



The Leverhulme Trust

Leverhulme Network

Economic integration and social change in the Islamic world system, 800-1000 CE.

This is intended to be a short introduction to the Leverhulme Network set up by Fanny Bessard (SOAS and St Andrews) and Hugh Kennedy (SOAS). This is being generously funded by the Leverhulme Trust. The network will last over three years from January 2015 to January 2018 and is intended to bring together scholars interested in the economic history of the Islamic Middle East c.750-1050 CE. In a series of three, full funded international conferences. The papers from each conference will be published in individual volumes.

Research Questions

The Arab-Muslim conquests of the seventh century CE, conquests which resulted in the establishment of a polity dominated by a Muslim ruling class, and, increasingly, by a common Muslim culture, had profound effects on the history of the lands between the Atlantic and the Indian sub-continent and have shaped the identities and social structure of these areas down to the present day.

Between 800 and 1000, the Muslim world enjoyed an economic “Golden Age”. In marked contrast to the Christian West, and even the neighbouring Byzantine Empire, this period was characterised in the Islamic world by the development of large cities,

a widely used coinage, the emergence of new technologies in such fields as ceramics, glass-making, paper-making and agricultural infrastructure. It is likely that the population of Baghdad in the ninth century was between 300,000 and half a million at the time when the population of London might have been 10,000 and the population of Paris 20,000. All this was managed by an Arabic-using bureaucracy, who was in turn the main creators of the vigorous literary and philosophical culture of the period.

This project will investigate the economic structures of the Muslim world from the end of the eighth to the

beginning of the eleventh centuries. It aims to bring a new understanding of the construction and development of the Islamic economy as a *world system*, stretching from Central Asia to the Atlantic. Its purpose is first to examine the processes of integration, both commercial and technological, of the previously isolated macro-regions of greater Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Iran and Soghdia/Central Asia. It will investigate how their integration led to a change in local artisanal and commercial practices, and had an effect on the inter-relationship between the regional and global dynamics. It will then focus on political mechanisms and the role of Islamic state and its fiscal structures in the development of this world system. Finally, it will aim to define the social changes, which accompanied or were conditioned by the evolution of the economic practices and the commercial networks in the early Islamic world.

The consequences of this economic integration and reasons for this apparent prosperity have hardly been investigated by modern historical scholarship. One of the main reasons for the neglect of this obviously important topic is the range of linguistic and disciplinary competencies required to give a rounded picture. The languages required include Arabic, Greek, Coptic, Persian (both Middle Persia-Pahlavi and New Persian-Farsi), Armenian and Soghdian. Besides the reading of literary texts, the project also requires expertise in papyrology to make use of the documentary evidence from early Islamic Egypt, of codicology to examine the more efficient ways of publishing written information in Arabic which emerged in the period and epigraphy for Arabic inscriptions. The second main area of expertise is archaeology and material culture. This

involves the understanding and interpretation of excavations of course, but also the specialist studies of ceramics, glass manufacture and textile production, vital sources of information for the study of the integration of different economic zones and the diffusion of technologies through the whole area. It is also important to co-opt expertise in the study of faunal remains, grains and pollens to provide scientific ground-truthing for the literary evidence for agricultural activity and food consumption. The project requires specialists in numismatics to investigate the importance of the abundant coin evidence for the understanding of wider economic activity. Finally this project will be innovative in co-opting leading experts in economic theory, who will oversee the economic analysis of the development of integrated commercial networks and markets in the Abbasid era.

This project will be markedly distinct from other discussion of the economic and cultural history of the Middle East in the early Islamic period in a number of ways. In the last quarter of a century, there has been a considerable amount of work on the question of continuity and change between the worlds of late antiquity, both Roman-Byzantine and Sasanian Persian, and early Islam. The general thrust of this research has been to emphasise the continuity in the structures of material life through the profound political and military changes of the period. Most of this research, both archaeological and textual, tends to take the discussion to the middle of the eighth century at the latest: a key example of this is the debate about continuity of city life where the archaeology has shown how late antique cities in greater Syria evolved slowly and peacefully into the

cities of the early Islamic period but without carrying the debate forward into later centuries. This project does not attempt to challenge the broad thrust of this debate or, indeed, to review the same evidence again. It will be rather to advance the discussion into what happens after Islamic rule is established.

This project marks also an advance on previous work by integrating data from different geographical areas. The discussion of continuity and change in the early Islamic economy, and urban development, has been dominated by evidence from greater Syria. There are good reasons for this: the archaeological sites offer huge potential and were, at least until the recent unhappy events in Syria, comparatively available to international scholarship. This, however, can only have been a small part of the

story. Urban and commercial developments in the cities of Iraq, Iran and Central Asia are much less well studied and, while this is beginning to change, at least in Central Asia. There has been almost no attempt to correlate evidence and developments on the eastern parts of the Islamic world, much more populous and prosperous than Syria. This project will, for the first time, bring scholars from these different areas together to examine these questions rigorously and at length. This is clearly a field in which international networking is essential if progress is to be made.

This network will enable pioneering and original work on this important subject and throw new light on the fundamental economic and social divergencies between the Islamic world and mediaeval Christendom.

The Network

In addition to SOAS, where the network is administered by Dr Bessard and Prof. Kennedy, assisted by a Network Facilitator (to be appointed) there will be seven partner Universities in the network. They are listed below with the names of the lead scholars in each institution:

- University of Copenhagen (Prof. Alan Walmsley)
- Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Paris (Prof. Jean-Michel Mouton)
- University of Geneva (Dr Denis Genequand)
- University of Hamburg (Prof. Stefan Heidemann)
- Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Dr Katya Cytryn-Silverman)
- University of Poitiers
- University of Oxford (Dr. Arezou Azad)

In addition to the partners, scholars from other institutions will be invited to the conferences as honoured guests.

There will be an advisory board to keep an eye on progress and make suggestions. The following have kindly agreed to serve on this: Dr. Peter Sarris (Cambridge), Dr Bryan Ward-Perkins (Oxford), Professor Andrew Wilson (Oxford), Prof Chris Wickham (Oxford)

Conferences and Publications

The objective of the programme will be first to organise three conferences. The papers given during the conferences will be published in three volumes edited by Bessard and Kennedy

A conference on *The infrastructure of trade and transaction costs* (2015) will discuss the exchange networks and practices in the Abbasid Middle East and Central Asia. This will highlight the progressive rupture of the past's equilibrium from 750 and the emergence of new commercial horizons, as well as the structural role of Baghdad in this reconfiguration of distant trading and of the common *modus operandi* of merchants and financial circuits in early Islam. This conference will also investigate the infrastructure of trading networks (maintenance of roads and bridges, collection of dues on the movement of goods, regional variations in the taxation of trade, security of traders and caravans), as well as explore changes in the technology of transport.

A conference on *Globalised demand and regional specialities* (2016) will focus on the impact of the extension of trading networks on the local systems of production. This will explore the decline of the traditional modes of urban work, to the benefit of a production increasingly orientated towards profit and market economy. The phenomenon of technology transfer, as well as the effect of increasing standardisation of regional artisanal practices in the context of a globalisation of the demand on the emergence of economic inter-dependencies in the early Islamic Middle East and Central Asia, will be explored.

A third conference on *Economy and*

society in the early Abbasid caliphate (2017) will finally explore the enhanced role of the state in generating economic demand, as well as the changing social status of merchants and artisans.

A website will also be created. It will be used to present this project, its partners and the programme of colloquium. The partners could download publications, bibliographical data and images on open-access. A database will be attached to and used as a way to record and expose newly excavated traces of markets and productive remains from the early Abbasid era, as well as the artefacts found from Egypt to Central Asia. This database will also work as a collation point for quantitative written information about the economic activity in the 8th-10th c. Islamic world. The website will allow information sharing on this little studied field and establishing statistical measurements.

The project includes fieldwork, consisting of research in the archives of the Departement of Antiquities in Jordan (Amman) and Israel (Jerusalem), of surveys in Jordan (Jarash), in Kurdistan and Central Asia (surveys of the early Islamic route networks in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and along the Caspian), as well as of investigation in the museums and libraries' collections. The project will aim therefore to build on previous sources by the collection and integration of newly discovered data.

Finally, this project aims to translate and publish a selection of the most important Russian articles of the Soviet on urbanism and economy in Central Asia which are largely lost to modern international scholarship.

This is an invitation to anyone who would like to participate in these conferences or who would simply like to find out more, to get in touch with us

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SOAS, University of London, August, 2014