

Preface

Gerald Hawting

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Gerald Hawting came to SOAS in 1963 to study for an undergraduate degree in History, “*with special reference to the Near and Middle East (Branch IV)*”. This included not only courses in the history of the Middle East from the early Islamic to the modern periods, but also the study of Semitic languages, particularly Arabic and Hebrew. When he retired in 2009 as Professor of the Near and Middle East, Gerald Hawting had spent over forty years at SOAS, studying, teaching, researching and writing about the origins and early history of Islam.

In the four decades of his official career, between 1970 and 2010, the academic study of the early history of Islam was fundamentally reshaped. Still a mostly conservative and positivist field in the 1970s, Islamic history, or “Islam in history”, was shaken up by the publications of a group of young scholars – often called the “revisionists”, or “sceptics” – many of whom met at SOAS in the 1970s and 80s: among them were Patricia Crone, Michael Cook, the late Martin Hinds and Gerald Hawting. The SOAS faculty lists of these decades similarly reads like a *Who’s Who* of Middle Eastern studies (Bernard Lewis, P.M. Holt, M.E. Yapp, Colin Heywood), but it was above all the ideas and work of John Wansbrough, then teaching in the Arabic department, that influenced these young scholars. Central to the development of a new approach to the field was Wansbrough’s insistence that early Muslim texts on the origins and early history of Islam, compiled decades and centuries after the events they claim to describe, cannot be used to reconstruct secular history but offer a version of “salvation history”; a history of Islam as conceived by the Muslim tradition where all actions are part of God’s plan for the salvation of His people. Some of the consequences of this view were perhaps most starkly expressed in *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* by Patricia Crone and Michael Cook (Cambridge, 1977), in which the authors presented an account of the origins of Islam using only non-Muslim sources, and thus presented a very different story to the traditional one – that of a Jewish messianic movement which eventually shed its Jewish origins. The book received much criticism, not least from Wansbrough himself,¹ yet it emphasized the difficulties of the Muslim literary tradition, and the uses and limits of alternative source material contemporary to the origins of Islam and written by non-Muslims. Moreover, Crone and Cook strongly argued for an understanding of the formation of Islamic civilization in the context of Late Antiquity.

This idea of studying Islam in its particular historical context, as well as in comparison with the historical development of the other two major forms of monotheism, rabbinical Judaism and Christianity, also very much characterizes

1 See the review by John Wansbrough in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 41/1, 1978, 155–6.

Hawting's work. In a series of articles as well as his 1999 monograph *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History*, Hawting argues for examining Islam's origins as the formation of a new monotheist religion, with all the implications that this brings. The book examines the religious setting within which Islam emerged, by way of a close analysis of the *mushrikūn*, the supposed pagan opponents to Muhammad's message in the Quran. Hawting identifies these *mushrikūn* as monotheists rather than polytheists in a literal sense, and suggests a separation of the Quranic material from the later Muslim literature which developed to explain the Quran and its context: accordingly, the image of the Quranic pagans and of the *jāhiliyya* (the period prior to Islam, often translated as "the age of ignorance") as described in the traditional literature should be read "primarily as a reflection of Islam's origins which developed among Muslims during the early stages of the emergence of the new form of monotheism".²

Hawting's suggestions have significant consequences for our understanding of the origins of Islam, not least because the monotheist environment in which he envisages Islam to have emerged is not likely to be the Hijaz as per Muslim tradition, but an area closer to the monotheist world of the time, such as the Fertile Crescent or Iraq. Whilst some colleagues and students remain to be convinced by the arguments, or even vehemently disagree with the book's conclusions,³ *The Idea of Idolatry* has served as a catalyst for ground-breaking work on the origins of Islam, and has been hugely influential in the study of the context of the Quran.

If Hawting is best known for his work on the *mushrikūn*, the long list of his published writings shows the importance of his scholarly contribution to the field of early Islamic history more generally. His first academic book, *The First Dynasty of Islam: The Umayyad Caliphate AD 661–750* (1986; second edition 2000), is an introduction to the history of the Umayyad caliphate, yet it is much more than a simple introductory work. In his very characteristic clear style, Hawting gives a sense of what historians of the early Islamic period

- 2 G.R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3.
- 3 The book was reviewed extensively; see, Nadia Maria el-Cheikh in *Bulletin of the Royal Institute of Inter-Faith Studies*, 2/2, 2000, 190–3; Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila in *Acta Orientalia*, 62, 2001, 211–16; Roberto Tottoli in *Annali Dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale*, 60–61, 2000–01, 572–3; A.-L. De Prémare in *Bulletin Critique des Annales Islamologiques*, 17, 2001, 45–8; Francis Robinson in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 64/2, 2001, 270; Patricia Crone in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 5104 (26 Jan. 2001), 10; Fred M. Donner in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 121/2, 2001, 336–8; Yasin Dutton in *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 12/2, 2001, 177–9; Wilferd Madelung in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 11/2, 2001, 271–72; Andrew Rippin in *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 46/2, 2001, 348–51; Michael Bonner in *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*, 35/1, 2001, 65–6; Peter Heine in *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung*, 96/4–5, 2001, 585–7; Robert Hoyland in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 13/2, 2002, 236–7; Paul M. Cobb in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 61/4, 2002, 299–300; Mehmet Sait Reçber in *The Muslim World*, 93/2, 2003, 331–5; Gordon Newby in *American Historical Review*, 108/2, 2003, 610; David Morgan in *Religion*, 33/2, 2003, 170–80; Walid A. Saleh in *H-Net Reviews in the Humanities & Social Sciences*, Feb. 2005, 1–5.

would like to know, but often cannot; it is thus a real introduction to a field which is still in the process of forming questions rather than giving answers.

The urgency to explain the complexities of the field, and make the academic study of the origins and early history of Islam more accessible to students as well as the interested general reader, also underlies his translation work. Two volumes were masterfully translated for the SUNY Tabari project, and a translation of al-Maqrīzī's *Kitāb fīhi dhikr mā warada fī bunyān al-ka'ba al-mu'azzama* is currently being prepared. A work that is not well known among academics, Hawting's first book and one of his earliest publications was a children's book, *The Moors*. Still found in almost 100 libraries around the world (according to WorldCat) this work already displays the concern with definitions, the precise prose and the careful reflection upon history that mark his later works. Such outreach work has extended to podcasts for the Historical Association, participating in radio talk shows and consulting for television films.

Editorship of a number of collected volumes have served his colleagues well also by providing a wide range of essays on a variety of topics. A small project came first, *Sacred Writing in Oriental and African Religions* (1986); this was an effort of the SOAS "Consultative panel in religion and philosophy" and features brief essays by John Wansbrough, Mary Boyce, Lewis Glinert and several others, in addition to Hawting himself. *Approaches to the Qur'ān* (1993) was the result of a SOAS conference devoted to the Quran held in 1990, and has proved to be a volume of lasting significance with many of the articles becoming standard references in the field. *Studies in Islamic and Middle Eastern Texts and Traditions in Memory of Norman Calder* (2000), *Muslims, Mongols, and Crusaders* (2004) (a collection of reprinted essays from the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*), and *The Development of Islamic Ritual* (2006) (a part of the Formation of the Classical Islamic World series), were all assembled with Hawting's skill in bringing together both people and perspectives in cohesive writing projects. His notes and glossary to the reprint of John Wansbrough's *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (2006) likewise made that pivotal book in his field of study more widely accessible to its potential audience. All of these volumes include an extensive introduction, often the only comprehensive analysis of the research to date.

In addition to the monographs, translations, edited volumes, and many articles, it is perhaps the book reviews which give the best sense of the breadth of Hawting's scholarship. His reviews – of works not just in English but a number of European languages, as well as studies in Arabic – are not simply descriptive summaries of other scholars' publications; they are critical evaluations of approaches, sources and ideas, and give some of the clearest expressions of Hawting's own views on the history and historiography of early Islam. As in many of his publications, he often provides a historiographic context and précis: to understand and explicitly state how an idea came to be accepted, and on what basis, is a major aspect of Hawting's writing and teaching. One always comes away knowing more about the field in general.

At SOAS, Hawting is still talked about as an inspirational teacher, who taught his students how to ask questions and continually evaluate and test the historical

sources. His colleagues, many of whom were appointed when he was Head of Department, remember his involvement in the many administrative changes that SOAS underwent between 1970 and 2010, not least the setting up of the Study of Religions department which he also headed for some time. But they also remember a scholar who sometimes locked the door from the inside and pretended not to be there, so he could read his texts and write his articles in peace. This dedication to research continues into his retirement: in addition to the Maqrīzī translation, there is a book promised on ideas of prophethood in early Islam and a book on the Ayyubids under way; several articles, on a variety of subjects, are forthcoming, testimony to his continued dedication to both his wide-ranging interests and his critical acumen.⁴

This volume is presented to Gerald Hawting by some of his teachers, colleagues and students. The contributions are reflective of some of his own interests: traditions on the origins, context and interpretation of the Quran (Crone, Rippin, Lecker, Kulinich); the development of Muslim ritual (Fierro); the critical study of the sources for Islamic thought, in the context of source material from other monotheist traditions (Rubin, Bayhoum-Daou, Gleave) and debates concerning orality and writing (Cook); the development of ideas of prophethood in Islam (Miskinzoda); and points of contact between Islam and the West (Brett). We are very happy that these offerings are published as a special issue of *BSOAS*, the journal in which many of Gez Hawting's own publications appeared, and which he markedly shaped whilst serving on its board from 1990, and as its editor between 2005 and 2009.

4 See for instance G.R. Hawting, "Idols and Idolatry" in R. Segal and K. von Stuckrad (eds), *Vocabulary for the Study of Religions* (Leiden, forthcoming).