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(Review) Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam

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Review by: Frederick S. Paxton

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developed intellectual apparatus that might still preserve an essentially truthful view of the past, whereas historians in more sophisticated societies are quite capable of falsification even within these criteria. Mythologizing is not the only way of distorting the past: politically or ideologically partisan historiography is equally effective.

Among the concomitants, the treatment of divination is unsatisfactory as regards both its occurrence and its theoretical compatibility with the main thesis, and portraiture does not occur in either closed or open societies in Southeast Asia, indicating the difficulty of evaluating individualism by *passé-partout* yardsticks. This is not to deny that the phenomena Brown investigates are connected. But the force of his argument would have been much greater had he omitted poorly documented case studies and given more attention to other factors—urbanization, social crisis, degrees of political integration—that emerge from his material. This could contribute much to the debate between conservative and poststructuralist historians, and it is to be hoped that Brown will return to this task in the future.

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Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam. By PATRICIA CRONE. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987. viii, 300 pp. \$32.50.

This book presents a devastating critique of a commonplace of current historiographical accounts of the rise of Islam—that is, that Muhammad's revelation was a response to a social and moral crisis in Mecca engendered by the emergence of the Meccans at the head of a trading empire stretching from India to the Mediterranean. According to the author, this view rests on the uncritical transposition of descriptions of Arabian trade in the classical period to the very different conditions of the sixth and seventh centuries. Since there was no trading empire and consequently no spiritual crisis among the Meccans, the origins of Islam lay in Muhammad's success at using monotheism to galvanize Arab reaction to the encroachments of the late antique "super powers" (p. 45)—the empires of Byzantium and Sassanian Persia. Islam amounted to "a programme of Arab state formation and conquest: the creation of an *umma*, the initiation of *jihād*" (p. 241).

But positive hypotheses are not what this book is mostly about. It is a book in which, as the author puts it, "little has been learnt and much unlearned" (p. 203). Much of what is unlearned has to do with the history of the spice trade in the ancient world and late antiquity. Although South Arabia did enjoy a short period of commercial success built on native spices and transit trade with India, that period had come to an end by the third century A.D. After that time the Roman market for Arabian spices collapsed, and the control of what transit trade remained passed to Ethiopians, Greeks, and Persians. Crone takes a close look at every product mentioned in discussions of Meccan trade, concluding in every case but one—pepper—that the Meccans could not have dealt in them. In so doing, she reassigns a number of spices usually regarded as Indian (cinnamon, cassia, calamus, and sweet rush) to Arabia and East Africa.

When Crone turns to the question of what the Meccans actually did trade in, her critique deepens. Since all Western accounts are based on Muslim sources—the Qur'ān and the traditions on the Prophet and his contemporaries preserved in *ḥadīth* collections and the writings of Muslim exegetes, historians, genealogists, etc.—Crone turns to them for help, as has everyone before her. Unlike most of her predecessors, however, Crone finds little there of historical value. The Qur'ān itself is historically incompre-

hensible without commentary. But the writings of even the earliest Muslim exegetes demonstrate that they themselves did not know the background of passages like sura 106, which mentions journeys taken by the Meccan Quraysh in summer and winter. Although Western scholars have regarded certain *ḥadīth* on this sura to be based on memories of Meccan trade, Crone's complete review of the exegetical writings provides so many contradictory traditions that they cancel one another out. Analysis of non-exegetical writings reveals the same situation. The body of traditions about the origins of Islam is not a memory bank but rather the product of storytellers presenting plausible explanations of obscure texts. If general consensus among the Muslim storytellers is the surest guide to historical truth, then the Meccans were at best itinerant traders, operating out of a sanctuary in northwest Arabia (and not in the Hijaz!) and dealing in inexpensive goods among their immediate neighbors in Syria and, less certainly, in Yemen, Ethiopia, and Iraq. If there is no way to get behind the stories to the historical reality they purport to record (and Crone fears that may be the case), then even this picture would "collapse, along with the conventional account" (p. 214).

Thus, this book is not just a critique of the role of Meccan trade in Western accounts of the rise of Islam. By putting in question the whole body of Arabic sources, Crone has bracketed all attempts, Muslim and non-Muslim, to get at the problem from within and has reopened the question of origins at a fundamental level. Yet there is something more. By uncovering the tendentiousness at the root of all Muslim traditions—a "tendentiousness arising from allegiance to Islam itself" (p. 230)—Crone's critical methodology exposes the soft underbelly of all historical narrative, for all narrative is storytelling and all successful stories depend on shared cultural allegiances. The truth of this is obvious in Crone's own attempt to offer an alternative account for the rise of Islam, built as it is around familiar themes readily understood by her contemporaries—economic and military imperialism and Arab nationalism. Faced with a dearth of firsthand information, Crone responds no differently from her early Muslim counterparts—she weaves the plausible around the obscure.

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The Changkufeng Incident: A Study in Soviet-Japanese Conflict, 1938. By
MICHAEL T. KIKUOKA. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1988.
xii, 185 pp. \$22.25.

If Michael Tadashi Kikuoka were a graduate student submitting his Changkufeng manuscript, I would commend him for his industry and initiative but reject his project in its current form and rap him on the knuckles for scholarly sins such as the reproduction of identifiable materials without attribution.

The author's central aim is to demonstrate that the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (IMTFE) inflicted a raw deal on the Japanese at the postwar Tokyo Trials, specifically where Changkufeng was concerned—a hardly novel contention. In support, Kikuoka exhaustively screens the IMTFE Transcript of Proceedings—his relatively major contribution—and transcribes whole pages of testimony. Nevertheless, in assembling early historical background, he rehashes standard textbook treatments. The bibliography is padded or at least grossly underused, yet neither Russian sources nor recent revelations of ULTRA intercepts involving Changkufeng are tapped.

Only two full-length studies of Changkufeng have ever been written in English. They antedate Kikuoka by one to three decades: (1) a U.S. Army Japanese Research