

## Book Review

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Thomas Bauer, *Warum es kein islamisches Mittelalter gab: Das Erbe der Antike und der Orient* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2018), 175 pp. ISBN 978-3406-72730-6. Price: €22.95 (cloth).

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Scholars write books out of various motivations, such as curiosity about and fascination with the unknown, the desire to impart knowledge, the urge to contribute to a debate, or the wish to advance their careers. According to its preface, *Warum es kein islamisches Mittelalter gab: Das Erbe der Antike und der Orient* (Why there was no Islamic Middle Ages: The heritage of antiquity and the Orient) was written for a different reason, namely, “anger about the widespread negligence with which a term is used that causes more damage than those who use it are usually aware of” (p. 7; my translations throughout). The term in question is, of course, “Middle Ages,” especially as part of the phrase “Islamic Middle Ages.” Thomas Bauer’s book is essentially a strongly worded and well-argued plea against the use of this term, which is still very common in both German and

—especially in its adjective form “medieval”—English scholarly literature about Islam and Islamic history. Moreover, Bauer develops a reasoned alternative to this term and the periodization it expresses by arguing that, up to the eleventh century CE, Islamic history should be understood as the final, albeit not fundamentally distinct, phase of late antiquity.

The main part of the book consists of five chapters. The first chapter (pp. 11–31) provides what its title promises: “The ‘Islamic Middle Ages’: Six Reasons against It.” The first reason Bauer adduces is a lack of precision: Even among Europeanists, it is disputed when the Middle Ages begin and end; once the term “Islamic” is added, the picture becomes even more muddled, given that this religious label is used to refer to the history of societies that consist largely of non-Muslims. Second, “Middle

Ages” is often accompanied by misleading notions, such as the erroneous idea that the people who lived in this period were particularly pious. Again, one aggravates this problem by combining “Middle Ages” with “Islamic,” since the two terms in combination imply what Bauer calls “an epitome of religious fanaticism” (p. 16). According to Bauer, this leaves no room for nonreligious aspects of literature, political thought, science, and art. Third, the term “Middle Ages” can be pejorative, especially when combined with the term “Islamic.” Bauer’s case in point here is the media coverage of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, which was depicted as a “return to the Middle Ages” (p. 19). Fourth, the term “Middle Ages” inherently serves purposes of exoticizing and othering; it is used to project an antithesis to one’s own, enlightened present. Fifth, derived as it is from the periodization of European history, it is Eurocentric and often imperialistic. The latter aspect becomes clear when non-Western—and especially often Islamic—societies are presented as mired in or even regressing to the Middle Ages, thus lacking the essentially Western characteristic of modernity. Sixth, the term lacks an empirical basis when applied to the Islamic world, since it presupposes a similarity of living conditions in European and Islamic parts of the globe during the period of roughly 500–1500 CE. Such a similarity, however, did not exist, as Bauer details in the next chapter.

Chapter 2 (pp. 33–77) uses the letters of the Latin alphabet to demonstrate through twenty-six short case studies that, in terms of intellectual, cultural, and social history, as well as the history of everyday life and mentalities, the conditions of living in the premodern

Islamic world were profoundly different from those in contemporaneous Europe during the time from the rise of Islam to the eleventh century CE. The case studies, some of which are illustrated, examine pertinent objects of material culture such as public bathhouses, glass objects, copper coins, and roofing tiles alongside fields of learning such as medicine and the natural sciences, social characteristics such as literacy and urbanity, and concepts such as the dogma of hereditary sin and homoeroticism. Bauer argues that each of these examples demonstrates that the Islamic world did not experience a break with earlier, antique periods of history comparable to what European societies underwent during the later centuries of the first millennium. Instead, the Islamic world exhibited characteristics Bauer summarizes under the keywords “continuation of late antiquity,” “resurgence of ideas from pre-Christian antiquity,” “independent developments that anticipate achievements of the early modern period,” “no ‘barbarization,’” and “preservation and further development of the culture of antiquity” (pp. 74–75). Given this lack of a clear break with antiquity, it is not justified to apply the term “Middle Ages” to the Islamic world.

Having thus thoroughly deconstructed the concept of an “Islamic Middle Ages” in the first half of his book, Bauer uses the remainder to develop a viable alternative. He begins this undertaking in the third chapter, “Looking for the Complete Picture: From the Mediterranean to the Hindukush” (pp. 79–117), by discussing what effective concepts of periodization ought to do, namely, (1) be objective and unbiased, (2) be applicable to large areas, (3) reflect fundamental changes affecting all or at

least many spheres of life in broad strata of society, and (4) be based on permanent and irreversible historical changes. Building on insights from linguistic theory, Bauer then argues that, optimally, periodization should be based on what he calls “clusters of characteristics” (*Merkmalsbündel*). This means that when developing systems of periodization, scholars should not merely take their cues from changes in one or two areas, such as politics or religion, but instead identify times that are characterized by multiple transformations in numerous aspects of human life. On the basis of these theoretical considerations, Bauer goes on to deconstruct the notion of the rise of Islam in the seventh century as marking the beginning of a new period of history. The beginning of Islam neither brought with it an immediate, large-scale transformation of the religious and economic landscape nor resulted in a profoundly different political map of Europe and the Middle East. Rather, as Bauer points out, the late antique pre-Islamic political order was dominated by two emperors—a Western Roman one in southern and central Europe and an Eastern Roman one based in Constantinople—and the Sassanian Great King who ruled his Middle Eastern empire from his residence on the banks of the Tigris in what is today Iraq. Around the year 800, more than a century after the rise of Islam, the political map looked strikingly similar. There were again two Roman emperors and a ruler—now called caliph instead of Great King—who governed his Middle Eastern empire from his capital on the Tigris. Moreover, all three rulers personified the same type of political leadership, something Bauer, quoting Almut Höfert, calls “imperial monotheism.” Only the disintegration of

the caliphal imperial monotheism during the tenth and eleventh centuries marked the beginning of a profoundly new period in the political history of the region. Bauer thus argues that the rise of Islam, rather than marking the end of late antiquity, resulted only in the beginning of a new phase of late antique history. Bauer calls this phase “Islamic late antiquity” and understands it as a transformative period for both the Islamic world and what is commonly called “early medieval” Europe. During this phase, both regions underwent gradual but very different processes of transformation of their late antique heritage, culminating in the start of a new period of history in the eleventh century. During this new period, the two regions again became much more similar in terms of their intellectual, economic, and cultural development than had been the case during the centuries of transformation. Building on these findings and the work of Garth Fowden, Bauer argues that instead of taking dates such as 476 or 635 CE as markers of the beginning of a new period, historians should understand the first millennium as one cohesive period of history.

Regarding Islamic cultural, literary, and intellectual history, Bauer contends that the time from the rise of Islam to the eleventh century should not be misrepresented as a Hegelian “golden age” in which Islamic societies “preserved” the antique cultural heritage that later enabled Europe to experience its Renaissance while the Islamic lands were caught in an inevitable process of cultural decline. Rather, the phase up to the eleventh century represents the formative period of Islamic intellectual culture, which then gave way to a long “classical” period until

the end of the fifteenth century. Because of the long-dominant paradigm of a general cultural decline that in part served colonial goals, a teleological worldview that saw modern Europe as the pinnacle of human history and evaluated other cultures on the basis of their contributions to European modernity, and a general scholarly fascination with the beginnings of historical processes, the intellectual and cultural output of this classical period remains very little studied. This holds true even though, when examining a certain field of intellectual history, modern-day scholars typically begin their explorations with some of the well-ordered and comprehensive works from the classical period rather than with the often highly innovative, but not yet fully developed scholarly products of the formative period. Nevertheless, the latter were long considered by modern-day scholars to be the more interesting and more relevant objects of study.

The first part of Bauer's fourth chapter, "Islamic Late Antiquity: The Formative Period of the Islamic Sciences" (pp. 119–148), takes up the topic of the importance of scholarly works from the classical period. It underlines the central place works authored in or around the eleventh century occupied in later Islamic scholarship by examining two works from the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, respectively, that provide broad overviews of Islamic intellectual history: Kātib Čelebi's (d. 1657) *Kashf al-ẓunūn ʿan asāmī al-kutub wa-l-funūn* and Muḥammad b. ʿAlī al-Shawkānī's (d. 1839) *Adab al-ṭalab wa-muntahā al-arab*. For each discipline of Islamic learning, Bauer identifies the works that receive a great deal of attention

from Kātib Čelebi and al-Shawkānī or that they recommend for study. He presents a list of more than twenty works that were of central importance for what he calls "the Islamic curriculum" (p. 121). The vast majority of these works were produced in or around the eleventh century, when most disciplines of Islamic learning had reached a level of maturity denoting the beginning of their postformative period. The status of these works as syntheses of earlier accomplishments and as the cornerstones of later developments within their respective disciplines demonstrates the pivotal significance of their time of production to the history of Islamic scholarship, as seen through the lens of two late representatives of this intellectual tradition who were steeped in its classical heritage.

The second part of the fourth chapter looks in detail at the changes the Islamic world experienced during the eleventh century. It pays special attention to the cultural, economic, political, and demographic situation in different regions of the Islamic world. Bauer points, among other things, to the period of crisis in greater Syria and Egypt during the eleventh century, which manifested itself in developments such as increased incursions by Bedouin groups and migrating nomads, famines, and deurbanization, which in turn likely had their underlying causes in adverse climate conditions. These developments went hand in hand with the end of Islamic imperial monotheism as represented by the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad as well as with the downfall of the Umayyads of al-Andalus and, slightly later, that of the Fatimids of Egypt. Because this time of crisis was of

only regional importance and lasted less than two hundred years, it did not result in a fundamental cultural discontinuity, although it nevertheless indicated the beginning of a new period.

The fifth and final chapter, “The Eleventh-Century Epochal Threshold: Conclusion and Outlook” (pp. 149–158), summarizes the main arguments and findings of the book, offers a brief discussion of their applicability to African history, and closes with reflections on the periodization of later Islamic history. Regarding the latter point, Bauer argues against the view that the early sixteenth century marks the beginning of a fundamentally new period. Instead, he proposes a periodization that treats the time from the eleventh to the second half of the eighteenth century as one single period of Islamic history, with the events at the beginning of the sixteenth century marking only the turn from the earlier to the later part of this period.

Altogether, Thomas Bauer's *Warum es kein islamisches Mittelalter gab* constitutes a remarkably broad, well-argued, clearly structured, and richly illustrated contribution to one of the most

fundamental debates of Islamic history. Building on the author's important earlier work on questions of periodization,<sup>1</sup> it offers a persuasive deconstruction of what Bauer shows to be the highly problematic notion of an “Islamic Middle Ages.” Historians who continue to use this term will be hard-pressed to find convincing reasons for their terminological choice. Moreover, any future attempt to arrive at a meaningful periodization of Islamic history must take Bauer's conclusive arguments for the notion of an “Islamic late antiquity” into account.

In his book, Bauer does not simply return this notion of an “Islamic late antiquity,” which had already figured prominently in the work of the late Thomas Sizgorich,<sup>2</sup> to the center of the debate about the proper understanding of early Islam. He also contributes to several important recent trends in the revision of traditional systems of periodization of Islamic history.<sup>3</sup> These trends include the deconstruction of the concept of “decline” as a useful category of historical inquiry,<sup>4</sup> the reevaluation of the early sixteenth century as a supposed watershed in Islamic history,<sup>5</sup> and the tendency no

1. See especially Th. Bauer, “In Search of ‘Post-Classical Literature’: A Review Article,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 11, no. 2 (2007): 137–167.

2. See, e.g., his “Narrative and Community in Islamic Late Antiquity,” *Past & Present* 185, no. 1 (2004): 9–42.

3. For a useful overview of current systems of periodization of Islamic history and the debates about them, see F. Donner, “Periodization as a Tool of the Historian with Special Reference to Islamic History,” *Der Islam* 91, no. 1 (2014): 20–36, especially 28–36; and with regard to early Islam in particular, A. Borrut, “Vanishing Syria: Periodization and Power in Early Islam,” *Der Islam* 91, no. 1 (2014): 37–68.

4. See, e.g., S. von Hees, ed., *Inḥiṭāṭ—The Decline Paradigm: Its Influence and Persistence in the Writing of Arab Cultural History* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2017); S. Brentjes, “The Prison of Categories: ‘Decline’ and Its Company,” in *Islamic Philosophy, Science, Culture, and Religion: Studies in Honor of Dimitri Gutas*, ed. F. M. M. Opwis and D. Reisman, 131–156 (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

5. See, e.g., S. Conermann and G. Şen, “Introduction: A Transitional Point of View,” in *The Mamluk-Ottoman Transition: Continuity and Change in Egypt and Bilād al-Shām in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. S. Conermann and G. Şen, 13–32 (Göttingen: Bonn University Press, 2017), especially 13–20.

longer to regard dynastic changes alone as sufficient indicators of the beginnings of new periods.<sup>6</sup>

As is almost inevitable in a book of its breadth, *Warum es kein islamisches Mittelalter gab* includes a few elements specialists might find problematic. Statements such as “Egypt is ruled from the sixth [sic] century onward by Arabic-speaking Muslims” (p. 85) or the claim that al-Shawkānī’s *Adab al-ṭalab wa-muntahā al-arab*, which was completed around 1807, belongs to the eighteenth century (p. 120) might best be explained as slips of the pen. The claim that it was “foreign” to the premodern Islamic world to treat converts to Islam with suspicion should be revised in light of Luke Yarbrough’s recent work on Islamic anti-*dhimmi* discourses that also targeted converts.<sup>7</sup> Yet, of course, these minor points in no way diminish the value of the book as a whole. Possibly more serious is an unfortunate terminological choice that is particularly puzzling in a work that calls consistently for careful reflection on the potential pitfalls of our scholarly vocabulary: the term “Orient.” This term, which appears prominently in the subtitle of Bauer’s book, is no less problematic in German than it is in English and, ever since the publication of Said’s *Orientalism*, brings to mind a bygone time of exoticizing literature about the

“Oriental” other. Within the German-speaking context, in particular, recent calls by far-right political actors to defend the “Occident” against “Oriental” invaders make the term appear even more unfit for academic use. It should be pointed out, however, that in the main text of Bauer’s book, which in more than one place engages critically and thoughtfully with Orientalist discourse, the term “Orient” is largely absent, appearing most often in quotations from other studies. Its prominent—and unexplained—appearance on the cover of the book is thus difficult to fathom. One is left to wonder whether its use reflects primarily the marketing strategy of the publisher rather than any terminological preferences of the author.

In the preface to *Warum es kein islamisches Mittelalter gab*, the author aptly describes his book as “moving between a hopefully not too polemical essayistic style and a hopefully not too dry specialized scholarship” (p. 8). To the present reviewer, Bauer’s work clearly fulfills both hopes and constitutes one of the most important German-language books on Islamic history published in recent years. It is a work no historian of the Islamic world interested in questions of periodization can afford to ignore, and it will have a profound impact on one of the most fundamental debates of our field.

6. See, e.g., K. Hirschler and S. B. Savant, “Introduction: What Is in a Period? Arabic Historiography and Periodization,” *Der Islam* 91, no. 1 (2014), 6–19, at 13–16.

7. L. Yarbrough, *Friends of the Emir: Non-Muslim State Officials in Premodern Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).