

**Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing*
(Princeton: Darwin Press, 1998)**

Islamic culture has a long and rich tradition of historical writing, which many scholars believe evolved naturally. Yet, concerns abound about the validity of studying these complex and often contradictory sources for narratives of Islamic origins. Scholars of the skeptical approach even argue that these texts have been so transformed over time and are so biased that they cannot provide any measure of truth about the earliest history of Islam. In *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginning of Islamic Historical Writing*, however, Fred Donner challenges these views. Analyzing a wide range of early Islamic sources, he argues that Islamic histories emerged out of an ahistorical culture of Believers not naturally, but as a means of historicizing legitimation in the newly crystallized communion of Muslims. Moreover, by tracing the development of these texts and the attitudes and concerns that lay behind their writing, he refutes the skeptic argument, insisting that a tradition-critical approach can bring new understanding of the early Islamic period.

The writing and study of history was not always important to Islamic culture and to understand the later texts, ones must first understand the context out of which they first emerged and thus the changes that drove this shift to historicity. Donner thus begins his work by noting that the earliest writings of the Believers in the years contemporaneous to and shortly after Muhammad were profoundly ahistorical in character. Chief among the writings that emerged from this period was the Qu'ran. Although skeptics argue that the Qu'ran did not reach its final form until later, Donner compares the content and form of the Qu'ran to that of later hadiths to conclude that "the Qu'ran text, as we now have it, must be an artifact of the earliest historical phase of the community of Believers."¹ Examining the Qu'ran, he identifies three

main themes: paraenetic exhortations to piety, legalistic definitions of piety within the community and anecdotal illustrations of pre-Islamic piety. This focus upon morality above all else led not only to the first generation of Believers taking on an assertive mien of militant piety but also to rejecting history as irrelevant. Only when the first Believers began to interact with and rule over non-Believers and non-Arab Muslims, taking on a new identity as a Muslim communion, did their needs change. In an era of intra- and inter-communal political and religious tensions, increasingly, Muslims wished to legitimize their new community. In addition, groups and individuals within the community wished to define and justify their own place as potential leaders and distinctive entities. Other forms of legitimation existed, Donner acknowledges – including piety, genealogical and theocratic – but historicizing legitimation was a powerful tool that Believers could no longer ignore.

This growth in interest in history was thus not a "natural" phenomenon nor a result of external influences, but rather a product of the functionality of history for legitimation. This, Donner demonstrates through the identification of themes within early Islamic history and the relating of these themes to the issues and concerns that drove them. The themes fall into three broad categories: Inception themes that define and describe Islam in the earliest time, Preparatory themes that describe the relation of Islam to the past and Boundary themes that define the community in relation to itself and others. Together, the themes found in the master narratives of such authors as al-Tabari portray a "collective vision" of the Islamic past.²

Having described the context in which the first Islamic histories emerged, Donner then proceeds to examine in greater detail the core themes as they crystallized within a wide variety of Islamic histories.

¹ Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing*, Studies in Late

Antiquity and Early Islam 14 (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1998) 61.

² Ibid., 139.

Nubuwa, for example, was a theme of Inception that relates Muhammad's life as a prophet. It thus functioned as an affirmation of Muhammad's role as a prophet, legitimizing Islam as a faith when the Muslim community first debated theology with Jews and Christians. *Fitna*, however, was a Boundary theme that emerged alongside the internal clashes within the community to define sub-groups such as the Shia and to legitimate their claims to leadership and status. He also looks at geographical differences as a factor in thematic emphasis. The `Alid dominated Al-Kuba was a major source of histories with a *fitna* theme for instance, while Mecca, the home of the Quraysh tribe, proved a source for histories with a theme of pre-Islamic Arab history that legitimized the Quraysh's role as leaders of Islam. Donner thus concludes that most themes emerged after the end of the first century AH in a variety of locations.

However, given the gap between the events and the historical texts, the question thus must arise of the accuracy and continuity of the accounts. Skeptics would argue that bias and the requirements of the community at the time of writing would necessarily skew all such accounts, invalidating them as sources of historical truth. Donner maintains, however, that although the actual histories emerged from the second century onwards, the raw material had existed in multiple forms from the beginning of Islam including family accounts, inscriptions and documents such as the "Constitution of Medina." These were then historicized and placed within the context of themes. Moreover, what he calls *verisimilitude of counterfeiting* – the need for accounts to conform to prevailing assumptions – would enable the identification and rejection of the most spurious accounts.³ Thus, while certainly bias and transformation would shape some accounts, careful study of them within the context of their time, and geographic source can still elicit valid knowledge of early Islam.

Donner concludes by examining the development of chronological schemes within Islamic history and the

structure of such works. The ahistorical character of early Islam made the former an "arduous process" yet one that the historians persevered with as plausible chronological schemes made historicizing legitimation yet more effective.⁴ Structurally, the preponderance of the hadith or *khbar* format of short accounts (*akhbar*) preceded by chains of transmission (*isnad*) gave the early Islamic histories a fragmented quality unlike most non-Muslim contemporaneous histories that, Donner argues, comes from the trust shown towards hadiths by the early pious Believers. This trust would be invaluable to the function of history as legitimizing tool.

In first examining the context in which the earliest histories of Islam emerged and then identifying and analyzing the themes within the histories alongside the issues and concerns of the evolving Muslim communion, Donner uses of a wide variety of primary sources from across Islamdom. His penetrating analysis of these sources is especially compelling, taking what is acknowledged to be a complex and often confusing field and forging a powerful argument. He effectively demonstrates that the growth in early Islamic history was not a natural phenomenon but rather a reaction to the needs of the Muslim community. As religious, political and social pressures grew with the conquests and expansion of the community of Believers, these stressors called into question the legitimacy of the both the community as a whole and the groups within it. History was a potentially powerful tool for legitimation. This understanding casts new light on the historical text and thus upon the history that such texts relate, refuting the extreme views of followers of the skeptical approach and validating a tradition-source approach that analyzes the texts within their contexts for a "kernel" of historical truth."⁵ Well written and persuasive, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginning of Islamic Historical Writing* is thus a vital work for all students of early Islamic history and historiography.

³ Ibid., 210.

⁴ Ibid., 248.

⁵ Ibid., 18.