The Romans built their roads slowly, as part of a meticulously planned military infrastructure. The Umayyad roads, by contrast, possibly weren't roads at all, at least by the standards of the modern world or the Roman empire—since wheeled transport was likely already on its way out in the Near East. At the same time, however, the caliphate did invest in other aspects of long-distance communication.<sup>70</sup>

Another difference had to do with markets. Regarding the legions posted along the Roman frontiers and receiving their pay in coin, we may say, following Bang, that they represented a concentration of surplus consumption which attracted private resources, as civilian merchants and contractors provided services and goods to the army and the state. Few, if any, other places in the Roman empire afforded opportunities for transregional private commercial ventures on this scale.<sup>71</sup> The situation for the early caliphal armies must have been comparable. Markets sprang up along the routes, or if they were already there they increased in size. Individuals whom we may call private entrepreneurs provided the same service of transforming surplus for soldiers gathered in large numbers with cash to spend. Once again, however, there were differences between the Roman and Umayyad cases. One of these was the high volume of traffic along the Umayyad superhighway, at least in strategically important areas. Another was the direct connection that the superhighway created between the frontier zones and the cities of the interior. In other words, the military apparatus of the early Islamic state linked individual markets to one another while connecting the imperial heartland with its peripheries more directly and on a larger scale than had happened earlier in the Roman, Byzantine, and (quite likely) Sasanian empires.

Now, however, we encounter a problem: we have little evidence—especially archaeological—for these military markets. We may begin with the armies themselves. Army regulars (*muqātila*) received both stipends (*ʿaṭāʾ*), or payments in cash, and in-kind sustenance or provisions (*rizq*). These fighters would not have needed to visit markets for their basic needs, although some of them would have gone there anyway. However, there were others who did need markets, including the volunteers, who didn't receive provisions from the commissary. In any case, the chronicles provide little information about these markets, although they do recount episodes in which army commanders, cut off from their lines of supply, had recourse to markets.<sup>72</sup> We need to look elsewhere.

Some of the earliest extant literary productions of Islamic jurisprudence come from the area of *siyar*, or law of war and military justice. These books mention the exchange of goods in markets, especially in the context of division of spoils of war. If a fighter receives a share and prefers to exchange it for something else, he may do this in the marketplace. Furthermore, the army commander may, if he chooses, sell the entire haul on the market

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70. A. J. Silverstein, *Postal Systems in the Pre-Modern Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

71. An example is the Rhône-Saône-Rhine axis in Gaul; see Bang, *Roman Bazaar*, 110–11, 127–28.

72. Examples include al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh* (Leiden: Brill, 1879–1901), 2:1315–17 (Maslama's army starving before Constantinople) and 2:1494 (Asad b. ʿAbd Allāh in Khuttal). Cf. N. Fries, *Das Heereswesen der Araber zur Zeit der Omajjaden nach Tabarī* (Tübingen: Schnürlein, 1921), 12–13.

and then divide the proceeds among the fighters.<sup>73</sup> However, the *siyar* literature says little or nothing about how these markets functioned—not even whether they followed Islamic commercial law or whether any of the merchants conducting business there were non-Muslim (as likely they often were).

### Linguistic Evidence

The notion of a caliphal superhighway has linguistic evidence in its favor. Gilbert Lazard has argued that New Persian (Persian of the Islamic era) became the language of the entire Iranian cultural area as a direct result of the early Islamic conquests. Before that time, under the Sasanian empire, New Persian's immediate ancestor, Middle Persian or, more precisely, that version of Middle Persian known to us as Pahlavi, had already expanded beyond its original homeland in southwestern Iran, since it (Pahlavi) was the first language of the empire. However, other regions continued to use other languages including, on the Inner Asian frontier, Soghdian. But then, with the early Islamic conquests, came a large-scale movement from western to eastern Iran, involving lines of communication and supply, soldiers and their families, camp followers, and military governors with their courts and administrative apparatus. While Arabic served as the language of command and written communication, Persian constituted the everyday vernacular. It is accordingly in Khurasan and Transoxania that we find the earliest evidence for New Persian, using the Arabic alphabet. By 1000 CE it had replaced Soghdian in the east, by which time it had also moved back west and become the language of the entire Iranian cultural region.<sup>74</sup>

A similar argument could be made for the spread of Arabic in former Byzantine lands at the expense of Greek. How can we account for the rapid spread of Arabic, through all levels of society and in both urban and rural areas, when Greek had not spread similarly under Hellenistic and Roman rule?<sup>75</sup> The answer must have to do with increased communication among markets and towns and the articulation of their roles. Here we may note that the evidence of language, in and of itself, can be useful. We may also note that dynamic movement on a large scale provides a key to understanding the early development of the Islamic economy.

### Ownership of the Market

In classical Islamic law, the market (a concrete, physical space, not the abstract space of the modern concept) is, or should be, marked by openness, both in the accessibility of the space and in the transparency of the transactions taking place there. The marketplace needs to be sustained and protected from predators, both internal and external, and

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73. A. Morabia, *Le ġihād dans l'islam médiéval* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1993), 245.

74. Lazard, "The Rise of the New Persian Language," in *Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 4, ed. R. N. Frye, 595–632 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); idem, *La formation de la langue persane*, Travaux et mémoires de l'Institut d'Etudes Iraniennes I (Paris: Peeters, 1995).

75. D. Wasserstein, "Why Did Arabic Succeed Where Greek Failed? Language Change in the Near East after Muhammad," *Scripta Classica Israelica* 22 (2003): 257–72. See also R. Stroumsa, "Greek and Arabic in Nessana," in Schubert and Sijpesteijn, *Documents and History*, 143–57.

the political authorities are assumed to take responsibility for its safeguarding. It is not, however, a space owned by anyone. To this we may add that it is generally thought that Islamic governments, beginning with the early caliphate, did not exert monopolistic power in the marketplace in any systematic way. In particular, they did not corner the production and/or distribution of strategic commodities, at least not on the scale that their Roman and Byzantine predecessors and counterparts had achieved.<sup>76</sup>

However, this picture contrasts with other known characteristics of early Islamic government, especially of the Umayyads. We begin with the words attributed to Yazīd III upon his ascent to the caliphate in 126/744 during the civil war known as the Third Fitna: “O people, I give you my pledge that I will not place stone upon stone nor brick upon brick, I will not dig any canal, I will not accumulate wealth or give it to any wife or child [of mine]. . . .”<sup>77</sup> Here Yazīd condemned not only his predecessor al-Walīd II but the entire Umayyad dynasty and clan. However, Yazīd’s attempt to dissociate himself from his family’s mania for building did him little good, as he soon fell victim to the ongoing dynastic and civil strife.

Despite all the differences among the various opponents of the Umayyads (including Zubayrids, Shī‘ites, and Khārijites), they agreed among themselves in condemning the Umayyads for having “usurped” property that ought, in the first instance, to have belonged to the early Arab settlers, or to the community as a whole, or to the Family of the Prophet. Now the Umayyads had their own claims and justifications in these matters. However, their accusers had material evidence on their side, in that the ruling elite demonstrably did engage in commercial and agricultural ventures, some of them quite extensive, in addition to the mosques and palaces and other buildings for which they are better known today.

According to a fairly well-known report, after Muḥammad first arrived in Medina, he opened a market there and gave instructions that no one should impose taxes on it or build it up. Perhaps around forty years later the caliph Mu‘āwiya, who pursued building and agricultural projects in both western and eastern Arabia,<sup>78</sup> built two commercial spaces within the market of Medina and refurbished a third,<sup>79</sup> in apparent violation of the principle previously established by the Prophet. Afterward, during the reign of Hishām, the caliph’s uncle Ibrāhīm, then governor of Medina, ordered the construction of a walled complex of shops, warehouses, and inns, thus uniting the city’s commercial activity within one space. The complex was built handsomely and solidly with its rents accruing, of course, to Ibrāhīm. But when Hishām died, the city’s residents razed the buildings to the ground.<sup>80</sup> We are not told what caused this resentment, but it may have had to do with the usurpation of assets properly belonging to the community or something similar. Did opposition also cohere

76. A. Laiou and C. Morrisson, *The Byzantine Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

77. Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rikh*, 2:1834–35; *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, trans. C. Hillenbrand (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987–2007), 26:194; Borrut, *Entre mémoire et pouvoir*, 395.

78. G. C. Miles, “Early Islamic Inscriptions near Ṭā’if in the Ḥijāz,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 7 (1948): 236–42; A. Al-Askar, *al-Yamama in the Early Islamic Era* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2002), 84.

79. ‘Abd Allāh b. Shihāb al-Dīn al-Samhūdī, *Wafā’ al-wafā’ bi-akhbār Dār al-Muṣṭafā* (Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-Ādāb, 1373/1953), 1:541–43; R. Foote, “Umayyad Markets and Manufacturing: Evidence for a Commercialized and Industrializing Economy in Early Islamic Bilād al-Shām” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1999), 182–83.

80. Al-Samhūdī, *Wafā’ al-wafā’*, 1:541–43; Foote, “Umayyad Markets,” 182–86.

around the notion that this activity constituted a constriction of the market, upsetting the balance prescribed by Islamic law? We do not know, as our information on the episode is sparse and the “mainstream” chronicles do not even report it. The *Muwaṭṭaʿ* of Mālik, a Medinan product, does not hint at these events.

In Syria, the Umayyad caliphs and their relatives built and exploited many markets. We have both archaeological and textual evidence for some of these.<sup>81</sup> Now we may consider this information in the light of recent research on the “desert castles” of Umayyad *bilād al-Shām*, which has both expanded and problematized our knowledge of these buildings’ commercial, agricultural, and urban contexts.<sup>82</sup> Meanwhile, we are also told that governors for the Umayyads built commercial structures in Iraq, and similar things are likely to have happened elsewhere, although the best-documented province, Egypt, does not yield a clear picture in this regard. The ‘Abbāsids seem to have engaged in this kind of activity less than their predecessors did, or in any case they managed to attract less attention in the process. It seems on the whole, however, that governors, rulers, and their relatives did continue to own commercial spaces and to rent them out for profit, at least some of the time. Why, then, do the Umayyads stand out for this practice?

The Umayyad caliphate was a patrimonial state, like the Roman/Byzantine and Sasanian empires before it and the ‘Abbāsīd caliphate after it.<sup>83</sup> At the same time it was a frontier state (or as Blankinship calls it, a jihad state), not only because it relied on revenue from conquest, but because the frontier was essential to the ways in which it exerted and expressed its authority. This applied in particular to the metropolitan province of Syria, where the caliphate faced its first and greatest enemy, Byzantium, in frontier lands that were close by and readily accessible via the superhighway. Apocalyptic literature from this era points to anxiety over a possible Byzantine invasion of the Syrian heartland. The Umayyad caliph, meanwhile, presented himself as the protector of the Syrian Muslims in his person, just as he embodied the *sunna* for the entire community.<sup>84</sup> In this frontier zone, ordinary Muslims seem to have been prevented from acquiring landed property, at least during the later Umayyad era, because ownership of such property was considered a prerogative of the caliph.<sup>85</sup> It may also be that the Umayyad patrimonial frontier state extended its claim to ownership, at least tendentially, not only over newly conquered lands in the Syrian frontier zone but also over agricultural and commercial property in the Syrian

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81. See Foote, “Umayyad Markets”; M. McCormick, “Movements and Markets in the First Millennium: Information, Containers, and Shipwrecks,” in Morrisson, *Trade and Markets in Byzantium*, 51–98; A. Walmsley, “Regional Exchange and the Role of the Shop in Byzantine and Early Islamic Syria-Palestine: An Archaeological View,” in Morrisson, *Trade and Markets in Byzantium*, 311–30.

82. Borrut, *Entre mémoire et pouvoir*, 412–43 ; D. Genequand, *Les établissements des élites omeyyades en Palmyrène et au Proche-Orient* (Beirut: Institut français du Proche-Orient, 2013); idem, “Formation et devenir du paysage architectural omeyyade: L’apport de l’archéologie,” in Borrut and Cobb, *Umayyad Legacies*, 417–73.

83. The literature on patrimonial states is enormous, though not for the early caliphate; see Borrut, *Entre mémoire et pouvoir*, 391–92.

84. Décobert, “Notule.”

85. M. Bonner, “The Naming of the Frontier: ‘Awāsim, Thughūr, and the Arab Geographers,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 57 (1994): 17–24, esp. 21–22.

heartland. It then put all these resources to productive use, compensating for the deficiency or unpredictability of revenues from other provinces.<sup>86</sup> Meanwhile, it may also be the case—although the matter remains controversial—that the Umayyad caliphs exerted control over the legal apparatus, which presumably had the final say in who owned what.<sup>87</sup>

Muslims, Christians, and Jews certainly mixed together in Umayyad Syria, and they must also have shopped together. This brings up once again the question of what legal system held sway over those marketplaces that were not, as in Medina, frequented entirely by Arabic-speaking Muslims. The only thing that seems certain is that some of these marketplaces were owned by the Umayyad extended family. Yet this was the formative era of Islamic commercial law, a system that prevents powerful individuals from dominating the marketplace. Here we have the basis of another contrasting narrative and counternarrative. Our usual idea is that in the formative era, the Islamic marketplace assumed its characteristics—including its emphasis on transparency and the absence of monopolistic activity, including by the powers that be—in a linear fashion, parallel to the early development of the law governing these practices. Against this we have a picture of a marketplace best characterized as diverse and conflictual.

### **Poverty, Wealth, Asceticism**

Modern discussions of the early Islamic economy often have an ethical, even moralizing character. Writers—whether historians, economists, journalists, apologists, or polemicists—have their views about progress or decline in the Islamic world, and they tend to attach the praise or blame for it to Islam itself. We have already seen this in the arguments over boom and bust. We can also see it in another way of thinking about the early Islamic economy, which, unlike “boom or bust,” has deep roots in arguments that actually took place in the Near East during the early Islamic era. These take the form of the following narrative, or something like it.

Before the coming of Islam, the Arabs lived simply and were accustomed to hardship. Those among them who acquired wealth preferred to give it away or to consume it with ostentatious hospitality and feasts, hoping in this way to acquire fame, followers, and clients. This picture did not change fundamentally with the coming of Islam, as Muḥammad and his community remained frugal in their habits and practiced solidarity and generosity toward those less fortunate than themselves. But then the great conquests transformed everything. Accustomed to making do with little in an austere land, the Arabs suddenly had all the wealth of the great empires spread before them. They divided some of this wealth among themselves as spoils of war and took advantage of the rest as beneficiaries of the tax revenues that now came their way. From then on, however, things did not go smoothly. Some individuals acquired fabulous wealth and flaunted it with the arrogance of *nouveaux riches*. Others—most famously the second caliph ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb—condemned this attitude and practiced self-denial in ways which may strike us now as equally flamboyant. Meanwhile, tensions arose over who was to have how much and in comparison to whom.

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86. Borrut, *Entre mémoire and pouvoir*, 431–44.

87. Schacht, *Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*, 192–213; Décobert, “Notule.”

Tensions of this kind underlay what some modern observers have called “social protests,” such as the events associated with Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī, and they had a role in the *fitnas*, or civil wars. Dissatisfaction of this kind also resulted, later on, in a widespread ethos of passively renouncing the world (*zuhd*). Indeed, Islamic asceticism is often portrayed as having emerged directly from the old Arabian austerity, or else from nostalgia for it.<sup>88</sup>

This mode of arguing and narrating had a major place in early Islamic economic thought and practice. For even if there was, as S. D. Goitein claimed, an “early Islamic bourgeoisie,”<sup>89</sup> not all its members enjoyed their prosperity with blissfully carefree consciences. Contrary to what some present-day writers claim when they link early Islam to modern notions of property, market, and consumption, many early Muslims in the commercial sector felt profound unease about “gain” (*kasb*, *iktisāb*).<sup>90</sup> Some of them expressed this unease, and perhaps even resolved it, through renunciatory practices (“this-worldly asceticism”). What we call the realm of economics was for them at least as much an ethical—and of course, religious—area of concern as it was a practical one.

Perhaps our modern discussions have taken this discourse too literally. It was quite natural for people in, say, third/ninth-century Baghdad to view their own ups and downs in continuity with events in Arabia two or three centuries earlier. For after all, it was old Arabia and the earliest generations of Islam that provided them with legal and ethical frameworks for understanding these matters. Nonetheless, they lived in a different world: wealthier, urbanized, monetized, and with incomparably higher degrees of division of labor and social inequality. Accordingly, we should pay attention to this discourse, and others like it, not as literal accounts of what happened, but as components of early Muslims’ understanding of the economic realm.

## Conclusions

Here we may step back for a moment to ask what questions matter most for us regarding the economy of early Islam. We will all have our own preferences, but it seems that most of the modern contributions discussed here share a concern with continuity. Did the coming of Islam mean business as usual or a fresh start? Did property and infrastructure suffer damage from the early conquests? What new technologies were introduced and what already-existing technologies advanced or declined? What happened to trade networks at the local, regional, and interregional levels? These questions often occur in the framework of an inquiry regarding the transition “from late antiquity to early Islam.”

These questions are all important. However, as scholars have asked and (where possible) answered them, they have not managed to avoid the problems discussed toward the beginning of this article. In particular, the term “economy” recurs in its modern sense, as an autonomous domain of experience, whereas the inhabitants of the early caliphate did not think of the economy in such terms—as indeed no one did before the modern era. This does not mean that we should avoid the term, precisely in its modern sense: for as modern

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88. L. Kinberg, “What Is Meant by *Zuhd*,” *Studia Islamica* 66 (1985): 27–44.

89. Goitein, “Rise of the Middle-Eastern Bourgeoisie.”

90. L. Kinberg, “Compromise of Commerce,” *Der Islam* 66 (1989): 193–212; Bonner, “*Kitāb al-Kasb*.”

observers, we have no real alternative. However, we do need to integrate the economy into other areas of experience, including religion and politics (both civilian and military). We also need to consider the early Islamic economy in the comparative context of tributary empires.

Modern discussions tend to portray these changes in Near Eastern society, politics, and economy as dutifully attending upon the arrival of a new ideology. Once certain basic principles and habits have been inculcated in the earliest generations, they remain in force basically forever. Yet everything that we know about early Islam suggests that this was an era of dynamic change. For that collective actor known to us as the Muslim community, it was an era of intense conflict, both external and internal. Accordingly, we may do well to seek approaches that feature dynamism and movement. Here Maurice Lombard stands out, in retrospect, as a pioneer.

In this article I have discussed only a few of the many pieces that need to be integrated into a broad picture. I have tried to find ways to use the early sources productively, by identifying contrasting and conflicting narratives and counternarratives within them. In this way I hope to discover certain institutional matrices that shaped these processes—though they did not govern or determine them. In the case of the argument over Meccan trade, we can identify two rival matrices, one in the master narrative familiar to us from such authors as al-Azraqī, and the other in the narrative of the “markets of the Arabs.” These matrices are then, in turn, relevant to the events of the *ridda* wars, which, as already noted, followed the sequence of the “markets of the Arabs” throughout the peninsula, but in reverse order. For the Umayyad era, meanwhile, we have lots of information regarding the economy, but we lack a framework (or matrix) for bringing it all together. Again, the juxtaposition of rival conceptions may be useful: instead of an orderly progress toward the “free-market” world of the ‘Abbāsīd era, we may have before us a diverse, even chaotic marketplace in which the ruling elites do precisely that which, according to Islamic law, they are not supposed to do, namely, manipulate and create productive and commercial infrastructure and institutions, all to their own advantage.

Finally, we may return to the economic boom that began in the early ‘Abbāsīd era, if not earlier. We do not know exactly how it happened, but during the third/ninth century the situation becomes clearer, as we begin to have literary sources of various kinds. Among these the Arabic geographical literature is especially helpful, and within this literature the fourth/tenth-century author Ibn Ḥawqal<sup>91</sup> stands out in particular. With his expertise in trade, commerce, finance, and public administration, Ibn Ḥawqal helps us recognize our point of arrival. He also presents the advantage of having devoured (or thoroughly plagiarized) his predecessor al-Iṣṭakhrī, so that this single text provides detailed information from at least two successive generations.

One of the features of Ibn Ḥawqal’s work is his detailed itinerary, already familiar from earlier Arabic geographical literature. Even though al-Iṣṭakhrī and Ibn Ḥawqal offer the results of their own experience and research, these itineraries constitute the collective

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91. Abū al-Qāsim Ibn Ḥawqal al-Naṣībī, *Kitāb Ṣūrat al-arḍ*, ed. J. Kramers (Leiden: Brill, 1938; repr. 1967); trans. M. Bonner, *Book of the Image of the Earth* (Reading: Garnet, 2018).

achievement of several generations. They are tied in their origins not only to the imperial postal system (*barīd*) but also to the army, including of the Umayyad era, with its superhighway. Another feature is political fragmentation. Al-İřtakhri and Ibn Ḥawqal do not even try to peddle the fiction of a unitary caliphate, which in their time existed barely or not at all. Despite this fragmentation, however, a remarkable integration of markets and production emerges from Ibn Ḥawqal's presentation of networks at the local, regional, and interregional levels. I use "integration" here in a general sense, but I think that upon close examination, this and similar texts will also yield evidence of integration in a more technical sense, regarding the relation (coordination) of prices for a range of commodities and over time in different, but connected markets.<sup>92</sup>

For the most part in Ibn Ḥawqal's world, governors and rulers do not intervene often in the marketplace, at least directly. The great exception, the Ḥamdānid ruler Nāşir al-Dawla, intervenes in, or rather usurps and destroys marketplaces, especially in Nisibis and Mosul, so egregiously and outrageously as actually to prove the rule.<sup>93</sup> On another occasion, in Tiflis (Tbilisi), when a group of merchants undertake a rather questionable piece of business, their leader sends a message to the *amīr* to inform him but does not wait for permission to proceed.<sup>94</sup> Here we see no Polanyian "factors" (merchants operating on the account of the ruler or the state), and none of the "piggybacking" activity of certain merchants in the Roman empire who, many centuries earlier, had combined lucrative activity on behalf of the state with commerce on their own account, receiving handsome tax breaks along the way.<sup>95</sup> On the other hand, Ibn Ḥawqal shows endless admiration for certain great men who, after acquiring fortunes in government service, set themselves up in the countryside in manorial splendor,<sup>96</sup> like provincial magnates in the Roman and other tributary empires. He never tires of recounting the exploits of such people in the fiercely competitive domain of generosity and hospitality.

Ibn Ḥawqal brings us to where we knew we were going to arrive all along: a world where princes and governors exert only limited control over the marketplace; where Islamic commercial law prevails, more or less, in that marketplace; where prices find their "correct" levels on their own; and where many people—including Ibn Ḥawqal himself—show remarkable sophistication in the economic, commercial, and fiscal domains. One way or another, this is a different world from that of late Byzantine Syria and Egypt and Sasanian Iraq and Iran. Markets are now more integrated and yes, by modern standards, more "free."

How have we arrived here? I would argue that it has not been along a straight line leading back to the Mecca and Medina of the Prophet and beyond that to an earlier, promarket (though still pagan) Mecca. Instead, the early Islamic economic regime included what we may call, in Polanyian terms, a surprisingly large dose of reciprocity, frequently expressed

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92. Bang, *Roman Bazaar*, 12, 29, 114–15.

93. Ibn Ḥawqal, *Kitāb Şūrat al-arḍ*, 211–16. The same applies to Sayf al-Dawla in Aleppo, and other members of the Ḥamdānid clan.

94. *Ibid.*, 340–42.

95. Bang, *Roman Bazaar*, 74–75.

96. Ibn Ḥawqal, *Kitāb Şūrat al-arḍ*, 98–99, 154, 454, 466.

in Qurʾānic rhetoric and ethics, together with more predictable doses of redistribution and market exchange. Above all, the early Islamic economic order emerged from the large-scale movements and mixings of merchants, soldiers, and other people, together with the legal and moral principles, commodities, gifts, and other things that they bring with them. It also emerged from a long series of conflicts, such as those between Quraysh and their rivals in old Arabia over trade and access to markets; between the earliest Islam and its ideological, political, and commercial rivals; between the Umayyad ruling house and its enemies; and others that remain to be identified and charted.

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