



The Search for
**PROPHET
MUHAMMAD**

History Extension

Major Project

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Prophet Muhammad: Extension Project on the
historicity debate and Islamic historiography

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“Discuss how the historicity of Prophet Muhammad influences the historiography on the golden age of Islam.”

Historicity serves as a central process of historiography, denoting the actuality, authenticity, and factuality of temporal and historical circumstances.¹ The historicity of Prophet Muhammad, a highly contested historical narrative, stands at the centre of modern scholarship’s revised scrutiny, undergoing significant re-examination and reconstruction through various lenses and schools of historical thought. As French scholar Ernest Renan asserted, “Islam was born... not amidst the mystery... of other religions, but rather in the full light of history.”² Yet, the ensuing debate on the historicity of Prophet Muhammad challenges this recognized origin, demonstrating the unattainable image of Prophetic authenticity modern historians aim to construct. Islamic historiography is riddled with the personal reservations of classical historians, political puppeteering, or the prejudices of religiously motivated sects, with the image of Prophet Muhammad moulded by historians and their agendas to legitimise communities, certify power, and justify the proliferation of political, military and expansionist objectives. With the eruption of written culture in the emerging Arabic civilisation, historical institutions were spearheaded by the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates, reorganizing social power in the construction of the Muslim confessional identity. The legacy of Prophet Muhammad was emulated by political leaders to legitimise power, perpetrate state and expansionist objectives, and enforce social and cultural restrictions on female scholarship. Through revisionist and radical approaches, modern scholarship, while unable to construct the historical Muhammad, showcased the extent of historiography in the Islamic Golden Age is tainted by a historical framework lined with embellishment, subjectivity, contradiction, and forgery.

The scarcity of surviving sources and the alteration of major work in the transmission of the Islamic historiographical tradition demonstrate the difficulty in the debate of Prophet Muhammad’s historicity. The chain of Islamic historical writing is distinctly characterised by an element of

¹ Rome Harre and Fathali M. Moghaddam, “Historicity, Social Psychology and Change,” in *History, Historicity and Science*, ed. Joseph Margolis and Tom Rockmore (London: Routledge, 2006): 94-120. For the temporal association, see Nicholas Bunnin and Jiyuan Yu, *The Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy* (Malden: John Wiley & Sons, 2004), 308.

² Tom Holland, *In the Shadow of the Sword: The Battle for Global Empire and the End of the Ancient World* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2012), 34.

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modification, in which the remaining extant *histories* contain blatant interference, censorship or omission by the hands of later historians. Major prophetic biographies, such as Ibn Ishāq's *Sirat Rasul Allah*, present the foremost challenge in Islamic historiography, as this *sīra* is credited to the lost works of Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī, then altered by al-Bakkā'ī, and finally abridged by Ibn Hishām over the course of the seventh- and- eighth centuries.³ Universal histories, such as Al-Tabari's eighth century *History of the Prophets and Kings*, contain "corrections" in the later tenth century translated version, the *Tarikhnama*, that perpetrate the military and communal goals of the vassal Samanid state.⁴ Our understanding of the Islamic historiographic tradition is dependent on the selective cherry-picking of classical historians and the "facts" they choose to present. As E.H Carr asserts in *What is History?*, "*The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context.*"⁵ This creates a clear disparity in the intended purpose of original material and authenticity of Prophet Muhammad's portrayals throughout historical works, as his traditions, values and words are selectively chosen to develop the various objectives of historians and institutions over centuries. Furthermore, The distinct lack of archaeological and primary source evidence contemporary with Islam and the Prophet's era leaves the modern historian with "chronological discrepancies... embellishment" and the "outright invention" of Islamic historiography.⁶ Historical representation of events such as the Battle of Badr or the Shia/Sunni schisms differed based on the sect or organisation dispelling information, with the image of Muhammad the lawgiver or leader of Holy War perpetuated for these objectives. Pinpointing the influence of Prophetic authenticity remains difficult through this alteration of *histories*, as what constituted 'historical fact' was dependent on the thematic narratives, underlying agendas, and personal reservations relative to the time period.⁷ Modern scholarship is thus faced with the challenge of interpreting and untangling a complex historiographic tradition modified by centuries of transmission, tainting the historicity of Prophet Muhammad through unhistorical tampering, misinterpretation, and fabrication.

With the rise of historical thought in the formative period of Islam and the Muslim caliphates, the historicity of Prophet Muhammad was utilised as a tool for communal legitimisation. Early historians employed 'prophetic themes' (nubuwa) and communal themes (umma)⁸ in historical writing to establish their identity as 'Muslims' in history. Based off Hayden White's *Burden of History*, historian Fred Donner proposed these themes of the Prophet's life, tradition and actions in the Islamic historiographic tradition served as the catalyst for early Islam's "innate historical curiosity," and

³ Chase F. Robinson, *Themes in Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003), 22.

⁴ A.C.S Peacock, *Mediaeval Islamic Historiography and Political Legitimacy: Bal'ami's Tarikhnama* (New York: Routledge, 2007) 103-104.

⁵ Edward Hallet Carr, *What is History?* (New York: Vintage, 1962), 10.

⁶ Fred McGraw Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Michigan: Darwin Press, 1998), 4-5.

⁷ Ibid, 129.

⁸ Ibid, 147-202.

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played a central role in the construction of Islam's historical consciousness.⁹ Formative Muslims such as 'Urwa ibn al-Zubayr or Malik ibn Anas provided jurisprudence and historical authority, integrating these prophetic themes as a vital function of society through hadīth teaching and biographical works.¹⁰ Further supported by Gordon Newby and Chase Robinson, early historians gained a "cultural confidence" through "religious certainty" over the heirdom of the Abrahamic religion, as a "-major [function] of the *sīra* (in reference to Ibn Ishāq's work) [was] to present a biography of Muhammad that would fit into the already existent and revered patterns of Christian hagiology."¹¹ The eruption of written culture in the eighth century onwards is directly correlated with the mass production of *hadith* (statements or actions of Muhammad), and *sunnah* (traditions and practices of Muhammad) in order to affirm Muhammad as an apostle of God, and to legitimise the confessional identity of the Muslims and the emerging Rashidun and Umayyad caliphates.¹² Yet, as historian Tom Holland argues, these early historical works closely resembled the fiction of storytellers such as Homer, rather than authentic historical work.¹³ These formative historiographical works lacked a critical approach to constructing history, renouncing academia for a tradition overwhelmed by socially and culturally motivated purposes. Therefore, the historicity of Prophet Muhammad was moulded to "authorize [the] community's very claim to legitimate existence,"¹⁴ regardless of the validity of historiography, establishing the Muslim identity and the justification of the emerging of the Arabic empires.

The manipulation of the Prophet's historicity in the classical period is exemplified within the biographical works and major *histories* of early Muslim scholars, where the presence of political and religious sects directly influenced the construction of leading Islamic historiography, such as the works of Al-Tabari. The proliferation of Arabic states and eruption of historical writing was distinctly characterised by the use of Prophet Muhammad's legacy as a form of political legitimisation. Historian Patricia Crone explores the creation of *sīra* as a tool for asserting legitimacy in *Mediaeval Islamic Historiography*, where the genesis of Ibn Ishāq's *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* lay with the request of the caliphal patronage following the violent takeover of the Abbasids.¹⁵ Formulated as a universal history, Ishāq's

⁹ Ibid, 115. Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, 20-21.

¹⁰ For Malik Ibn Anas' impact on hadīth, see Muhammad Zubayr, *The Hadith for Beginners* (Goodword Books, 2006), 143. For Ibn Zubayr, see Alfred Guillame, *The Life of Muhammad: Ishaq* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), xiv.

¹¹ The initial two quotations are from Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, 14. The final quotation and theme of the Abrahamic inheritance is explored in, Gordon Darnell Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet: A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), 280.

¹² Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 18.

¹³ Holland, *Shadow of the Sword*, 39.

¹⁴ Hayden White, "The Burden of History," *History and Theory* 5, no. 2 (1966): 132.

¹⁵ For the Abbasid legitimacy issue, see Patricia Crone, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 89-94.

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s̄ira emerged as a form of legitimising the Abbasids “cultural credentials” amidst their violent uprising.¹⁶ Major works such as Bal’ami’s *Tarikhnama*, a translation of Al-Tabari’s *History of the Prophet and Kings*, perpetuate a blatant Persian perspective¹⁷, where the ruling Samanid state encouraged the conversion of non-Muslim communities for the “Persianisation of frontier areas and the acculturation of the new Turkish military elite”¹⁸ through historical material. Al-Tabari himself lived in a period of social unrest between the Sunni and Shi’ite sects, with his original *History* influenced by the Abbasid endorsement of Sunni Islam, adopting a “strongly pro-Sunni” stance while displaying hostility against Shi’ism. As history as a separate field of study emerged under the Abbasids¹⁹, the established historical narratives surrounding Prophet Muhammad and his lineage were constructed by the religious undertones and political agendas of the caliphate. This distortion of the Prophet’s genuine purpose is supported by Crone, as with the majority of surviving works influenced by Abbasid politics, “we will never know how... the... caliphs remembered their prophet,”²⁰ nor gain a definitive understanding of his actual person and influence. With foundational works such as Ishāq’s *s̄ira* and Tabari’s *History* defined by the inherently biased Islamic historiography, the historicity of Prophet Muhammad remains shrouded in unknowability, serving as a politicized tool for ulterior purposes within the Islamic historical narrative.

While initially prominent authorities on hadith studies, female scholarship drastically declined as the historicity of Prophet Muhammad was utilised to enforce the socially subjugating norms of Arab society. Despite their specialisation in the transmission of religious knowledge and the Prophet’s tradition, the assimilation of religious culture and the imperialist objectives of the state marginalised women from hadith studies, obstructing female participation and shifting historical knowledge to a patriarchal lens. Historian Asma Sayeed argued early *muhaddithat* (female scholars of hadith, ‘traditionist’) “[used] the Prophet’s hadith... to circumvent strictures imposed on male-female interactions.”²¹ *Muhadditha* such as Asma’ bint’ abi Bakr, utilised her association and authority of Prophet Muhammad’s tradition to circumvent the “political and worldly authority” of Umayyad officials.²² These traditionists, with others such as ‘Amra bint ‘Abd al-Rahman, Fatima bint al-Mundhir, or wife of Muhammad, A’isha bint Abi Bakr, transcended the patriarchal norms commonly

¹⁶ Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, 26.

¹⁷ J.S Meisami, *Persian Historiography to the End of the Twelfth Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 29-30.

¹⁸ Daniel E, “The Samanid ‘Translations’ of Tabari,” in *Al-Tabari: a medieval Muslim historian and his work*, ed. H. Kennedy (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2008), 12.

¹⁹ E. Sreedharan, *A Textbook of Historiography, 500 B.C to A.D. 2000* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2004), 65.

²⁰ Patricia Crone, *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 4.

²¹ Asma Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge in Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 31.

²² *Ibid*, 52.

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associated with pre-modern society, gaining authority over the rudimentary transmission of Islam. However, as Donner argues, this authority served ephemeral purposes in minor disputes²³, with state functions overhauling female participation in the succeeding generations. Early *muhadditha* gained their authoritative position over the formative historiographical tradition through their personal associations with Prophet Muhammad and the initial two succeeding generations.²⁴ With the rise of the Abbasid propaganda machine, the transmission of religious and historical knowledge transferred from the traditionists to the “professionalization”²⁵ of the Arabic elite. Specific works such as Malik’s *Al-Muwatta*, provided jurisprudence²⁶ for Islamic society, leading to the specialization of hadith and Prophetic traditions for the state²⁷. Furthermore, the development of the Islamic state and its absorption of Judaistic, Christian and Zoroastrian cultural norms accelerated the Arabic patriarchal norms.²⁸ As historian Leila Ahmed asserted, the expansion of imperialism after the Prophet’s death undermined gender egalitarianism, implementing redesigned criteria’s of the traditionist profession.²⁹ With political reforms for traditionist eligibility amplifying the culture of domestication in Islamic society, a drastic decline in female participation occurred throughout the eighth century onwards. Therefore, while initially the catalyst for an unprecedented level of female scholarship, the historicity of Prophet Muhammad bolstered the restrictions of the “dominant culture of domesticity”³⁰ through the legal and cultural works of the Arabic state, barring a prominent female presence in Islamic historiography.

Through the critical approach of historical revisionism, the historicity of Prophet Muhammad is inevitably an ascertainable picture to construct, as the abundance of unhistorical elements are near indistinguishable from the historical. This historical-critical methodology is demonstrated by the rigorous studies of modern-day study on the Islamic historiographic tradition. Western scholarship is purposed with “[revoking] history from religion and religious traditions of history.”³¹ Leading historians, such as Fred Donner or John Burton, and the Revisionist School of Islamic Studies, all

²³ Donner, *Narratives*, 90-92.

²⁴ Sayeed, *Women in Islam*, 93.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 95.

²⁶ Zubayr, *Hadith*, 143.

²⁷ For Abbasid Caliph Abu Ja’far al-Mansur’s request of *Al-Muwatta*, see Amin Ahsan Islahi and Tariq Mahmood Hashmi, *Fundamentals of Hadith Interpretation* (Lahore: Al-Mawrid, 2012), 112-113. For the Maliki school of hadith specialisation under the Umayyads, see Maribel Fierro, “Proto-Maliki, and Reformed Maliki in al-Andalus,” in *The Islamic School of Law: Evolution, Devolution and Progress*, ed. Peri Bearman, Rudolph Peters and Frank E. Vogel (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005), 61.

²⁸ Sayeed, *Women in Islam*, 105

²⁹ Barbara Freyer Stowasser, *Women in the Qur’an, Traditions, and Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 22-24. Also see, Nabia Abbot, “Women and the State in Early Islam,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 1, no. 1 (1942): 106-126.

³⁰ Sayeed, *Women in Islam*, 94.

³¹ Kathryn Lofton, “Why Religion is Hard for Historians (and How it can be Easier),” *Modern American History* 3, no. 1 (2020): 70.

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adopt secular beliefs in their approach to Islamic studies and the quest for the historical Prophet Muhammad. Islamic revisionism, unlike that of Islamic scholarship, is not motivated by religious or political reservations, and provides a sceptical commentary on the extant works of Islamic historiography, employing source-critical methodology for academic purposes. Similar to Von Ranke's 'colourless' history, Islamic revisionism aims to construct Muhammad on "the narratives of eyewitnesses, and on genuine and original documents."³² Classical historians, such as Al-Waqidi, Bal'ami, Ishaq or Al-Tabari, often relied on the narratives of their contemporaries and predecessors for their histories³³, with Crone arguing the discrepancies, blatant embellishment, fictions and contradictions stemming from this inaccurate methodology.³⁴ Historian Robert Hoyland attributes the distinct lack of verifiable sources existing on Prophet Muhammad to the "[airbrushing]... of history by later Muslim writers," bolstering the image of the Prophet for other agendas.³⁵ The image of Prophet Muhammad in early Islamic historiography is littered with the influences of political patronage, colourful fictions of the authors, contaminated through oral transmission, or simply lost to time. As Harald Motzki asserts, "-it is not possible to write a historical biography of the Prophet without... using the sources uncritically... while... using the sources critically... it is not possible to write such a biography."³⁶ Thus, the scarcity of historically reliable sources and blatant distortions of the prophetic image leaves the modern scholarship with a "yardstick of probability"³⁷ in the critical reconstruction of Prophet Muhammad.

Moreover, radical approaches to the historicity of Prophet Muhammad argue the Prophet himself as a legendary figure of fiction, with a minority of modern historians attributing the existence of Muhammad to other factors during the post-classical period. While leading historians undoubtedly conclude Muhammad as a historical figure, differing controversial perspectives in Islamic studies propose Muhammad as a mythical figure off-sprunged by Christianity. Initially begun by Soviet orientalist Liutsian Kilmovich in 1930³⁸, historians such as Yehuda D. Nevo and Judith Koren assert "Marwanid and Abbasid scholars... [developed] Muhammad into a historical figure"³⁹ to justify the

³² Marrie-Hughes Warrington, "Leopold Von Ranke," in *Fifty Key Thinkers in History*, ed. Marrie-Hughes Warrington (London: Routledge: 200), 258.

³³ Donner, *Narratives*, 125.

³⁴ Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 223.

³⁵ Robert G. Hoyland, *In God's Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 56-57.

³⁶ Solomon Alexander Nigosian, *Islam: Its History, Teaching, and Practices* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2004), 6.

³⁷ W. Montgomery Watt, M.V McDonald and John Burton, "The History of Al-Tabari: Muhammad at Mecca," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 53, no. 2 (1990): 328.

³⁸ Michael Kemper, "The Soviet Discourse on the Origin and Class and Character of Islam, 1923-1933," *Die Welt Des Islams* 49, no. 1 (2009): 1.

³⁹ Yehuda D. Nevo and Judith Koren, *Crossroads to Islam: the origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State* (New York: Prometheus, 2003), 330.

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expansion of the state under religious pretences, specifically the divine intentions of Muhammad.⁴⁰ Works such as Ibn Hisham's abridged *Sirat Rasul Allah* of Ishaq, were formulated to legitimise the state in history through scripture, such as *hadith* and *sira*, and religion.⁴¹ While this intertwining of political and religious preoccupations is present in accepted forms of Islamic historiographical study, Nevo and Koren's provocative stance on Muhammad's existence, according to Colin Wells, mirror that of modern Holocaust denial⁴². Similarly, Karl-Heinz Ohlig, in *The Hidden Origins of Islam* argued the formative Arabic religion was a Christian sect that conceived 'Muhammad' as an apostle-prophet independent of the trinity and Jesus.⁴³ The emergence of Islamic historiography was recognized as an attempt for the Umayyad and Abbasid's to legitimise their new confessional identity through 'Muhammad' and the Qu'rān⁴⁴. However, Crone and Hoyland in *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It* oppose these arguments, asserting the existence of non-Muslim sources, such as an Armenian bishop's chronicle on Muhammad⁴⁵, or archaeological evidence⁴⁶, at the very least, confirms Muhammad as a separate historical entity. This ensuing debate between scholars and the minority reinforces the lack of a definitive framework on the Prophet's authenticity. Therefore, radical revisionist theories highlight the differing perspectives in the debate of Prophet Muhammad's historicity, casting doubt on widely accepted notions of Islamic historiography and thus amplifying the inherent issues within the reconstruction of Prophet Muhammad.

Thus, in summation, despite the relentless efforts of modern scholarship, the historical Muhammad is inevitably a debate of historicity defined by an abundance of embellishment, puppetry, and outright fiction. As John Burton asserts, "one simply cannot recover a scrap of information of [historical] use in constructing... Muhammad, beyond the bare fact that he once existed."⁴⁷ Riddled with the puppetry of social and political powers, the historicity of Prophet Muhammad showcases the innate difficulties in the critical reconstruction of politically formed historical figures and the significance of social,

⁴⁰ Ibid, 348.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² For a detailed review on Crossroads to Islam and its comparison with Holocaust denial, see Colin Wells, "Crossroads to Islam: The Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State," Review of *Crossroads to Islam*, by Yehuda D. Nevo and Judith Koren, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 2, no. 33 (2004): 1. <https://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2004/2004.02.33>

⁴³ Karl-Heinz Ohlig and Gerd R. Puin, *The Hidden Origins of Islam: New Research into its Early History* (New York: Prometheus, 2010), 9-10.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 6-7.

⁴⁶ In 1968, archaeologists discovered an inscription at the south-west corner of the Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem during excavations. The inscription is one of the earliest Arabic texts mentioning Muhammad and is a legal document naming both companions of Muhammad and witnesses to its creation. Further detail can be found at, "Jerusalem 32 - An Inscription Witnessed by Three Companions of Prophet Muhammad, 32 AH / 652 CE" Islamic Awareness, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://www.islamic-awareness.org/history/islam/inscriptions/jerus32.html>

⁴⁷ Burton, "Muhammad at Mecca," 328.

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cultural, gender, and religious bias in historical narratives. Furthermore, the blatant alterations of major texts highlight the profound impact of subjectivity and the transmission of sources on the course of history, as well as developing our understanding on the purposes of history and the historian. Finally, radical revisionist approaches exemplify the inherent failings of modern scholarship at determining his historicity, demonstrating the various critical lenses applied in the quest for the historical Muhammad. Therefore, it is evident that the writing of Islamic historiography relied on a distorted legacy fuelled by misconception and forgery than that of a critically constructed and historically accurate image.

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