

SFB Visions of Community & the Institute for Social Anthropology
present

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HISTORIOGRAPHY, IDENTITY & CULTURAL MEMORY in EARLY ISLAM

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ABSTRACT

In the so-called classical Islamic narrative sources, the first centuries of Islam are often reduced to a finally limited number of events, characters, or places. This historiographical skeleton is, in fact, so widespread in the sources that it has generated some suspicion in modern scholarship. Indeed, scholars questioned the existence of a “kernel of truth” within this material. To some extent, such debates have led us to a methodological impasse. Yet, a different approach of the source material is possible, from a history of memory perspective. It invites us to move away from the quest of historical “truth”, to rather focus on how Abbasid-era scholars (chiefly in the 3rd/9th and 4th/10th centuries) wished to remember their own past and the new meanings they granted to it by putting it into new written contexts. Such a methodology has given fruitful results for the Medieval West for instance. From this perspective, my paper aims to shed light on the Abbasid construction of the past and on the making of a cultural memory of early Islam in the context of the emergence of new identities. I will argue that a major “historiographical filter” was created after the abandonment of Samarra and the return of the caliphate to Baghdad in 279/892, leading to the imposition of a historiographical vulgate articulated around an agreed-upon periodization of early Islam that became a binding framework for later generations of historians down to modern times. However, this vulgate was by no means the first attempt by Muslims to write the story of their origins. Previous historiographical layers did affect the making of the Abbasid version, as history had to be rewritten with whatever materials were available.

In the process, the salient *lieux de mémoire* of early Islam were granted changing significations that we can try to retrieve from the perspective of “history of meanings” (*Sinngeschichte*).

BIOGRAPHY

Antoine Borrut (PhD, University of Paris – La Sorbonne, 2007) is Associate Professor of History at the University of Maryland. He specializes in early Islamic history and historiography. He is the author of *Entre mémoire et pouvoir: l'espace syrien sous les derniers Omeyyades et les premiers Abbassides* (v. 72-193/692-809) (Leiden 2011). He also edited or co-edited several volumes: *Umayyad Legacies: Medieval Memories from Syria to Spain* (with P.M. Cobb, Leiden 2010); *Écriture de l'histoire et processus de canonisation dans les premiers siècles de l'Islam*, *Revue des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerranée* (REMMM) 129 (Aix-en-Provence: 2011); *Le Proche-Orient de Justinien aux Abbassides: peuplement et dynamiques spatiales* (with M. Debié, A. Papaconstantinou, D. Pieri, and J.-P. Sodini, Turnhout 2012). He received fellowships from the French Institute of the Near East (IFPO) in Damascus (2002-2006), the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (Paris, 2007-2008), and the Aga Khan University (London, 2012). He presently serves as secretary of Middle East Medievalists and as editor of its bulletin, *Al-'Uṣūr al-Wuṣṭā*. He currently works on the much-neglected genre of astrological histories and on the cultural memory of early Islam.