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Periodization as a Tool of the Historian with Special Reference to Islamic History

Abstract: The article discusses periodization and spatialization – delimiting a particular length of time, a particular region of the globe, or both – as necessary strategems for studying history, since the seamless web of human life cannot be analyzed in toto. It discusses different notions of periodization, in particular those advanced by Fernand BRAUDEL and others of the Annales School and the concept of “Zeitschichten” proposed by Reinhart KOSELLECK. It surveys some of the periodizations that have traditionally been applied specifically in the realm of the history of the Islamic Near East and a number of essays discussing the periodization of Islamic history (especially those of S. D. GOITEIN and M. MORONY). It argues that the notion of an “ideal” or “perfect” periodization of history (or of any subsection of it) that meets all needs is futile. Periodization must be seen, rather, as a tool employed by the historian that highlights a particular set of developments in a society, so that many different periodizations are possible and, indeed, desirable depending on what the historian wishes to understand. The historian must consider what development she wishes to articulate from the past and choose or fashion a periodization that most clearly illuminates that development.

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The past, like life, is a continuous web of interrelationships. Since we cannot study the whole past in one lump, we must break it down. We can do so either by limiting the area of the globe we wish to consider, or the time frame we wish to consider or, usually, both.¹ While my main subject is about the way we subdivide

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¹ We could also limit our investigations by theme or subject: for example, we might examine an institution (e.g., slavery or the university) or a concept (e.g., free will or monotheism) wherever and whenever it appears in human history, but usually such investigations are also limited by time and place, for practical reasons such as linguistic competence.

time – periodization – I want to start by speaking a bit about the subdivision of place, which we can call spatialization.

Periodization and spatialization, as two aspects of a single problem of managing the unmanageable interconnectedness of everything, are of course often intimately related. A periodization may seem perfectly obvious or sensible within a given spatial framework, but if we change that spatial framework, our periodization may no longer seem appropriate. What might appear to be a fruitful or revealing periodization for the history of England, for example, might not fit so well if we enlarge our frame of reference to the whole British isles, even more to the lands surrounding the North Sea basin, or to all of Europe; we might then see that our original periodization was parochial and really reflected only regional or local developments that were far from characteristic of other areas. Chronological framing or periodization then will always be dependent on geographical framing or spatialization. Far more than periodizations, moreover, spatializations are often taken as a given and are assumed to have a kind of static ontological existence. Consider, for example, the apparent durability as units of historical analysis of many well-worn geographical concepts: “England,” “Italy,” “Europe,” even such avowedly problematic ones as “the Middle East,”² when compared with periodizations such as, say, “the Renaissance” or even more, something like “the 18th century.” If I were to tell someone that I study the history of the 18th century, they would almost certainly press me immediately to specify where: France? Japan? Mexico? If I were to say that I study the history of England, or of Russia, on the other hand, even without specifying in which period, it would, I think, somehow seem a bit more meaningful; if nothing else, it implies a set of more stable parameters such as language, culture, etc. This may be why many university programs of study are focused on particular world areas: we have departments of Near Eastern studies, South Asian studies, etc. We do not have so many departments of “modern studies,” and I doubt there are any departments of “18th century studies.” It is true that we find programs, and even a few university departments, of “medieval studies” and sometimes “renaissance studies,” but these are implicitly understood to be limited in their spatial relevance: the “medieval” European and circum-Mediterranean region and “renaissance” Italy and adjacent areas. I doubt that any student of the Toltec culture of Mexico would find a place in a program of “medieval studies,” even though, chronologically, that culture was contemporary with the Carolingians and early years of the Holy

² On this, see most recently Michael E. BONINE, Abbas AMANAT, and Michael Ezekiel GASPER (eds.), *Is There a Middle East? The Evolution of a Geopolitical Concept* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

Roman Empire. “Classics” is also a kind of temporal and spatial hybrid: Greece and the Roman world, from roughly the first millennium BCE to the middle of the first millennium CE. In such cases, the temporal designation carries with it an implicit spatialization.

So, in some sense, spatialization comes first; we identify usually the place we will study and then consider the approximate time frame. Yet spatializations, even the most apparently “natural” ones – “the British Isles” or “Egypt” or “Australia” or other regions of the globe that have relatively clear natural borders – even these are of course also merely artificial constructs, for spatialization always involves the drawing of borders or boundaries, which, when dealing with the history of human societies, are always just imaginary lines; as BRAUDEL put it, “what boundaries can be marked when we are dealing not with plants and animals, relief and climate, but men, whom no barriers or frontiers can stop?”³ As crucial as it may be to establish for our historical analysis the spatial framework within which we plan to conduct our research, it is equally crucial to keep in the back of our mind the knowledge that our spatial framing is, fundamentally, a choice we have made, not something absolute or innate in the material we study. We must remember that, on occasion, we may need to look beyond otherwise well-established spatial “boundaries” if our analysis seems to suggest that doing so would be illuminating.

A good example of the “springing” of hitherto assumed spatial boundaries has been the century-long effort to understand when “antiquity” ended and the “Middle Ages” began – appropriately enough, given the subject of this essay, a question of periodization. From the eighteenth century and Gibbon, this transition was identified with the Germanic migrations, with the fall of Rome and the end of the office of emperor in 476 CE as perhaps the most crucial marker of a broader set of changes. The “end of antiquity” or “beginning of the Middle Ages” was then seen pretty much as a European – indeed, a western European – matter. It was the Belgian historian Henri PIRENNE (1862–1935) who first challenged this view and in ways that still resonate today. First, he argued that the various Germanic groups were, by the time they penetrated the borders of the Roman Empire, quite thoroughly Romanized in culture, so that their seizure of power in Italy and elsewhere did not mean the end of antique civilization. Second, PIRENNE shifted the focus of analysis to the economic realm, transcending as he did so the older argument between the “Romanist” and “Germanist” camps, with their nationalist-racist overtones, that had dominated debate on the “end of antiquity”

³ Fernand BRAUDEL, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (New York: Harper, 1972) I, 168. (French orig. 2nd ed. 1966).

until his day.⁴ PIRENNE argued that, in contrast to the economic vitality of Roman Europe, with thriving cities and towns sustained by far-reaching commerce centered on the Mediterranean, the economy of Western Europe had by the time of Charlemagne undergone a severe contraction. The European economy was now characterized, PIRENNE argued, by the virtual disappearance of cities and large towns, due to the collapse of long-distance trade (in particular, trade with the Mediterranean). It was also characterized by poverty relative to Roman times and by localism – that is, most of the small communities that existed subsisted on foodstuffs and manufactures produced nearby. To explain these dramatic shifts in the European economy, PIRENNE pointed to the rise of Islam, which he argued, sundered the former unity of the circum-Mediterranean world of classical antiquity. The new Muslim rulers not only took over the Levantine and North African provinces that had been integral parts of the thriving Roman economic and cultural world, they also, PIRENNE believed, closed their ports to Christian shipping out of religious hostility and, in doing so, choked off Europe's former economic prosperity. Europe's economy revived only slowly, and centuries later, as northern Europeans began to construct a new civilization focused on commerce in the North Sea and Baltic.

This provocative complex of ideas, presented in several of PIRENNE's scholarly works,⁵ has become collectively known as the "Pirenne thesis," and debating it has occupied historians of Europe and beyond ever since.⁶ For present purposes, the point is that PIRENNE's analysis required him to look beyond the comfortable limits of "Europe" – specifically, indeed, to the Islamic world – to explain something that was (and still is) seen as a European phenomenon, the transition from Classical antiquity to medieval history and culture. This European transition, from "antique" to "medieval," PIRENNE argued, could not be adequately explained without recourse to factors that emerged outside the European frame of reference. Since PIRENNE's day, scores of historians, archaeologists, numismatists, art historians, and others have debated his hypotheses; PIRENNE's various arguments have been affirmed, modified, or refuted on the basis of new data, incomparably greater in quantity and precision than was available to him. But his

⁴ On Pirenne's dismissal of the "Romanist"- "Germanist" debate, see Peter BROWN, "'Mohammed and Charlemagne' by Henri Pirenne," *Daedalus* 103 (1974), 25–33.

⁵ Notably, his *Medieval Cities: Their Origins and the Revival of Trade* (1925) and the posthumous *Mahomet et Charlemagne* (1937) and also in many earlier articles.

⁶ A useful selection of some key interventions of the early to mid-20th century is Alfred F. HAVIGHURST (ed.), *The Pirenne Thesis: Analysis, Criticism, and Revision* (Boston: Heath, 1958). Also noteworthy is Richard HODGES and David WHITEHOUSE, *Mohammed, Charlemagne, and the Origins of Europe: Archaeology and the Pirenne Thesis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983).

“springing” of the boundaries of Europe has remained unchallenged – indeed, it has been developed more fully. The most noteworthy recent contribution, Michael McCORMICK’s massive *Origins of the European Economy*, which is essentially an effort to explain the Carolingian economy, at times casts its geographical net at least as wide as, if not wider than, did PIRENNE.⁷

Periodization as a general problem of history

Having thus entered into the question of periodization and its role in Islamic history through the back door, so to speak, let us now leave spatialization behind and consider periodization more directly. The very idea of periodization rests on the assumption that a discrete subsection of the temporal continuum (a “period”) is marked by some distinctive cultural qualities, institutions, or practices, and that the end of periods should coincide with palpable and significant change. Yet, as we all know, it is most unlikely that a whole panoply of distinctive features will conveniently begin and end at the same time; the assumption of strict borders between different periods obviously does violence to the normal realities of human life, with its usually slow rhythms of gradual change. The problem was well stated by Michael MORONY: “A period is defined in terms of its own coherence and in terms of its contrast with other periods beyond historical boundaries at either end. Such periodization tends to overlook continuities by emphasizing differences and changes from one “period” to the next. A continuously changing, dynamic, kaleidoscopic historical model would be closer to reality but would be more difficult to describe or to comprehend.”⁸ MORONY puts his finger on the essential dilemma we face as historians. On the one hand, we *must* engage in periodization if we wish to make the historical continuum comprehensible and break it down for analysis. On the other hand, the very act of periodization *inevitably* overstates the coherence that exists within individual periods and just as inevitably undermines our perception of continuities that span the assumed “seams” between periods.

The difficulties created by assuming too strict a divide between successive historical periods become obvious when we try to categorize a monument such as the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. There is still lively debate about just what

⁷ Michael McCORMICK, *Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce, A.D. 300–900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁸ Michael G. MORONY, “Bayn al-Fitnatayn: Problems in the Periodization of Early Islamic History,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 40 (1981), 247–51, at p. 249.

this building represents, but we can certainly say that it is, at one and the same time, a great monument of late antique or Byzantine art (especially mosaic decoration) and one of the first monuments of a newly emerging Islamic art. Too strict a division of the history of the Levant into “late Roman/Byzantine” and “early Islamic” periods would tend to obscure the nature of this building, for to insist that it belongs either exclusively to one period or to the other would force us to suppress or to deny an important aspect of its meaning. To do it justice, we have to see the Dome of the Rock as belonging, in perhaps different ways, to both worlds. So, we see that the problems of messy or fuzzy boundaries are as much an issue for periodization as we (and Braudel) saw they were for spatialization. We might resort to the stratagem of viewing certain stretches of time as “transitional periods” between two others, but this is simply to slice the loaf more finely and does not eliminate the basic problem.

The philosopher of history Reinhart KOSELLECK has both decried the dangers of simplistic and overly rigid periodization and attempted to resolve it by proposing the concept of “Zeitschichten” or temporal strata.⁹ KOSELLECK points out that individual or unique events exist in the context of more enduring structures of repetition, or patterns of relationship, that provide the framework within which we understand their meaning – in particular, the degree to which a particular event meets expectations or, on the other hand, forces us to alter our expectations. He argues that while there may be rapid changes in the realm of individual events, the larger structures within which individual events are imbedded change more slowly. Some structures endure for many years and may provide a common experience for (and thus help to define) a whole generation: the Great Depression, the Vietnam War, the era of the typewriter, or the era of Big Band music. Yet other structures endure much longer still, across many generations – such as the great religious traditions of the world, which have endured in many cases for a thousand years and more. These ideas seem more or less like a restatement of some of the central concepts of the historians of the *Annales* school, with their emphasis on the *longue durée* and their vision of slow, long-term patterns which contain within them the more fleeting “surface changes” of *l’histoire événementielle*.¹⁰

⁹ KOSELLECK, *Zeitschichten: Studien zur Historik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000); his basic theory is sketched out in pp. 19–26. See the helpful summary by Helge JORDHEIM, “Against Periodization: Koselleck’s Theory of Multiple Temporalities,” *History and Theory* 51 (2012), 151–71.

¹⁰ See, for example, BRAUDEL, “History and the Social Sciences: The *Longue Durée*,” in his *On History* (transl. by Sarah Matthews) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 25–54, at p. 48: “In fact, these different time spans which we can discern are all interdependent: it is not so much time which is the creation of our own minds, as the way in which we break it up. These fragments are reunited at the end of all our labors. The *longue durée*, the conjuncture, the event all fit into

Yet, as KOSELLECK himself points out, even these mega-structures themselves undergo change. His emphasis on the notion that different temporal strata may change on different timetables is useful in contemplating the problem posed by periodization because it makes clear that we must periodize with an eye to larger structures rather than merely to ephemeral individual events, but it does not fundamentally solve the problem. Even if we are considering one of the structures that is slow to change, we still must come to terms with the essence of that structure (if it is to be the basis for our periodization), and its change over time, and must try to delimit its boundaries, and this is likely to prove no less vexing for a “deep” structure than it is for more quotidian events.

For example, we might identify the “age of rail travel” as a distinctive period in the history of public transportation, beginning around the middle of the nineteenth century and ending sometime in the late-20th century, when the rapid rise of automobile transport coincided with a sharp decline in train travel. Following KOSELLECK, we can readily appreciate that many individual events – a horrendous rail accident, for example, that sparked improvements in rail safety, or the development of the diesel electric locomotive as an alternative to steam power – provide internal articulations within our proposed “age of rail travel.” But understanding that these more “superficial” or individual events fit within and are in part given meaning by the larger structure does not actually help us define when our “age of rail travel” begins or ends (if it has ended).

We should then ideally try to define periods so that they begin and end with moments when changes are visible in as many different temporal strata as possible. But I am not sure that this degree of philosophical precision is actually of much help to practicing historians, although it is of course a useful caveat to keep in mind. There is some advantage – if only the advantage of simplicity – in having historical periods begin and end with fairly sharp dates, as MORONY suggests, but it is unlikely that a change in several temporal strata will line up neatly with a single date. This being so, we must always remember that the past realities that we are trying to describe as historians are not so sharply delineated. We must remember that the temporal limits we establish for different “periods” are fundamentally not themselves real but are matters of convenience – our own convenience – and are likely to be fuzzy, and therefore, it behooves us to pay attention to the fuzziness, to precisely those phenomena that transcend

each other neatly and without difficulty” The French original of Braudel’s essay, which in the context of discussing the relationship between historical models and the social sciences makes frequent comments on periodization, appeared in *Annales E.S.C.* 4 (Oct–Dec 1958), *Débats et combats*, pp. 725–53.

somewhat the chronological limits we have imposed on our material, when relevant evidence presents itself. So, to go back to an earlier example, even if we were writing a book about Byzantine mosaic decoration in Syria, with a putative cutoff date at the loss of Byzantine control around 640 CE, we would probably want to include the Dome of the Rock, built a half-century later, in our discussion.

Over the past thirty years, there has been an active debate about periodization by historians concerned especially with the question of “modernity” or “the modern.” (Koselleck himself was a major contributor to this debate.) One part of the debate focuses on whether “modernity” actually exists, what its presumed characteristics are, and whether the apparently teleological quality of the concept of “the modern” in the works of many historians is defensible or not.¹¹ Another aspect of the debate over modernity as a period emphasizes the *political* content, or intent, of periodization, particularly the periodization of “the modern.” This has been very persuasively argued by Kathleen DAVIS in her book *Periodization and Sovereignty*.¹²

DAVIS critiques the distinction between “medieval” and “modern,” which involved categorizing “medieval” as “feudal,” implying that masses of serfs were virtual slaves to powerful lords, and arguing that “modern” in contrast was thus presented “post-feudal,” and therefore enlightened, participatory, and progressive. In her view, this dichotomy was an effort to frame the political treatment of colonized peoples by early “modern” European states as being qualitatively different from, and better than, the way “medieval” societies subjected and virtually (or actually, legally) enslaved/enserfed the masses in a system of “feudalism.” Apologists for Western colonialism claimed that “feudalism” still survived in the “backward” societies of the lands they were colonizing, so their Western hegemony was not just more subjugation, but rather was bringing those peoples “modern” liberation – conquest by the modern West was “different.” For DAVIS, this is clearly an exercise in retrospective identification of “periods” and with a strong political agenda behind it. Of course, as we all know, the very invention and use of the term “medieval” was itself something that had a decided political or cultural agenda: a stepchild of the notion of the “renaissance,” which prided itself on the recovery, celebration, and imitation of the works of classical antiq-

¹¹ See Lynn HUNT, *Measuring Time, Making History* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2008).

¹² Kathleen DAVIS, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politic of Time* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

uity.¹³ The “medieval” was that “dark age” between the glories of antiquity and the glories of the renaissance, and it long suffered from this congenital defect, although in recent years, the term has been somewhat liberated from the negative associations of its birth.

So, then, despite the problems inevitably posed by the assumption of temporal “boundaries” whenever we engage in periodization, we can still propose that the effort to break a long span of history into discrete periods may be worthwhile. But we must always be aware of the inevitable “fuzziness” of any periodization, and we must be alert to the possibility that a periodization may have advanced – indeed, almost inevitably will have advanced – an implicit, or explicit, political agenda at the time of its creation and may still have political meaning in the present.

The periodization of Islamic history

When considering Islamic history and its periodization, perhaps the most basic question is: “Why do we identify ‘Islamic history’ as a discrete field of study at all?” To do so is itself, after all, essentially an exercise in periodization – separating the history of certain parts of the world from what came before the appearance of Islam (and in some areas, such as Iberia and much of the Balkans, from what came after). It may seem “natural” to consider the history of Islamic civilization as a separate aspect of human or world history and to begin with the career of Muḥammad and the appearance of the Qur’ān as its origin-point, but it begins to seem a bit less natural when we reflect on the fact that for several centuries after the time of Muḥammad the majority of people in what we habitually call the “Islamic world” or the “Islamic empire” were not Muslims.¹⁴

The fact is that the identification of “Islamic history” as a separate field by Western historians is something they inherited from Muslim writers.¹⁵ Muslim

¹³ KOSELLECK, *The Practice of Conceptual History. Timing History, Spacing Concepts* (transl. by Todd Samuel PRESNER and others) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), chapter 7 (115–30) “Concepts of Historical Time and Social History” provides a good overview of the emergence of a number of such commonly accepted “periods.”

¹⁴ The question of conversion rates in the spread of Islam in the Near East is much debated but difficult to be precise about because of the lack of documentary evidence. The most sophisticated effort to address the question is Richard BULLIET, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), which offers what might be called an educated guess on the basis of a clear, if somewhat speculative, methodology.

¹⁵ As noted in my *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton: Darwin, 1997), 293–96.

historians conceptualized human history as unfolding between God's Creation of the world and the Last Judgment, and for these historians, the great articulation point in this long history was the revelation of the Qur'ān to the Prophet Muḥammad and the emergence – the political emergence – of Islam in the world. They therefore divided all of history into two great segments: the *jāhiliyya*, or period before the revelation of the Qur'ān, and the history of the Islamic community since Muḥammad's day, when salvation was readily available to all who would receive the revelation. This subdivision of world history into pre-Islamic and Islamic eras has not only been widely adopted by Western historians in their writings, it has also shaped the way institutional programs of study are structured. This grand periodization is, however, obviously grounded in an expression of (Muslim) faith, just as was the adoption of the eras "BC" and "AD" by Christian historians in Europe.

Historians, however, are right to question whether any faith-based periodization is really appropriate because history can only be pursued as a discipline on the basis of a secular, not a faith-based, view of the world.¹⁶ Among those who wrote about the history of the Islamic Near East, Philip HITTİ (1886–1978) was one of the first to break the mold by adopting an explicitly secular (in his case, Arab nationalist) perspective in his *History of the Arabs*, which considered not only the centuries after the rise of Islamic but also the pre-Islamic history of the ancient South Arabian kingdoms in some detail.¹⁷ More recently, Peter BROWN's book *The Making of Late Antiquity*¹⁸ examined (mainly) the eastern Mediterranean from around 250 CE until about 800 CE – spanning the late Roman/Byzantine and early Islamic eras. By doing so, he downplayed the idea that there was a sharp break in the early 7th century and emphasized instead many powerful continuities that continued across the supposed "divide" between the Late Antique *jāhiliyya* and Islam – the decorative arts in the Dome of the Rock among them. Brown's student Garth FOWDEN, in his *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity*¹⁹ has similarly suggested a periodization that spanned late antiquity and the early Islamic world.

¹⁶ See Fred M. DONNER, "The Historian, the Believer, and the Qur'ān," in Gabriel Said Reynolds (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān in its historical context 2* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 25–37, esp. 30–35.

¹⁷ Philip K. HITTİ, *History of the Arabs* (1st ed. London: Macmillan, 1937) and many later editions. On Hitti, see Fred M. DONNER, "Pioneers of Medieval Middle Eastern Studies: Philip K. Hitti," *Al-'Uṣūr al-Wuṣṭā: the Bulletin of Middle East Medievalists* 8 (1996), 48–52.

¹⁸ Peter BROWN, *The World of Late Antiquity* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971).

¹⁹ Garth FOWDEN, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

But let us accept, for the moment, the notion that “Islamic history” has some kind of coherence or rationale and a fairly sharp starting date in the early seventh century. Do we then simply treat the whole of Islamic history as a single unit? In the early days of our field, it seems to have been assumed that Islamic history and civilization was a kind of unit, marked by essentialist characteristics that colored all aspects of it from its beginnings until today. As S. D. GOITEIN pointed out in the 1960s, however, Islamic civilization is not a single, uniform phenomenon but rather is full of diversity, and we need to periodize it precisely to escape this kind of essentialism: as he put it, to avoid “the danger of *abstracting a general picture of Islam which never was a historic reality*”²⁰ In other words, unless we break Islamic history down into meaningful smaller units, we fail to see the specificity of different historic phenomena. Periodization is more than merely a matter of convenience, of making a vast topic more manageable by breaking it into smaller units; it is an exercise in analysis that divides a larger whole in ways that allow us to see more clearly the distinctive qualities of its different components.

How then should Islamic history be subdivided? It is commonplace to organize the presentation of the early Islamic centuries under the rubrics of the age of Muhammad the prophet, the age of the *rāshidūn* or “rightly-guided” caliphs (632–661), the Umayyad period (661–750), and the Abbasid period (750–1258). It is immediately apparent that the three periods following the life of the prophet are of grossly unequal length: 29, 89, and 508 years respectively, and the last “period,” associated with the Abbasids, is so long that one questions whether it can be considered in any way a single period having coherent characteristics. It is also clear that the central focus of this group of “periods” is the office of the caliphate, or putative leadership of the Islamic community and (for a time) the Islamic state, since each period is identified simply by who held that office. It has been argued that this is “essentially a dynastic approach to history which is based on assumptions about the causative impact of the personality and policies of rulers”²¹

Such dynastic periodizations are often criticized as artificial or shallow, for dynastic changes do not necessarily – or usually – coincide with deeper changes

²⁰ S. D. GOITEIN, “A Plea for the Periodization of Islamic History,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 88 (1968), 224–28 (emphasis in original). An example of just such a misguided effort to capture the supposed unchanging “essence” of Islamic civilization is found in Reuben LEVY’s *The Social Structure of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), each chapter of which discusses a particular social institution but in doing so combines data from widely disparate times and places without paying sufficient attention to historical change.

²¹ MORONY, “Bayn al-Fitnatayn,” 247; GOITEIN, “A Plea for the Periodization of Islamic History,” 223, also is critical of our over-reliance on the dynastic periodization of Islamic history.

in society. Archaeologists in particular have criticized as misleading the application to material artifacts, especially ceramics, of what they term “historical” (by which they usually mean dynastic) labels. It has been shown, for example, that certain Syrian pottery that was labeled “late Byzantine” by earlier excavators or analysts (because the heyday of that pottery’s production was in the “Byzantine” period) continued to be produced well into the “Umayyad” period, so that many sites were misdated.²² They imply that an archaeological periodization that used strictly archaeological descriptors from, say, the ceramic record, would be preferable, e.g., “coarse red-slip ware” giving way to “incised, unglazed ware,” which in turn gives way to “yellow luster ware.” Such categorizations are widely used in the archaeology of the prehistoric Near East, where people speak of “Ubaid ware” and the “Ubaid culture” – the implication being that when a certain kind of pottery is found, it is borne by people who represent a certain cultural synthesis, and when the ware at a site changes, it means that a different culture has taken over. But such categories are of value only to those archaeologists who know the meaning and chronological range of the ceramic descriptors. These ceramic-based periods then need to be carefully correlated to some other criteria – chronological, dynastic, whatever – to make them more meaningful to the non-archaeologist. The advantage of this approach is that the chronological calibration of a particular ware can be adjusted as new information becomes available: for example, “red slip ware” could be thought to arise in the mid-Umayyad period/early eighth century CE but subsequently be shown actually to arise only in the late eighth century, the early Abbasid era, whereas if the ware had been initially called “Umayyad fine ware,” the confusion arising with new information on its date would require at least a total change in nomenclature, probably confusing even many archaeologists. The problem is that the dynastic periodization used by many historians for early Islamic history was employed by some archaeologists, even though it is essentially irrelevant to their evidence.

MORONY proposed that dynastic periodizations are rooted in a notion of the impact of individual personalities on history, but I think this caliphate-based periodization (like the very notion of the distinctiveness of Islamic history) is also a product of Islamic historiography itself, which once again Western historians have, for better or worse, adopted wholesale. This periodization seems to have been developed particularly under the Abbasids, whose jurists and historians wished to stress the fact that their predecessors the Umayyads were not, like themselves, members of the prophet’s clan of Hāshim; they could, in this way,

²² See especially Alan WALMSLEY, *Early Islamic Syria. An Archaeological Assessment* (London: Duckworth, 2007). He also provides many other examples of misattribution.

help to vilify the Umayyads as unqualified to rule and illegitimate. At the same time, the Abbasids wished to bracket out the first four caliphs, only one of whom, ‘Alī, was of the clan of Hāshim – and the descendants of ‘Alī were serious rivals to the Abbasid rulers. To quell factional disputes among supporters of the claims of ‘Alī, who wished to consider his three predecessors illegitimate and those members of the community who still honored the memory of the prophet’s companions and successors Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, and ‘Uthmān as well as ‘Alī, jurists and historians of the Abbasid era generated the notion that these four caliphs were *rāshidūn* or “rightly guided” and therefore deserved the support of the whole Muslim community.²³ This stratagem was intended to put an end to the bitter debates that threatened to cleave the Muslim community into hostile factions depending on their views of the primacy of ‘Alī’s claims to succeed the prophet. But it also neatly minimized both ‘Alī’s identity as the only Hāshimite of the group and ‘Uthmān’s identity as an Umayyad: all four caliphs were now put on an equal footing as *rāshidūn*. This periodization, *rāshidūn*-Umayyads-Abbasids, thus neatly isolated the Umayyads as the “evil dynasty” and as an aberration, so to speak, between the God-guided leadership provided by the *rāshidūn* and then, after the Umayyads’ overthrow, by the Abbasids. It therefore has something in common with the way the idea of the “Middle Ages” emerged from the claims of writers of the Renaissance.

Periodization as a tool of the historian

This last example also neatly illustrates the fact, which should be obvious by now, that various periodizations are *tools* used by historians to highlight the particular themes or developments in which they are interested. They may, as in the case of the sequence “*rāshidūn* – Umayyads – Abbasids,” have a strongly polemical intent, but in any case, they are designed to focus attention on a particular issue. It is thus futile to expect a single periodization to be comprehensively satisfactory, to be in some sense an “ideal” or “absolute” periodization that is equally relevant for all aspects of history, although, obviously, some periodizations may be more narrowly conceived than others. Dynastic periodizations do indeed have a tightly restricted focus, but they have the advantage of making clear who was

²³ Robert GLEAVE, “‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (3rd ed., Leiden: E. J. Brill, online) proposes that the concept of the *rāshidūn* caliphs was only acceptable after the jurist Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855 CE) accepted the legitimacy of ‘Alī’s caliphate.

actually holding power (or claiming to), or holding a particular office, at a given time, which may be of interest to us even if we are not (like the Abbasids themselves) concerned with establishing our legitimacy to rule. If, on the other hand, we are concerned with matters other than who ruled or who occupies a particular office such as the caliphate, we may wish to elaborate a different periodization that makes those other developments stand out – as archaeologists have sometimes done, with their ceramic-based sequences.

We can again turn to the Islamic tradition itself for an example of a periodization that focuses on an issue other than the succession to the caliphate – although it is not, I think, usually recognized as an exercise in periodization. Among the *muḥaddithūn*, or specialists in the study of prophetic traditions (*ḥadīth*), there developed a “science of men” (*‘ilm al-rijāl*) that collected information on earlier generations of *muḥaddithūn*, including their birth and death dates (when known), their teachers and students, where they taught, and their reliability as transmitters. This information was used to evaluate the *isnāds* or chains of names on whose authority a particular *ḥadīth* was conveyed and to ensure, for example, that a scholar who claimed to have a *ḥadīth* from some earlier scholar had actually studied with him or could have crossed paths with him during his lifetime. Eventually, massive biographical dictionaries of such scholars were produced that compiled such information; an early example was the *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt al-kabīr* by Muḥammad ibn Sa‘d (d. 845 CE). As its title indicates, the biographies in this large work are organized into *ṭabaqāt*, “classes,” which are effectively generations. The first *ṭabaqa* consists of Companions of the Prophet Muḥammad (the so-called *ṣaḥāba*); the second, of “followers” (*tābi‘ūn*), that is, scholars of the next generation who related *ḥadīths* from Companions; the third, the generation of those who related from the “followers”; and so on. This structure provides a kind of rough periodization by generations of transmitters, which is exactly the information that students of *ḥadīth* would have found most relevant and useful, as it helps them reconstruct and comprehend the elaborate network of personal connections by which religious knowledge was preserved and transmitted. As there is usually no effort to link the various *ṭabaqāt* to a particular dynasty nor to establish specific calendar dates for them, however, it is not particularly useful for someone concerned with aspects of history other than the transmission of prophetic *ḥadīths*. As a periodization, the *ṭabaqāt* framework is, we might say, a tool of the *muḥaddithūn*.

Modern historians, too, of course, use periodization as a tool to highlight a particular theme in the society whose history they study. The dynastic categorization, which is useful for emphasizing the holders of power in large states, is frequently applied: we are all familiar with discussions of the history of the Near East that structures it in terms of the “Ottoman period” (however vague its begin-

nings – with the dynasty in the 13th century or with its conquest of Constantinople in the 15th century or its occupation of Syria and Egypt in the early 16th century?), and early modern Iran is usually discussed in terms of the “Safavid period” and “Qajar period” (with, again, some uncertainty over the period of Safavid collapse and the reign of Nādir Shāh in the early and mid-18th century). Returning to the early Islamic period, we might consider the old sequence “*rāshidūn* – Umayyad – Abbasid” as reflecting this tendency to organize things following the holders of power, except that the Abbasid period is usually considered to extend from their rise to power in 750, not merely until their loss of effective power to the Būyids in 945 but all the way to the end of the dynasty in 1258. This suggests, to me at least, that Western historians’ fidelity to this periodization is unwittingly influenced by the Islamic tradition’s own legitimist concerns, as much it is to their own preference for a dynastic sequence of power-holders. Most surveys of Islamic history as a whole take 1258 and the death of the last Abbasid caliph at the hands of the Mongols as a kind of watershed. The coming of the Mongols is, of course, a significant development that might be seen as marking the advent of a new era, but the Mongol onslaught on the Islamic Middle East really began in the 1220s and 1230s, not in 1258. For the central Islamic lands, 945 or 1055 has sometimes been considered more significant as a turning point in terms of general historical trends. Part II of the first edition of the *Cambridge History of Islam* was accordingly entitled “The Coming of the Steppe Peoples” and spanned the Buyid/Fatimid, Saljuq, and Mongol eras in the central Islamic lands. Of course, the history of the Islamic Maghrib has to be organized pretty much on a completely different timetable; the question of spatialization arises once again.

Marshall HODGSON, in his ambitious survey *The Venture of Islam*,²⁴ divided the full span of Islamic history into three phases, a “Classical Age” (ca. 600–945), a “Middle Period of Expansion” (ca. 945–1450), and “The Gunpowder Empires and modern times” (ca. 1450 to present). I suspect that this tripartite breakdown owed something to the fact that it saw its genesis in a year-long course sequence in Islamic Civilization at the University of Chicago, where the regular academic year is divided into three academic quarters; perhaps, if Chicago structured its academic calendar on semesters instead of quarters, HODGSON’s *Venture of Islam* would have been organized in two volumes instead of three. In any case, HODGSON’s “Middle Period,” vaguely described as a period of expansion (as if earlier and later centuries did not also see marked expansion of the Islamic community), actually coincides fairly well with the *Cambridge History*’s “Coming of

²⁴ Marshall G. S. HODGSON, *The Venture of Islam. Conscience and History in a World Civilization*. 3 vols. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

the Steppe Peoples.” HODGSON, however, makes the important point that this “Middle Period” is one that was habitually underrepresented in most survey texts, which concentrated either on the origins and classical period, with its Arabocentric focus, or on the early modern and modern periods (16th century to present), and tended unfairly to diminish the Persianate cultural developments of the 12th–17th centuries. Therefore, in volume II of *The Venture*, he attempted to set the record straight.

What, however, of periodizations that are not focused primarily on power-holders and dynasties? We have already mentioned ceramic periodization as a tool for the archaeologist or historian of material culture. It is of course possible to fashion a variety of other periodizations, created in the interest of emphasizing particular historical developments; their utility depends on the degree to which they successfully epitomize the desired theme and the importance of the theme itself. For early Islamic history, for example, one could readily imagine a periodization that highlighted the changing nature of military institutions in the Islamic empire, if one were especially interested in them. Such a periodization would begin with an “early conquest” period (632 to ca. 680), when the state drew on a large number of different tribal groups of Arabian origin to form a standing army, move to a “Syrian tribal” period (ca. 680 to 750), when the caliphal armies relied more and more heavily on troops of Syrian origin, followed by a “Khurasanian” period (750 to ca. 840), when elements from that province came to dominate the caliphal forces, followed by a “Turkish mercenary” period (ca. 840 to 900), when slaves or freed slaves often of Turkish origin dominated the caliphal armies (and often the caliphs themselves), followed by a “warlord” period (ca. 900 to 945), when a variety of military commanders held real power, leading to the Būyid protectorate (beginning 945). These “periods” might form meaningful chapters in a book on early Islamic military institutions.²⁵ Again, the realities in the Islamic West would have to be described according to a different program.

Similarly, one could fashion a periodization of Islamic history that highlighted the development of administrative institutions in the Islamic state: from a “formative” period (632 to ca. 725), during which formal institutions for taxation and adjudication were just beginning to crystallize, followed by a “high caliphate” period (ca. 725 to ca. 945), when the caliphal bureaucracy reached full development and exercised a good degree of direct administration of the caliphal realm, followed by a “fragmentation and decentralization” period

²⁵ Hugh KENNEDY’s *The Armies of the Caliphs. Military and Society in the Early Islamic State* (London: Routledge, 2001) in fact does follow something like such an organizational scheme in its successive chapters.

(ca. 945 to 1400), when effective bureaucratic functions increasingly fell into the hands of regional or local powers or were replaced in part or entirely by alternative methods of control (such as *iqṭāʿ* or direct collection of revenues by military and other functionaries, rather than reliance on a tax bureaucracy to manage the assessment, collection, accounting, and disbursement of revenues). This would give way to a new “imperial period” (especially under the Mamluks, Ottomans, and Safavids), when large states with highly developed bureaucracies of taxation once again were dominant.

S. D. GOITEIN proposed his own periodization that divides Islamic history into four main segments related to broad cultural characteristics (and with marked overtones of ethnic-nationalist conceptualizations).²⁶ GOITEIN’s four segments are (1) Arabism and Arabic Islam (ca. 500 to 850 CE), in which Islam emerges “as the self-realization of the Arab nation;” (2) the Intermediate Civilization (ca. 850 to 1250 CE), when Islamic civilization fully incorporated the Hellenic tradition and eventually passed it on to the West; (3) Institutional Islam (ca. 1250 to 1800 CE), dominated by regional and mainly non-Arab civilizational complexes (the Mamluks, Ottomans, Safavids and Qajars, Moghuls, etc.); and (4) Transition to National Cultures (ca. 1800 to present), mainly inspired by sources other than Islam.

The historian thus has many potential periodizations at his or her disposal and can fashion new ones as needed. They are tools he or she can use to highlight key developments of a particular kind. For the purposes of broad surveys of history, such as those found in textbooks and introductory courses of wide scope, periodizations whose boundaries between different periods coincide fairly closely with palpable change in several important aspects of life will obviously be more useful than periodizations that are narrowly focused only on one dimension of historical change. But no single periodization will be “ideal;” the apparent boundaries that delimit any periodization may mark a decisive change in some aspects of society but will be certainly be spanned by continuities in other aspects. As with any tool, the secret to using periodizations is to choose the right tool for the particular job at hand and to remain flexible and creative in using it.

²⁶ S. D. GOITEIN, “A Plea for the Periodization of Islamic History,” *JAOS* 88 (1968), 224–28, at 227–28.