

To what extent could we recognize Muhammad (the Prophet) to be a historical figure?

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The Historiography of Muhammad the Prophet: An Academic Discourse

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Key Terms, Acronyms and Abbreviations:

- **History**¹
- **Historiography**²
- **Islamicists**³
- **Contemporaneous**⁴
- **Anachronistic**⁵
- **Parchment**⁶
- **Hadith**⁷
- **Sira**⁸
- **Islamic tradition**⁹
- **Late antiquity**¹⁰
- **Documentary Evidence**¹¹
- **Numismatics**¹²
- **LALIA**¹³
- **CE**¹⁴
- **c. or ca.**¹⁵
- **wr.**¹⁶
- **Prof.**¹⁷

¹ “Some academics use the term ‘history’ to refer to the past, some to writing about the past, and some to the image of the past that has come down to us.” (Robert G. Hoyland, personal communication, Research log: April 20, 2023). In this report, the term “history” shall refer to the written record or the accounts of past events.

² In the scope of this research, it refers to the critical examination of primary and secondary historical sources, including analysis of evidence and evaluation of interpretations presented by historians, followed by a synthesis.

³ A person who specializes in the history and study of Islam. See (Crone, What do we actually know about Mohammed? 2008, 1)

⁴ It means existing at or occurring in the same period of time.

⁵ Something belonging to a period other than that being portrayed.

⁶ It is a stiff, flat, thin material made from the prepared skin of an animal, usually a sheep or goat, and used as a durable writing surface in ancient and medieval times.

⁷ It is Arabic for narration and refers to the corpus of the sayings or traditions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad.

⁸ It is used to refer to the genre of prophetic biography.

⁹ Sources of Muslim origin dealing with reports about early Islam; these include the Sira and the Hadith. From a religious perspective, the Quran is also considered a part of the Islamic tradition alongside the Sira and the Hadith. However, Quran “is not a part of the Islamic tradition in the sense that when it was revealed to Muhammad there was as yet no Islam (not in the historical sense anyway, though theologians would say there was Islam since Adam)” (Robert G. Hoyland, personal communication, Research log: April 20, 2023). Therefore, the Quran shall not be considered a part of the Islamic tradition for the usage of the term in this research: it shall be treated as a late-antique text instead.

¹⁰ It is the period c. 300—c.800 CE

¹¹ It is the information which has not been handed down from one generation to the next, but rather has been inscribed on stone or metal or dug up from the ground and thus preserved in its original form. See: (Crone, What do we actually know about Mohammed? 2008, 2)

¹² It is the study of coins and other currency units.

¹³ It stands for “Late Antique Little Ice Age”

¹⁴ It stands for “common (or current) era”. It refers to the same years as AD (Anno Domini, i.e., Latin, ‘in the year of the Lord’.) does, but removes the religious element.

¹⁵ It stands for “Circa” and indicates the approximate date for an event.

¹⁶ It stands for “written”

¹⁷ It stands for “professor”

Abstract

In this discourse, I intend to explore the debate concerning the question of prophet Muhammad's historical existence as contested within academic circles. This research report attempts to obtain a synthesis of heavily contrasting and contradictory historical interpretations: one side that accepts and other that rejects the historical existence of the Prophet Muhammad.

Why Conduct This Research?

Prophet Muhammad who lived in the late 6th and early 7th centuries CE, has often been regarded as one of the most influential individuals in human history whose life and teachings continue to have a strong impact on our present-day world¹⁸. The historiography of Prophet Muhammad has evolved with skepticism and Western interest in this field rising post-9/11¹⁹. The lack of awareness and understanding of the historiography of Muhammad amid the increasing relevance begs one to do justice to this discourse.

Outline

Morozov argues that Arabia was not developed and a distinctive Muslim identity did not exist during the early centuries of Islam. This is supplemented by Klimovich's observation that the sources for Muhammad's life are late, and both conclude that Muhammad did not exist. This perspective is challenged by Crone and Cook's claim that Arabia was developed and demonstrated in light of earlier non-Muslim sources that Muhammad did exist. This argument is opposed by Nevo and Koren's opinion that Crone and Cook's sources are unreliable and they observe absence of Muhammad's name in early documentary evidence to conclude that he did not exist.

I attempt to evaluate the strengths and limitations of the arguments presented by these historians, finally attaining a synthesis between the opposing views, to whatever extent objectively possible. I shall conclude by noting my own limitations and providing suggestions for improvements and further research.

Disclaimer

Here, I do not intend to collect or compile historical data or to formulate a historical narrative. Let it be further clarified that despite the relevance of this discourse to religious discussions and the prospect of far-reaching socio-political implications, is simply a historiographical inquiry that must be viewed as such.

Personal View Points Prior To This Research

Just like a time capsule, I see written history as a record for past that communicates to the present times the knowledge of an era that produced it. While researching history I would prefer a source that was produced closer in time to the events described therein, because it is produced by contemporaries who would have had near-first-hand and often insightful knowledge of the happenings they describe, more so than later non-contemporary generations.

On What Shall Be Considered Historical

Crucial for understanding this problem, first one must establish that "history" is the record of the past. The alternate understandings¹ of this word fall short for the requirements of this discourse. Then there is also a difficulty in defining "what is historical?"²⁰ Building upon the definition of history established above, an event/person is historical if its

¹⁸ As reasoned here: (Hart 1978, 3-10)

¹⁹ (Cook 2016)

²⁰ "In a general way, all persons and events are historical in the sense that they are part of history, but in practice historians past and present tend to focus on those persons and events that are perceived to have had an impact on our lives. This has changed a bit since the 1970s with many wanting to be able to write history from below, focusing on 'ordinary' people and has accelerated in recent years with advances in archaeological science meaning that much more data can be obtained from human and material vestiges." (Robert G. Hoyland, personal communication, Research log: April 20, 2023).

existence is attested in authentic historical records/writings²¹ which were produced by people who would have held near-first-hand knowledge²² of the event/person in question. Using this criterion, if a person is proven to have historically existed, it does not answer who that person was or what that person did²³; until and unless historical records provide information in that regard as well.

Therefore, my research is termed as “To *what extent* could we recognize Muhammad (the Prophet) to be a historical figure?”, thereby enabling us to explore not only the question of the prophet’s historical existence but also allowing us to explore and understand his life and the world around him; the latter albeit simply to better understand the first.

Evaluating the claims of Morozov

1. The Contention If Arabia Was Developed Enough to Give Rise to Islam

Nikolai Alexandrovich Morozov was a communist a revolutionary writer in Soviet Russia who held experience in the fields of science and history. He observed that the life of Prophet Muhammad is set in Mecca and Medina according to the Islamic tradition, but these regions he claimed were far off from the main areas of civilization in late antiquity, presumably referring to the Persian and Roman empires to the north. He assumes that society has to gradually progress from one consecutive stage of development to the next and implies that the Arabian Peninsula was too primitive to have been capable of giving rise to Islam.²⁴

Since Morozov displays knowledge across many subjects and disciplines in his works, one may want to take his claims as “expert opinions” but caution is advised since Morozov does not specialize in early Islamic historiography and is also a revolutionary figure whose work is produced through the lens of the Communist ideology that views religion as the opium for the masses,²⁵ thus having the vested interest of for portraying religion as a deception.

Specialist of the historiography of late antiquity and early Islam such as Oxford university’s Prof. Patricia Crone²⁶ disagrees; “Arabia seems to have been a much more developed place than most Islamicists (myself included) had ever suspected – not just in the north and south, but also in the middle.”²⁷ Since she specialized in this field and was a leading scholar, it is an expert opinion, but she does not elaborate on what she meant by ‘developed’ Arabia and neither she nor Morozov cite any evidence to support their claims. One may tend to evaluate their views in light of excavations in the Negev desert that revealed a “densely inhabited landscape” with many large settlements²⁸. However, it is questionable if the same could be generalized to Mecca or Yathrib/Medina where Islam supposedly arose, since no excavations have taken place there.²⁹

In absence of Archaeological evidence from Mecca and Medina, we must resort to historical texts that may present clues about late antique Arabia. Yathrib/Medina was the city from which Prophet Muhammad operated according to the Islamic tradition.³⁰ Existence of Yathrib is well attested in numerous literary and documentary sources dated to as early as 6th century BC and onwards³¹ hence not disputed.³² Moreover, the Quran records Muhammad’s interaction

²¹ These historical records could be in both literary form such as chronicles, histories, etc. or documentary evidence such as rock inscriptions, written documents, numismatics, art, etc. Such evidence helps us critically examine the historical narratives already known to us and also possess the potential to provide new insights into the topic.

²² And thus, contemporaneous or near-contemporaneous to the period being studied.

²³ I.e., it does not confirm our prior knowledge of the person’s life.

²⁴ See (Hoyland, Writing the Biography of the Prophet Muhammad: Problems and Solutions 2007, 11)

²⁵ “To be honest they (Morozov and Klimovich) are not very informative, as they are driven by the communist ideology of religion being only opium for the masses” stated by (Robert G. Hoyland, personal communication, Research log: April 20, 2023).

²⁶ Patricia was a renowned and leading scholar in the historiography of early Islam (Patricia Crone)

²⁷ (Crone, What do we actually know about Mohammed? 2008, 6)

²⁸ (Yehuda D. Nevo and Judith Koren 2003, 3)

²⁹ (Robert G. Hoyland, personal communication, Research log: April 20, 2023)

³⁰ See: (Watt, Muhammad at Medina 1956)

³¹ Yathrib appears in historical documents dating as early as 6th cent. BCE (Gadd 1958, 58-59, 84) and continues to appear in records henceforth. See: (A Pre-Islamic Nabataean Inscription Mentioning The Place Yathrib 2018)

³² I failed to find any scholarly argument that casts doubt on the existence of this city while Morozov does not discuss it either.

with the people of Yathrib³³ and so do near-contemporaneous rock inscriptions discovered in the vicinity of Medina that name Muhammad³⁴ which suggests that he may have operated in the region. However, such evidence has been neglected in scholarly circles and requires evaluation³⁵ before any conclusion could be reached. So far, we can only acknowledge the likelihood that Muhammad was in some ways associated with Yathrib; the existence of the city is however undisputed.

Makkah, the supposed birth-place of Islam³⁶ is first mentioned by its present name in an Armenian book of world geography.³⁷ The "longer recension" of this book portrays the Persian Empire as a unified entity which is known to have been destroyed by the Arab/Islamic conquest; and it also mentions encampments of Arabian armies at Babylonia without any reference to impending conquest. This textual analysis strongly suggests that this text was produced just before the conquest began:³⁸ making it contemporaneous to Muhammad's supposed lifetime. The book mentions the town of 'Pharan' which the author tells us is called 'Mecca' by the Arabs; indicating that it was developed and popular enough to be noted in foreign literature at the eve of the Arab/Islamic conquest.

The Chronicler of Khuzistan who makes no clear reference to any event after 652 CE in his work thus suggesting it was written ca. 660s CE³⁹ provides further evidence. He writes that the Arabs were "as numerous as the sand on the sea shore, whose leader Muhammad."⁴⁰ This phrase suggests that Arabs had a large population during Muhammad's life, which could have only been possible if Arabia was developed and capable of sustaining such as many inhabitants. This source also mentioned among other places, Medina/Yathrib and a "Qubta of Abraham" that is identified as the Kaaba⁴¹ by Prof. Robert G. Hoyland: an expert specializing in the historiography of early Islam and middle east at New York university⁴². The information the source provides is reliable since the early date of its composition suggests the author would have witnessed the events he describes. It is also worth noticing that Muhammad is mentioned by name: more on this below.

Furthermore, scientific studies on the 6-7th century CE climate based on tree-ring sampling presents the hypothesis that climatic conditions during LALIA might have made Arabia more habitable by boosting scrub vegetation that sustained larger camel herds which could have aided in transportation during the Arab/Islamic conquest.⁴³ This climatic information is the accumulation of the research from 19 different research institutes that report the similar findings across the northern hemisphere, suggesting greater validity of these results. However, no climate data was retrieved from Arabia itself, and given the large size of and the topographical variations in the peninsula, different regions must have been affected differently.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, it does seem plausible that if LALIA affected much of northern hemisphere as the study suggests, then it would have left an impact on Arabia as well; the extent of which is uncertain.

While our understanding of the state development in Arabia during the early 7th century may be further enhanced by archaeological explorations and climatic data samplings from Hijaz, the existing evidence strongly suggest that Arabia

³³ Quran 33:13

³⁴ See: (Al-Maghdawi 2018)

³⁵ See: (Anthony 2018) and (COLE 2018)

³⁶ See: (Watt, Muhammad at Mecca 1953)

³⁷ Makkah is mentioned the long recensions of The Geography of Ananias of Sirak wr. between 591 and 636 CE and thus contemporaneous to prophet Muhammad. (Ananias of Sirak, Robert H. Hewsens 1992, 71)

³⁸ See: (Ananias of Sirak, Robert H. Hewsens 1992, 13,33)

³⁹ See: (Hoyland, Seeing Islam as Others Saw It 1997, 182,185)

⁴⁰ A Chronicler of Khuzistan (wr. ca. 660s CE) See: (Hoyland, Seeing Islam as Others Saw It 1997, 186)

⁴¹ See: (Hoyland, Seeing Islam as Others Saw It 1997, 187)

⁴² See: (ROBERT G. HOYLAND 2018)

⁴³ See (Cooling and societal change during the Late Antique Little Ice Age from 536 to around 660 AD 2016, 7)

⁴⁴ "In general historians are still wrestling with the question of how to integrate climate data into their narratives, especially with regard to causation, and Islamic historians in particular have hardly started to think about it. There is also the problem that, as far as I know, there has been no climate data re LALIA from Arabia, and it is huge, so would not necessarily be the same as for more distant regions" (Robert G. Hoyland, personal communication, Research log: April 20, 2023)

was not under developed as initially perceived by Morozov who presented his argument before any counter evidence had come to light, thus making Crone's views more reliable.

2. The Identity of Early “Muslims”

Morozov further argued that initially Muslim or ‘Arabian Islamites’ as he named them, were known as “Agars, Ishmaelites, and Saracens” and that they “were indistinguishable from the Jews until the impact of the Crusades made them assume a separate identity” hence suggesting that Islamic religion and identity evolved gradually up until the eleventh century. Therefore, the narrative in the Islamic tradition cannot be true about the origins of this faith. He concludes, “All the lives of Muhammad and his immediate successors are apocryphal.”⁴⁵

Princeton university’s Prof. Michael Allan Cook⁴⁶ and Crone, both affirm that “there is no good reason to suppose that the bearers of this primitive identity called themselves 'Muslims' (i.e., Submitters)”⁴⁷ but were instead known as “Mahgraye”⁴⁸ instead as attested in contemporary non-Muslim texts. These sources also attest the existence of a Judeo-Arab alliance during the earliest phase of Arab/Islamic conquest which seems to explain why Morozov may have claimed that “Arabian Islamites” were “indistinguishable from the Jews”. Further analysis is found below.

Conversely, Crone and Cook cite the inscription at Dome of the Rock created in 691 CE that mentions the “Muslim” identity much earlier than what Morozov had suspected. Historians do not question the authenticity of this inscription since it has been preserved in its original form and is a dated official declaration produced by the religious and political head of the early “Muslim” polity that presents the most valid source about what that community called itself by that time. This is evident for the “Muslim” identity to have already existed in the late 7th century.

Unlike Morozov who wrote with the agenda to justify his communist ideology and did not support his argument with evidence, Crone and Cook write with a vested interest to produce objective information and also cite valid evidence to support their claims. This makes Crone and Cook’s argument more reliable than Morozov’s and his suggestion about Islamic identity evolving gradually over the course of four centuries is unlikely to be true. And thus, Morozov’s claim about the narrative of Islam's origin being fictitious could not be supported through this argument.

Approaches To Deal with The Problems of The Sources

Islamic tradition consists of a multitude of sources which are a cause of Islamicists’ pride,⁴⁹ but the numbers do not speak for the authenticity or the validity of these sources.⁵⁰ The different variants of the same report and contradictory information within the Islamic tradition is self-evident for the fact that this source material has not been preserved in its original state. With a changing socio-political situation, history often gets rewritten over the ages; thus, resulting in an accumulation of varying perspectives or contradictory historical accounts⁵¹.

Soviet orientalist and university teacher Liutsian Klimovich observed that “all the sources of our information on the life of Muhammad are late”. Writing under the influenced of Morozov’s work, he stated that Muhammad was a “necessary fiction since it is always assumed that every religion must have a founder”⁵². He seems mostly valid about the observation that sources for Muhammad’s life are late, since Crone⁵³, Collegiate Professor of History at the

⁴⁵ I.e., the narrative of Islamic origins is fictitious. See (Warraq 2000, 49)

⁴⁶ (The Holberg Prize 2014 was awarded to the British historian and scholar of Islamic history, Michael Cook 2014)

⁴⁷ See: (PATRICIA CRONE, MICHAEL COOK 1977, 8)

⁴⁸ i.e., the descendants of Hagar, the wife of Prophet Abraham.

⁴⁹ For instance, the Scholar Ernest Renan famously said, "one can say without exaggeration that the problem of the origins of Islam has definitely now been completely resolved. The life of its founder is as well known to us as that of any sixteenth-century reformer." See (Hoyland, Writing the Biography of the Prophet Muhammad: Problems and Solutions 2007, 2)

⁵⁰ See: (Hoyland, Seeing Islam as Others Saw It 1997, 2), (Shoemaker, In Search of Urwa’s Sira: Some Methodological Issues in the Quest for “Authenticity” in the Life of Muhammad 2011, 258) and (COLE 2018, 1) For further Analysis, see (Crone, Slaves on Horses 1980, 3-5)

⁵¹ (Hoyland, Seeing Islam As Others Saw It - Robert Hoyland & Uzma Rashid 2019)

⁵² See (Warraq 2000, 49)

⁵³ See (Crone, What do we actually know about Mohammed? 2008, 1)

University of Michigan Juan Cole⁵⁴ and Hoyland⁵⁵ all independently reach the same conclusions. Crone explains, “Sira of Ibn Ishaq is practically our only source for the life of Muhammad preserved within the Islamic tradition. The work is late: written not by a grandchild, but a great-grandchild of the Prophet's generation.”⁵⁶ All four professors have a vested interest to produce information accurately and have a consensus, thus making the claim seem more valid; but it must be noted that this analysis is limited to the sources in the Islamic tradition only.

The Islamic Tradition has suffered from interpolations thus losing their integrity. Alterations have sometimes deliberately occurred to further certain interests⁵⁷, and even by unintentional mistakes during the recall/transmission.⁵⁸ Crone and Cook further argue that there are no “cogent internal grounds for rejecting” nor any “cogent external grounds for accepting” the Islamic tradition.⁵⁹ “One can take the picture presented or one can leave it, but one cannot work with it”⁵⁶ (for historical purposes). The revisionist school argue writing history based on the sources from the Islamic tradition would instead result in a reiteration of what the ‘later’⁶⁰ generations wrote about early Islam, thereby reproducing the cultural memory about early Islam, more so than an accurate retelling of history⁶¹. In the absence of reliable historical sources on the early Islamic period, one cannot answer whether Muhammad was a historical figure or a fictitious/mythical character.

Quran As an Earlier Source

French Marxist historian, sociologist, orientalist and a biographer of prophet Muhammad, Maxime Rodinson responds by reminding us that we still possess the text of the Quran.⁶² Crone’s analysis of the Quranic text states that it was preached by Muhammad himself.⁶³ Prof. Robert G. Hoyland also considers the Quran to be a text dating to early seventh century when Muhammad lived.⁶⁴

These expert opinions have been corroborated by the radiocarbon dating of some early Quranic manuscripts written on parchment; test performed at the University of Oxford has dated the parchment on which the text is written to the period between AD 568 and 645 with 95.4% accuracy.⁶⁵ A limitation of this method would be that it does not tell us when the content of the Quran was originally composed, but it does provide a reasonably accurate estimate of when a particular manuscript may have been prepared. I am aware of at least five separate manuscripts that were radiocarbon dated to a similar time period by different laboratories,⁶⁶ suggesting that these datings are valid.

⁵⁴ (COLE 2018, 1)

⁵⁵ (Hoyland, Seeing Islam as Others Saw It 1997, 2)

⁵⁶ See: (Crone, Slaves on Horses 1980, 4)

⁵⁷ A contemporary source Zuqin Chronicler c.a. 775 CE comments on deliberate fabrications and cover-up of Islamic tradition. *Any law, whether prescribed by Muhammad or another God-fearing person, that is not set in accord with their (Arabs’) desire, they neglect and abandon. But what is in accord with their will and complements their desires, though it be instituted by one contemptible among them, they hold to it, saying: “This was appointed by the prophet and messenger of God, and moreover it was charged to him thus by God.”* Laws here refer to the prophetic teachings and are a part of the Islamic tradition thus used as sources for Muhammad’s life. See: (Hoyland, Seeing Islam as Others Saw It 1997, 413-414)

⁵⁸ (Yehuda D. Nevo and Judith Koren 2003, 7)

⁵⁹ See: (PATRICIA CRONE, MICHAEL COOK 1977, 3)

⁶⁰ i.e., written not by the prophet’s generation but *some four to five generations after his death*. See (Crone, What do we actually know about Mohammed? 2008, 1)

⁶¹ In other words, the Islamic tradition is a useful source for understanding what the people who wrote these sources believed about early Islam, but provide little or no insight into what actually happened. See (Anthony, Muhammad and the Empires of Faith: Making of the Prophet of Islam 2020, 2-3) It has also been perceived as the study of literature instead of history. See (Yehuda D. Nevo and Judith Koren 2003, 10)

⁶² See (RODINSON 1961)

⁶³ See (Crone, What do we actually know about Mohammed? 2008, 2)

⁶⁴ “Most scholars accept that the Qur’an belongs to the early seventh century” (Robert G. Hoyland, personal communication, Research log: April 20, 2023).

⁶⁵ See: (Birmingham Qur’an manuscript dated among the oldest in the world 2015) These dates indicate the estimated time period for the death of the animal from whose skin the parchment was created; thus, it would have taken some time prepare the parchment and the text would have been written sometimes afterwards.

⁶⁶ (Codex Arabe 328c), (Codex Şan’ā’ I), (Codex Şan’ā’ DAM 01-29.1), (Codex Is. 1615 I), and (Codex Ms. Qāf 47)

If the Quran was composed around the same time as the production of these manuscripts, then we possess a very early source for the prophet's life; one that he most probably preached himself and includes his teachings.⁶⁷

However, using Quran as a source for history is difficult according to Rodinson.⁶² Crone agrees and elaborates "Events are referred to, but not narrated; disagreements are debated without being explained; people and places are mentioned, but rarely named."⁶⁷ Thus, it is difficult to fully extract historical data from the Quran; unless its understanding is supplemented by external sources that may help ascertain the context of its verses.

Some Earlier Sources External to the Quran

Unlike Morozov and Klimovich, Crone and Cook argue strongly in favor of the historical existence of prophet Muhammad. Crone declares that, "There is no doubt that Mohammed existed, occasional attempts to deny it notwithstanding."⁶⁸ Adopting the advice of French Marxist orientalist and historian Claude Cahen that different disciplines of history should better acquaint themselves with each other's source materials,⁵⁰ Crone and Cook decided to use earlier documents outside the Islamic tradition⁵⁹ including a number of contemporary and near-contemporary sources of non-Muslim origins which presented a different picture of early Islam.⁶⁹ Not only emphasizing the aforementioned Judeo-Arab alliance in this movement, the sources also suggest a later date for the Muhammad's demise evident by his involvement in the conquests that were supposed to have happened after his supposed lifetime as per the Islamic tradition.⁷⁰ "The evidence that a prophet was active among the Arabs in the early decades of the 7th century, on the eve of the Arab conquest of the middle east, must be said to be exceptionally good."⁷¹ writes Crone.

By using contemporary sources, the authors overcome the problems caused by the lateness of the Islamic sources since the near-eyewitness status of the people who authored contemporary texts makes them more likely to present accurate information, especially when several sources agree on a point. Their contemporary nature enables these sources to present insights which the later sources could not have, making them a more reliable source material.

However, one limitation of Crone and Cook's work is that they assume that these early sources must be providing an accurate image of what actually happened; and thus, they do not put much effort into analyzing the sources they use. They seem to overlook the fact that these sources are authored by non-Muslims who despite having near-firsthand knowledge might have had insufficient understanding, biases or vested interests that could have affected their description of Islamic affairs. We could not be certain of the sources' validity without analyzing them. This puts the work of Crone and Cook at potential risk of reporting a misunderstood image of the past. Therefore, their findings need to be checked against an early source of Islamic origin since these were produced by people who held inside knowledge of Islamic affairs. Therefore, if any corroborations are discovered when checked against contemporary non-Muslim sources, it would suggest the information provided is accurate.

W. Montgomery Watt, Professor of Arabic and Islamic studies at the University of Edinburgh had highlighted one such text within the Islamic tradition called the "Constitution of Medina" authored by none other than the prophet Muhammad himself as the document itself attests. Based on a textual analysis of this document, Watt concludes that it is a very early text⁷² unlike rest of the Islamic tradition. It includes a number of archaic features like identifying the community as 'Mu'minin' (i.e., Believers) instead of 'Muslims' (i.e., Submitters), presenting a negative stance towards the Quraysh tribe, giving a relatively insignificant role to Prophet Muhammad and stating that Muhammad and the Jewish tribes of Medina were a part of a single community.⁷³

⁶⁷See: (Crone, What do we actually know about Mohammed? 2008, 2-3) and (Thomas)

⁶⁸ See: (Crone, What do we actually know about Mohammed? 2008, 1)

⁶⁹ See: (Hoyland, Seeing Islam As Others Saw It - Robert Hoyland & Uzma Rashid 2019)

⁷⁰ (Crone, What do we actually know about Mohammed? 2008, 1)

⁷¹ See: (Crone, What do we actually know about Mohammed? 2008, 2)

⁷² See: (Watt, Muhammad at Medina 1956, 225)

⁷³ See: (PATRICIA CRONE, MICHAEL COOK 1977, 7)

In light of the discussion above, the term "Muslim" was not used as the identity of the community before 691 CE; suggesting that this document was produced earlier. Watt argued that the Quraysh tribe which ruled the Muslim Empire during the Middle Ages (when the bulk of Islamic tradition was produced) could not have been portrayed in a negative light had this document been produced at later stage, thus, suggesting an early date for this document once again. Moreover, the prophet Muhammad's relatively insignificant position in this document which is also uncharacteristic of later Islamic writings whose authors had a religious and political ambition to venerate and elevate the status of their Prophet.

Watt is a renowned biographer of Prophet Muhammad; not only is he presenting a reliable expert analysis justified by reasoning, but his assessment is agreed by Prof. Fred McGraw Donner, a scholar of Islam at the University of Chicago, who likewise observes the use of the word 'Belivers' as opposed to 'Muslim' is used to identify the community in early Islamic texts.⁷⁴ He has also noticed that initial community give an relatively insignificant position to prophet Muhammad in comparison with the texts produced by later Muslim generations.⁷⁵ Even the Quran presents the Muhammad in a more humble light, "Muhammad is no more than a Messenger."⁷⁶ Since both experts are objectively present the same observation, it is more likely to be true; especially because it is supported by valid evidence. This suggest that only with time did prophet Muhammad become more important in the eyes of his community.

Watt's findings also corroborate Morozov, Crone and Cook's observation about the followers of Prophet Muhammad and the Jews being part of the same community. This means that despite being at a potential risk of reporting misunderstood information, it is most likely that the sources used by Crone and Cook are actually providing an accurate image since the information is verified by several early documents produced across different cultures.

As for the suggestion made by Crone and Cook about a later date for the prophet's demise, the conclusions are agreed by Prof. Stephen J. Shoemaker, a specialist on the beginnings of Islam who made a detailed analysis of eleven historical sources written in the seventh and eighth centuries CE. These sources despite having originated from a diversity of cultures and intended for different purposes "all indicating in various ways that Muhammad was alive and leading the Muslims when the Islamic conquest of Palestine began"⁷⁷. Since conclusions are well supported by primary evidence, it suggests that the observation made here is correct.

Absence Of Evidence in The Archeological Record

Archaeologist Yehuda D. Nevo and researcher Judith Koren have criticized the heavy reliance of Islamicists on literary sources who mostly ignore archaeological evidence which is otherwise essential to our understanding of the past. Nevo and Koren reason that all literary sources including the early near-contemporary sources used by Crone and Cook are prone to alterations during the transition process. Apart from scribal errors, later copyists might have edited certain sections to suit their interpretations of the past or to complement the information therein with their "prior knowledge" of the event: thus, altering the meaning of the text.⁷⁸ This, if true, would mean that he so-called contemporary sources have not reached us in their original form and just like the Islamic tradition; have lost their integrity.

Nevo and Koren argue that documentary evidence however has no process of transmission, and therefore it is free from any interpolations and presents a true portrayal of the time period which produced it. They reconstruct history only using documentary evidence⁷⁹ and make use of contemporary literary sources only if these corroborate their interpretation of archaeological evidence. They argue that if a discrepancy exists between the two; then the

⁷⁴ (Stanford fellow delves into archival materials that shed new light on the early days of Islam 2015)

⁷⁵ (Donner 2014)

⁷⁶ Quran 3:144

⁷⁷ (Shoemaker, The Death of a Prophet 2012, 64)

⁷⁸ (Yehuda D. Nevo and Judith Koren 2003, 7)

⁷⁹ (Yehuda D. Nevo and Judith Koren 2003, 8-9)

documentary evidence is to be given eminence over the literary source since the latter must be have underwent interpolations that made the information therein invalid and caused the discrepancy to exist.⁸⁰

The two authors are rational enough to note that unearthed material remains may only be a fraction that survives out of the original whole, while expressing the possibility that if more manuscripts and sites are discovered⁸¹, these could alter our understanding of the past. They also admit that archaeological evidence requires interpretation⁸².

Using their methodology Nevo and Koren suggest that Muhammad is not a Historical figure. They begin by highlighting that material remains presents no distinction between the periods before and after the supposed Arab/Islamic conquest⁸³ which could have held testament to the conquest having taken place. The archaeological evidence suggests that the Roman Empire had already started a process of withdrawal from Syria before the Arab/Islamic Conquest⁸⁴ as evident from the abandonments of the Roman fortification in the decades preceding the Arab/Islamic conquest. They conclude that the conquest and the major battles described in the Islamic tradition never took; the Arab takeover was a gradual process that occurred over several decades⁸⁵.

Nevo is a professional archaeologist while Koren is an independent researcher who has worked on different historical topics. Neither of them is an expert in early Islamic historiography, but both are professionals with adequate experience in the fields they are working in. Other archaeologists' findings corroborate Nevo and Koren' finds. Archaeologist Peter Pentz concludes, "The 7th-century 'conquest' of Syria is—in archaeological terms—totally invisible. That is to say, archaeological evidence is abundant, while the archaeologist looking for a break in the material is searching in vain."⁸⁶ Shoemaker writes that "numerous recent excavations have revealed no sign of any traumatic break or crisis in the seventh century."⁸⁷ Since multiple archaeological excavations have produced the same results, it is likely that Nevo and Koren are correct on their observation.

However, scholars have criticized Nevo and Koren's methodology. Crone disagrees with the "implied premise that history has to be reconstructed on the sole basis of documentary evidence".⁸⁸ Hoyland also suggests that one should evaluate the literary evidence before accepting or rejecting it;⁸⁹ something that Nevo and Koren did not do, thus making their evidence selective. For instance, they dismissed an eye-witness account that survives in the documentary form thus free from interpolations which mentions "villages were ravaged by the killing of the Arabs of Muhammad and many people were slain and taken prisoner."⁹⁰ It is worth noticing that the Quran mentions a similar skirmish, after which the followers of Muhammad inherited a land and properties which they "have not trodden"⁹¹ as if peacefully entering what had been abandoned. This means an alternative plausible explanation exists which should not be ruled out. According to Shoemaker "Both literary evidence and the archaeological record suggest a picture of the Arab takeover as a mostly peaceful transition"⁹²

This is not to say that any conflict never took place. The Byzantine-Arab Chronicle of 741 CE that states the Arab takeover was conducted "stealthily rather than by velour" and "not so much by open attacks as by persisting in secret incursions."⁹³ The archaeological evidence that Nevo and Koren brought to light does not clearly contradict or

⁸⁰ (Yehuda D. Nevo and Judith Koren 2003, 9)

⁸¹ (Yehuda D. Nevo and Judith Koren 2003, 13-14)

⁸² (Yehuda D. Nevo and Judith Koren 2003, 9)

⁸³ (Yehuda D. Nevo and Judith Koren 2003, 91,93)

⁸⁴ (Yehuda D. Nevo and Judith Koren 2003, 47-49)

⁸⁵ (Yehuda D. Nevo and Judith Koren 2003, 10)

⁸⁶ (Pentz 1992, 74)

⁸⁷ (Shoemaker, The Death of a Prophet 2012, 57)

⁸⁸ (Crone, What do we actually know about Mohammed? 2008, 2)

⁸⁹ (Hoyland, Seeing Islam As Others Saw It - Robert Hoyland & Uzma Rashid 2019)

⁹⁰ (Hoyland, Seeing Islam as Others Saw It 1997, 116)

⁹¹ Quran 33:26-27

⁹²

⁹³ (Hoyland, Seeing Islam as Others Saw It 1997, 615)

definitively corroborate the information found in the literary sources, but it could form a useful source for history if understood in light of literary sources which have been evaluated.

Novo and Koren also observed that the Muhammad does not appear in any dated documentary evidence until ca. 690 CE.⁹⁴ They reason that if he played a central role in the rise of Islam as the Islamic tradition claims, then such an absence in documentary evidence would only suggest that Muhammad did not exist.

One major limitation of this evidence or rather the lack of thereof is that it relies almost solely on the excavations in the Negev and Sde Boker in the Levant⁹⁵, instead of Hijaz in Arabia where Islam supposedly arose. Hejaz would have been a better place for archaeological excavation while researching the origins of Islam instead of Levant where Islam arrived later. The authors tend to downplay this limitation by generalizing the situation in the Levant to the Hejaz and therefore may well be presenting an inaccurate portrayal of the past.

Moreover, their assumption that Muhammad was central to Islam is incorrect as we have seen above that his importance only arose later in the history of the Islamic community. Hoyland critiques Nevo and Koren for searching for historical Muhammad in documents that were not intended to be historical reports: the absence of Muhammad's name in early official documents simply means that he was not being used as a "propaganda weapon" while early literary sources exist to testify to his existence quite well.⁹⁶

Conclusions

A large population and the existence of the cities of Mecca and Medina is testified in early written sources. It is plausible that the climatic conditions in the 6th and 7th centuries may have led to this development. Contemporary sources are witness to Muhammad's existence and attest to his involvement in the Arab/Islamic conquest thus suggesting a later date for his demise. The community he founded self-identified as "believers" and "Mahgraye" by foreign observers. It is also well-attested in early records that Jews were initially a part of this community. However, by the 690s CE this community had adopted the "Muslim" identity and elevated the Muhammad's status to the founder of Islam. The early Islamic takeover of the Near East seems to have featured military conflict as asserted in contemporary documents, but in light of material remains, Arab takeover appears to have been more peaceful and less destructive.

Although my research has yielded literary sources that could help justify the existence of Prophet Muhammad, the gaps in documentary evidence restrict me from producing a verdict that could state that Muhammad is a historical figure. Nevertheless, the evaluation of the arguments in this research makes it less likely for him not to have been a historical figure.

Limitations, Further Research and Evolution of Personal View

I believe that I chose a topic too vast to be covered in merely 5000 words; amid time constraints caused by extracurricular requirements and university applications which means that the discourse was not discussed to the complete potential.

Further research may take into account recent epigraphical finds in Arabia along with a deeper analysis of more historical sources. One may even attempt to evaluate the Islamic tradition in light of earlier contemporary sources which could provide external grounds for its evaluation.

Before starting my research, I believed that finding a mention of a person in a contemporary historical source would be sufficient to attest to the person's historical existence; however, now I realize that it is also important to analyze and evaluate the historical sources first to check that the information it presents is valid. Furthermore, once a person

⁹⁴ (Yehuda D. Nevo and Judith Koren 2003, 11)

⁹⁵ (Yehuda D. Nevo and Judith Koren 2003, 205)

⁹⁶ (Hoyland, *Writing the Biography of the Prophet Muhammad: Problems and Solutions* 2007, 11)

is likely to have historically existed as in the case of Prophet Muhammad, that would mean that there is potential to learn more about his life and times.

Word count: 4950

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