

## CHAPTER ONE

# Poverty and Charity in the Rise of Islam

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### The “Return of Wealth”

Each generation of Muslims in the Middle East has used charitable practices to alleviate suffering and to maintain balance and order in society. At the same time, a set of concepts clustering around poverty and charity have remained essential elements for understanding and expressing the norms that have governed much of Middle Eastern life. Poverty and charity thus were, and to some extent still are, focal points and ways of understanding for Muslims as they have thought about the creation and distribution of wealth and as they have established and sustained a wide variety of institutions.

One element of what we might call the Islamic “economy of poverty”<sup>1</sup> has to do with the concept of ‘return.’ Historical narratives regarding the earliest period of Islam inform us that as the Prophet Muhammad sent out his administrators of the *zakat* (obligatory alms) for the nascent Islamic polity, he instructed them to “take the possessions (*amwal*) of the rich and return them to the poor”; or to inform the donors that “God has laid the obligation of alms (*sadaqa*) on their possessions, to be taken from the rich among them and returned to the poor”;<sup>2</sup> and similar formulations. (The Arabic words for this are usually *radd* and its derivatives, less often *ruju’* and other words). Similarly, in the *hadith* (narrative accounts of sayings and deeds ascribed to the Prophet),<sup>3</sup> *return* often means “give,” as in: “Return (i.e., give to) the beggar, even if it is only the head of a sandgrouse.”<sup>4</sup> It can also be argued, on the basis of the hadith, that as wealth returns from the rich to the poor it must never return from the rich to the rich. The original donor of an item must afterward never retrieve it.<sup>5</sup>

These are not the only ways in which the early Islamic texts conceptualize charity or the circulation of wealth. But at the same time, the calls for return

are not merely casual metaphors. We see this already in the Quran, where in an important passage (59:7) we read: “That which God has returned (*ma afa’u llahu*) to His Messenger from the [conquered] people of the towns is for God and the Messenger and those close [to the Messenger] and for the orphan and the pauper and the traveler, so that it does not become something which circulates (*dulatan*) among the rich among you.” This passage sets forth vividly the precept of good circulation of wealth (never from the rich to the rich). At the same time it provides one of the foundations of early fiscal theory: from this passage of the Quran the jurists derived the concept of *fay’* (another word for return), which came to refer technically to the wealth accruing constantly to the community of believers from the lands they have conquered and from the labor of the conquered, non-Muslim “protected people” (*ahl al-dhimma*), in a never-ending cycle of return.<sup>6</sup>

More generally, the Quran makes constant admonitions and demands for almsgiving—*zakat/sadaqa*; here the context often seems to be that of prodding reluctant believers into making contributions, whether toward the conduct of warfare or the maintenance of the poor—these two being much the same thing. “If you fear destitution, God will make you wealthy [give you surplus] out of His *fadl* [surplus], if He wills” (9:28). Hoarding and greed are roundly condemned,<sup>7</sup> broadly in harmony with a conception of return (since hoarded goods cannot move). And the Quran insists upon a *haqq* (plural: *huquq*), a right or claim, which inheres in property. Of course persons have *huquq*, but we also find the *haqq* in the property itself. Thus the community of true believers consists of “those upon whose property there is an agreed right [*haqq ma’lum*] for the beggar and the destitute” (70:24, cf. 51:19). And in the Quran we also find *riba*, generally understood to refer to the forbidden “usury.” It is difficult to say what *riba* actually means in the Quran (rather than in mature Islamic law). However, one passage where it occurs (30:39) clearly contrasts some kind of bad circulation (*riba*) with good circulation (*zakat* or almsgiving).

Although this notion of return occurs repeatedly in foundational Islamic texts, it has largely escaped the notice of modern scholarship. Notable exceptions include the Egyptian radical reformer Sayyid Qutb, especially in his commentary on the Quran,<sup>8</sup> and the anthropologist Christian Décobert in his controversial *Le mendiant et le combattant*. There Décobert identified an *économie aumônière* or “economy of alms” as the basis of exchange in the early Islamic conquest polity. In his view the early Islamic economy forms, ideally, a system in which goods circulate perpetually within the community through constant almsgiving. The poor recipient of alms becomes rich so that he may then reimpovertish himself by giving, in a never-ending eleemosynary chain. However, he is not, again ideally, a producer of the goods that circulate. These enter the system from outside—as this is, after all, a conquest polity and economy. What the Muslim eats has ideally been

produced by others; and gain is perceived as separate from the activities of production and exchange.<sup>9</sup>

Even if Décobert overstated his case, he identified Islamic notions of charity that feature the notion of return. Later I will try to show that this is largely an Arabian inheritance. In different terms, we may say that Islamic charity is, in part, an extension or descendant of an older Arabian economy of gift. First, however, comes a broader look at poverty and charity within the context of the history and historiography of the rise of Islam.

### The Literary Sources for Poverty and Charity in Arabia

Any thesis about the role of charity and poverty in Islamic societies must take us back to the origins of Islam. And, indeed, poverty and charity were never more important in the history of Islam than they were then, at the very beginning. Zakat, the obligatory poor-rate, and sadaqa, voluntary alms, both appear prominently in the Quran and in other foundational texts, as we have just seen. (It should be remembered, however, that this distinction between compulsory zakat and voluntary sadaqa does not apply systematically in the Quran and in the earliest period of Islam.) In the old Arabic narratives about the early Muslim community and its conquests and quarrels, zakat and sadaqa loom large at several moments of crisis. These include the beginning of Muhammad's prophetic career in Mecca, when what appear to be the earliest pieces of scripture insist on almsgiving more than any other human activity. These moments of crisis also include the wars of the *ridda* or apostasy in C.E. 632–634, just after Muhammad's death. At that time most of the Arabs throughout the peninsula refused to continue paying zakat (now a kind of tax) to the central authority in Medina; Abu Bakr, upon assuming the leadership, swore he would force them all to pay this zakat, "even if they refuse me only a [camel's] hobble of it," and sent armies that subdued these rebels or "apostates" in large-scale battles that were soon followed by the great Islamic conquests beyond the Arabian peninsula itself.<sup>10</sup>

By the same token, in recent years some of the most influential historical accounts of the rise of Islam have attributed considerable importance to these charitable practices and to the structures that are supposed to have grown out of them. However, as we try to identify and describe charitable practices in pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabia with historical accuracy, we encounter serious problems in the source materials available to us.

We have no direct, contemporary, documentary evidence for the rise of Islam in the Hijaz (west central Arabia). Archaeological evidence, now marshaled by some researchers,<sup>11</sup> remains incomplete and difficult to interpret. Modern ethnography and travel literature provide insights and parallels but no hard evidence for

the political and moral economy of seventh-century Arabia. We continue to rely, for the most part, on a large corpus of narratives written during the Islamic period, in Arabic, and relating to pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabia. These writings have been preserved through a process of literary transmission, in such a way that texts mostly do not survive from before around A.H. 150 (C.E. 767). In the form in which we have them, the majority of these texts are the products of scholars who lived later than that, often much later. These scholars worked with earlier sources that have since then become lost, and it may well be that their work reproduces those earlier sources faithfully. However, some modern analysts have argued that the Arabic historical narratives contain parallel and contradictory versions of events, and that in both content and form they are the products of long processes of literary stereotyping.<sup>12</sup> Others have countered that the narratives do contain a significant core of accurate historical information. This debate has absorbed much of the time and effort of specialists in early Islam, especially in the latest generation.

Within this larger controversy, poverty and charity have received some attention. In the 1950s, W. Montgomery Watt argued that Muhammad's activity as a prophet in Mecca took place within a larger context of a "weakening social solidarity [in Arabia] and . . . growth of individualism." According to Watt a crisis, both economic and spiritual, beset the Hijaz, expressed in a new vocabulary of poverty and wealth: "While it seems unlikely that there had been any increase in absolute poverty in Mecca, it is probable that the gap between rich and poor had widened in the last half-century. The Qur'an implies an increasing awareness of the difference between rich and poor. . . . The rich were showing less concern for the poor and uninfluential, even among their own kin."<sup>13</sup> In this crisis the Quran offered a "new basis for social solidarity," in an idiom already familiar to the Meccans and their Arab neighbors. So even though many scholars, following Ignaz Goldziher, saw a deep gulf between pre-Islamic Arabian *muruwwa* (manly heroism, *virtus*) on the one hand, and Islamic *din* (religion) on the other hand,<sup>14</sup> Watt saw continuity between pre-Islamic and earliest Islamic society, between "old Arab ideals" and the new monotheist solution proposed in the earliest parts of the Quran. This continuity resided in the old Arab ideal of generosity, which now acquired powerful monotheist sanctions through the doctrine and practice of almsgiving: Watt described the creation of new fiscal institutions in the Islamic community that Muhammad established at Medina in 1/622. Although the institutions provided for the needs of the new circumstances, they were still built around the concept of generosity.<sup>15</sup> Poverty, charity, and generosity thus provide keys to the transition between *jahiliyya* (Arabia before Islam) and early Islam.

The crisis in social solidarity in early-seventh-century Mecca had to have a context and an explanation, which Watt located in the larger commercial history

of western Arabia. Mecca had turned its unpromising, barren site to advantage by seizing control over the peninsular caravan trade, including the lucrative trade in spices and aromatics from South Arabia to the Mediterranean world. As Mecca's merchants, especially the dominant tribe of Quraysh, quickly accumulated riches, they wove the Meccans and the surrounding tribes into their "financial net."<sup>16</sup> The result was an increasing and unprecedented inequality. In this way, Meccan poverty and Meccan generosity both resulted directly from the rapid growth of Meccan trade. The story of Meccan trade, which has been told with increasing refinement down to the present day,<sup>17</sup> has received far more attention than the poverty and charity that were the original centerpieces of Watt's carefully constructed biography of Muhammad. All the same, Watt's work has had enormous influence, as has his approach to the Arabic sources for the life of Muhammad, which may briefly be described as commonsensical: accepting the general narrative framework of *sīna* (prophetic biography) and *akbbar* (historical narratives), while sifting individual details and contradictory accounts for an acceptable narrative in accordance with criteria of plausibility.<sup>18</sup>

In 1987, Patricia Crone aimed a devastating critique at Watt's propositions (as Crone put it) that Mecca was an entrepôt of peninsular and international trade; that the Quraysh were the "bourgeois" entrepreneurs controlling that trade; and that "the Qurashi transition to a mercantile economy undermined the traditional order in Mecca, generating a social and moral malaise to which Muhammad's preaching was the response."<sup>19</sup> Crone arrived instead at the following negative conclusions: Mecca never was the favorable location for trade that modern scholars have made it out to be. In fact it made no sense as a commercial site. In late antiquity the incense trade and the transit trade in luxury goods from India did not usually take the overland route from Yemen to Syria. (The Mediterranean market for incense, in any case, had collapsed by the third century.) Mecca never dominated Arabian commerce with other countries and failed even to attract their notice. Meccan trade did not extend much beyond local distribution of such items as leather, cheap cloth, and livestock.

Guiding all this demolition work is a running critique of the Islamic sources, in which "apparently sober accounts of separate events turn out to be nothing but elaborations on a single theme."<sup>20</sup> "The tradition asserts both A and not A, and it does so with such regularity that one could, were one so inclined, rewrite most of Montgomery Watt's biography of Muhammad in the reverse."<sup>21</sup> Crone shows little interest in Watt's themes of poverty and wealth, generosity and almsgiving. The assumption is that once Watt's premise of large-scale Meccan trade before Islam has been removed, his entire edifice crumbles.

Several contributions made since Crone's *Meccan Trade* have sought to transcend the conflict between the older view of the sources,<sup>22</sup> whereby history emerges as a residue of the "right" texts, and what has been called the "revisionist school,"<sup>23</sup>

according to whom the defectiveness of the textual tradition makes history unrecoverable, or nearly so. None of these, however, has fully answered the objections made by Crone against Watt. Historiographical problems still prevent us from understanding the role of poverty and charity in the rise of Islam.

Yet another obstacle lies in scholars' almost exclusive concentration on sadaqa and zakat. These two words, which denote alms in the earliest Islamic Arabic texts, both have close cognates in other Semitic languages, including Hebrew and Aramaic, throughout their broad semantic ranges. So for instance, zakat in Arabic carries the connotation of "a payment on property in order to purify it and, hence, cause for it to be blessed and multiply." This sense of "purification," plus that of "exemption from taxes," occurs in other Semitic languages.<sup>24</sup> How and when did these terms enter the Arabic language and the Arabian peninsula? It seems that sadaqa and zakat occur rarely, if at all, in Arabic texts relating to Arabia before Islam or at the time of the beginning of Islam, *other than in specifically Islamic contexts*.<sup>25</sup> This indicates that sadaqa and zakat are relatively recent borrowings from the outside; or in other words, that they belong to the Near Eastern heritage of early Islam, at least as much as to the Arabian.

Several explanations have been offered for how these terms, and the practices associated with them, might have gained currency in the Hijaz in the early seventh century. These have included the idea that Muhammad witnessed these practices during his youthful travels to Syria, or else that Jewish or Christian practices became familiar in Mecca, despite the town's lack of a Jewish or Christian community. However, most of these explanations and theories have been philological in method on the one hand; while on the other hand, they have viewed the early history of these practices and doctrines through the history of the Islamic community, and through the use of Islamic texts.<sup>26</sup> But there cannot have been such a chasm between the redistributive practices of the jahiliyya and those of Islam.

Décobert's *Le mendiant et le combattant* constitutes one of the few attempts so far to go beyond the familiar discussion of sadaqa and zakat. He compresses a complex argument into his composite figure of "the beggar and the warrior." He begins with the historiographical problem, trying to view it sociologically. He distinguishes between the "preaching" (*prédication*) of Muhammad, a moment of crisis in early-seventh-century Arabia, and the "teaching" (*enseignement*) that came afterward.<sup>27</sup> However, Décobert's critique of the revisionist authors<sup>28</sup> fails to produce a countertheory in favor of the validity of those sources. He does not base his argument on close reading of Arabic sources, especially regarding Arabia before Islam. All the same, Décobert brings up an important point, namely, that the gift provides a key to the political economy of old Arabia and earliest Islam. The connected concepts of poverty and warfare were central to the formation of Muslim identity and have remained so ever since.

## Trajectories

In Arabia before the rise of Islam there was a wide variety of distributive and redistributive practices, many of them now obscure to us. I am working to identify some of these to recover certain aspects of the political economy of old Arabia. Then I propose to trace the evolution, rebirth, or death of these practices under the new dispensation of Islam. The source material available for this is fragmentary. However, we can identify themes of economic relevance among the writings, including poetry, that relate to pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabia. We cannot simply accept these narratives at face value: this especially applies to the stories in prose that provide narrative context to the poetry. However, once we have identified a recurring and/or underlying theme, we must seek its trajectories in time and space.

As for time, we may find a practice of jahiliyya recurring in Islam, under different circumstances and possibly under different names, but still recognizably itself. In this case, the Islamic sources—above all the hadith<sup>29</sup>—may allow us to reconstruct a trajectory over time.<sup>30</sup>

As for space, we need to discover networks and to plot them, with emphasis on the constant movement and “connectivity” of the Arabian environment.<sup>31</sup> These ought to include networks of trade and pilgrimage, but also the tribal matrix itself, with its intensive and shifting occupation of space.<sup>32</sup> Even though the “biases” of some of our Arabic sources can complicate the matter, these biases may also correlate to region or locality.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, even though the Arabic sources have been accused of rhetorical embellishment, stereotyping, party spirit, local bias, and so on, they show remarkable consistency of detail in their description of networks, or at least in providing pieces that we may then reassemble into networks. Patricia Crone has demonstrated this in relation to the early Islamic polity,<sup>34</sup> while her book on Meccan trade shows that accounts of jahiliyya also show consistency of detail that we can use to reconstruct networks of trade and pilgrimage.<sup>35</sup>

Rather than focusing on the dilemma of Meccan trade, we should take a broader view of Arabia as a whole. In what follows I will point to two aspects of the pre-Islamic economy, which coexisted even though they seem to contradict one another. One of them is the Arabian background of the Islamic return of wealth, which I mentioned toward the beginning of this chapter. The other, discussed first, is its seeming opposite: nonreturn, noncirculation, waste of surplus through competition over leadership.

## Generosity, Competition, and Waste

In Arabic writings pertaining to pre-Islamic Arabia, we find a recurring motif. A man of means has a camel slaughtered to provide a feast to the members of a kin-based group of moderate size, called “*qawm*” or “*hayy*.” Another man then becomes

angry and has one of his camels slaughtered and its meat distributed. The first donor counters with another camel, the second donor retaliates, and soon a pile of dead beasts accumulates, far beyond the capacity of the group to consume. The first of the contestants who runs out of camels or who gives up, must leave in disgrace. This competitive and self-destructive display, known by various names<sup>36</sup> and related to the poetic contests called “*tafakhur*” and “*mufakhara*,” was discussed briefly by Julius Wellhausen and Ignaz Goldziher more than a century ago, and then not much until recently. The parallel with the self-destructive feasting or potlatch of the Pacific Northwest is fairly clear.<sup>37</sup>

Variations occur on the motif. Hatim al-Ta’i, the paragon of Arab generosity not long before Islam, had a reputation both as a poet and as the lord of his people (*sayyid qawmihi*). Once when al-Hakam b. Abi l-’As was passing through on his way from the Hijaz to al-Hira, he asked Hatim for protection (*jiwar*), in the area controlled by the Tayyi’, Hatim’s tribe. Hatim agreed and provided lavish hospitality in the form of slaughtered camels. Hatim’s right to obligate all of Tayyi’ in a matter of *jiwar* was then challenged by his relatives the Banu Lam, another branch of the Tayyi’. The two sides came briefly to blows but then agreed to settle the matter with a competitive feast (*mijad*) at the market (*suq*) of al-Hira. The opponents marshaled their resources. Hatim made sure of the loyalty of various “cousins” and allies who pledged their wealth (*mal*)—meaning numbers of camels for slaughter. Hatim’s side attained such superiority that the Banu Lam had to admit defeat before the contest even began. This was good news both for the local camel population and for Hatim, whose fame and preeminence within his own *qawm* were now assured.

This practice of hamstringing and/or sacrificing of camels, most often expressed by the verb ‘*aqaral’aqr* and its derivative *ta’aqur* (competitive feasting) connects both with ancient practices of camel sacrifice and with questions of leadership. Not only must a prospective *sayyid* or *shaykh* show prowess in war, he also must nourish the group he seeks to lead, if need be in self-destructive competition. The consumers are not described as needy or poor, but they have a right to the camel feasts whenever these take place.

One of the fullest descriptions we have of *ta’aqur* comes from the early days of Islam, during the caliphate of ‘Ali (C.E. 656–661).

Ghalib [b. Sa’sa’a, father of the poet al-Farazdaq] slaughtered a female camel [*aqara naqatan*] and distributed [its meat] among the tents of the clan [*buyut al-hayy*] [of Tamim]. A portion was brought to Suhaym [b. Wathil al-Riyahi], who became angry and returned it, and then slaughtered a camel of his own. Ghalib then slaughtered another one, and so they vied with one another [*fa-ta’aqaru*] until Suhaym ran out [of camels]. Afterward, when Suhaym arrived at al-Kufa, his people chided him. He tried to excuse himself by saying that he had been away from his own herd. Then he sent for a hundred camels, which he slaughtered over the refuse dump [*kunasa*] of al-Kufa. Whereupon ‘Ali [b. Abi Talib, then caliph]



said, This has been consecrated for the worship of something other than God, so don't eat it [*inna hadha mimma uhillu biha li-ghayr Allah fa-la ta'kuluhu*]. And so it remained where it was until the wild beasts and the dogs ate it.<sup>38</sup>

Here we see ta'qur surviving into the early Islamic period, despite the existence of a caliph and a centralized administration. Objections to it are stated on religious grounds because of the association with pagan sacrifice. Other statements of disapproval and prohibition include the hadith "there is no 'aqr in Islam."<sup>39</sup> These prohibitions lack historical context, though interestingly, it is often 'Ali who condemns the practice on religious grounds, as in the passage just quoted. All the same, we find veiled allusions to the practice in other early Islamic contexts, including the Quran (the hamstringing by Thamud of the *naqat Allah* [God's camel]) and the famous Battle of the Camel of A.H. 36 (C.E. 656), which culminated in a hamstringing. But this will have to be taken up elsewhere. For now we see that in ancient Arabia there existed a trend toward competitive and sometimes self-destructive feasting, connected to contests over leadership. This trend seems to correlate to an archaic condition of society, where camels represent the main form of surplus and wealth. In this situation, surplus is given away, consumed, or simply destroyed. It does not circulate and does not return to its original owner.

Were these merely acts of generosity pushed to an extreme? The best discussion so far of generosity in pre-Islamic Arabia has been M. M. Bravmann's essay "The Surplus of Property."<sup>40</sup> Bravmann saw a basic identity between the generosity of old Arabia and the charity of early Islam, with some adjustment of vocabulary and practice. Although there are difficulties in this approach and conclusion,<sup>41</sup> Bravmann showed that acts of generosity among individuals in old Arabia followed certain patterns. The Arabs thought and said that property (*mal*) has a surplus (*fadl*, or '*afw*'), which its owner must give away. Indeed, that surplus carries a right or claim (*haqq*) within itself, which occurs in the Quran (see the opening section to this chapter, "The Return of Wealth"). The owner of surplus does not have to destroy it and may give it to someone who needs it. This needy recipient then enters into or continues a relationship with the donor, as protected guest (*jar*), client (*mawla*), or ally (*halif*). In other words, donor and recipient know each other—even if, as often, they do not belong to the same kin group—and the relationship between them is one of inequality. Now, most likely the recipient can never reciprocate this gift fully. He will be frustrated in his expectation (familiar to us from Marcel Mauss)<sup>42</sup> that the gift must be returned in some way and at some time. More specifically, the donor's act of benefaction traps the recipient into a relationship of clientage, or worse. The fact that the ta'qur is a contest over dominance within the group,<sup>43</sup> in which the consumers of the feast can never reciprocate, indicates that this Arabian destructive potlatch is indeed only an extreme point on a spectrum of acts of generosity.

## Markets and Trade

I stated at the beginning of this chapter that an Islamic notion of return of wealth had its roots in pre-Islamic Arabia. At first glance this appears not to be so, since the Arabic texts relating to Arabia before Islam, including the poetry, do not literally insist on a return of wealth, at least not with the same clarity as do the texts relating to Islam. However, the main connection does not lie where Bravmann thought it did, in acts of individual generosity, which, as we have seen, were associated with the acquisition and maintaining of power by individuals, with unequal relationships, and, in the extreme case, with dramatic waste of resources. Instead, we may look at two larger-scale types of exchange connected with trade and war.

Trade assumed a wide variety of forms in Arabia, as did its focal points, which we call markets. Róbert Simon worked out a typology of these markets, with the purpose of explaining the ultimate triumph of Mecca and Quraysh.<sup>44</sup> But the focus on Meccan trade may, as elsewhere, divert our attention from some important points. In the years before Islam, the Arabs developed a sense that goods traveled around the Arabian peninsula in an annual cycle. We see this in a narrative tradition about the “markets of the Arabs” (*aswaq al-‘Arab*).<sup>45</sup> This tradition describes only a fraction of the markets that actually existed. More precisely, it describes a sequence of from ten to fourteen, whereas the early-fourth/tenth-century writer al-Hamdani, in his *Sifat Jazirat al-‘Arab* (Description of the Arabian Peninsula), lists more than fifty.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, even though these markets of the Arabs included sites of obvious importance, such as Aden and San‘a, they also include some that are utterly obscure. Meanwhile, some famous market towns, such as al-Hira, are lacking in the tradition altogether. The purpose of this tradition on the markets of the Arabs, in its various versions, is, therefore, not simply to provide a list and description of the most important Arabian places of exchange; instead, two main themes emerge.

First, the tradition on the markets describes a sequence of places, beginning in Dumat al-Jandal in north central Arabia on the confines of the Byzantine and Persian Empires, then moving east to al-Mushaqqar, near Hajar, not far from the coast of al-Bahrayn; from there to coastal ‘Uman, then on to Hadramawt, Yemen, and the market-fairs of ‘Ukaz and its environs, and (in some versions) including the pilgrimage of ‘Arafa and Mina. The course continued north to Khaybar and then east to al-Yamama. In other words, the tradition traces the contours of Arabia and the approximate limits of Arab habitation. It includes a remarkable variety of political conditions, including the protectorate of the great empires, tribal control, and control by no one at all. It also describes an even more remarkable variety of types of merchandise and economic arrangements. So we have prostitution and slavery in Dumat al-Jandal, “goods of the sea” arriving from India and China at

Suhar and Daba at the entrance to the gulf, and elsewhere various local goods, all being traded with a number of distinct and colorful techniques. With all this movement and variety, including contact with the outside world, the dominant fact is still the outline of Arabia traced by this long itinerary.

Second, the tradition on the markets of the Arabs describes a constant motion of persons and goods along this clockwise path. Now, in reality this is difficult to believe: The route traced in this way seems only tangentially related to the trade routes familiar to us from our textbooks and from some of the books discussed earlier in this chapter. Yet the transmitters of this tradition insist on this movement, which has much in common with some of the conceptions of circulation of wealth current in the early Islamic period: not strictly circular,<sup>47</sup> but with goods and persons moving in the same direction and returning year after year.

The most fully described of these markets of the Arabs is its culminating point, the market-fair of 'Ukaz, with its extensions in nearby al-Majanna and Dhu l-Majaz (all of these two or three days' journey from Mecca). 'Ukaz was especially known for its contests of boasting and poetry. By some accounts it was also a place where one gave things away more than where one bought and sold.<sup>48</sup> The episodes of generosity at 'Ukaz have much in common with the potlatch episodes just described, except that they involve less waste, they are not restricted to camel feasts, and they take place in this one locale within a repeating, seasonal pattern. While there were still kings in Yemen (presumably in the fifth and sixth centuries C.E.), these would send fine swords, mounts and clothing to 'Ukaz, and have a messenger announce: "Let the most valiant of the Arabs take it!" In this way the Yemeni rulers would find out whom they needed to cultivate in the tribal hinterland.<sup>49</sup> Again, the emphasis is on generosity and competition. But despite this mention of kingship, 'Ukaz is described as outside political or tribal control, or as Wellhausen put it: "here no one was master of the house."<sup>50</sup> Although other accounts describe the Quraysh of Mecca as extending their influence within the fairs of 'Ukaz, the fairs of 'Ukaz took place outside Mecca and apparently beyond Meccan control.<sup>51</sup>

These traditions are difficult to reconcile with other information (also derived from a process of literary transmission) regarding trade routes. But taken together, the traditions on the markets of the Arabs point to a conception of circulation in Arabia that tended in a different direction from that of the wasteful generosity discussed in the previous section. Things move in a repeating pattern that defines Arabia and the Arabs as a geographical unity. The itinerary embraces a wide variety of political and economic arrangements. Above all, whatever the reason for existence of the itinerary may be, it is not the acquiring and maintaining of power and domination. It points instead to a growing sense of collective identity among the Arabs, as well as to a notion of return that prefigures the later Islamic notion of return of wealth.

## Warfare and Brigandage

Bravmann noted that “the surplus which is given away” was often the result of “acquisition” (*kasb*), or in other words, of raiding.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, prowess in warfare was always associated with generosity, as the one could hardly exist without the other. With so much raiding taking place, one could at least conceive of goods being constantly taken and then recirculated, always through violence. In these ways, Arabian warfare provided some of the elements of the Islamic return of wealth.

In the period just before Islam, the ideal of warfare as an extension or counterpart to generosity seems to have come under some pressure. We see this in the genre of poetry associated with the Arabian *sa‘alik* (singular: *su‘luk*). *Su‘luk* in this literature<sup>53</sup> is usually understood to mean “brigand” or “wretch.” It can also be one of many terms meaning poor, lacking. But while some of the *sa‘alik* humbly accept crumbs from the great, wealthy men (*sayyids*), others are famous for courage, solitude, and familiarity with death. And some individuals associated with the category, such as Hatim al-Ta‘i, are legendary not for deprivation but rather for abundant generosity. Their typical activities are raiding and distributing spoils among their followers. One of the things making a coherent category of the *sa‘alik* is their conservatism, their outrage at the shifting values all around them.

‘Urwa b. al-Ward provides a fine example: “Let me strive for riches, for I have seen that the worst of the people is the poor man [*al-faqir*], and the most shameful and despicable among them, even though he may have had good birth and fortune and attained the utmost in generosity: his wife despises him and his children chase him away.”<sup>54</sup> For the embittered ‘Urwa, the old values of good birth and generosity have been upended by a new distinction between rich and poor. The villains here are Arabian (not necessarily Meccan) *nouveaux riches*, arrogantly displacing the old *sayyids* who have struggled so long to acquire and maintain their reputation for valor and generosity. In any case, ‘Urwa was not the enemy of those in need. He was known as “‘Urwa of the *sa‘alik*” because “in harsh years” he would gather together a band of the sick and weak from his own tribal group (*ashira*) to whom he provided rough shelter and leadership in raids. Interestingly, he does not seem to have taken the fourth or fifth of the spoils, which (we think) customarily went to the leader (*sayyid* or *shaykh*) in war.<sup>55</sup> And after a season of raiding, his companions would return to their homes. We may infer from all this that the old ways of conducting war and of choosing leaders, and above all of generosity, have come under stress. ‘Urwa carries on in the old fashion, but for all his efforts he cannot halt a threatening and encroaching distinction between rich and poor. Arabia had always been a harsh country where most people could eke out only a marginal existence. But if there was always, to our mind, “objective” poverty in Arabia, the existence of a category of “poor,” defined in part by their

lack of protection and their lack of connection to the social system around them, seems to predate Islam by not very long.

In the early Islamic period we again find sa'alik. These are unruly, violent, urban riffraff, especially in frontier outposts, the predecessors of the *'ayyarun* (urban gangs) and *abdath* (urban militias of young men) of the great medieval cities. Their connection with the swashbuckling heroes of the jahiliyya is little more than that of a name. However, the old Arabian, pre-Islamic sa'alik do set a precedent for Islam: self-deprivation and self-marginalization as moral and political protest, a story that begins with the revolt of Abu Dharr al-Ghifari in the early years of the caliphate.<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have sketched the outlines of a thesis for which present and future work will provide fuller substance. But some conclusions already emerge. There existed in the medieval period, and to some extent there still exists in the Islamic world, an economy of poverty in which the idea of a return of wealth had a key role. This may be traced in part to the heritage that Islam shared with other monotheist traditions of the Near Eastern and Mediterranean worlds. But much of it goes back to Arabia itself.

For thousands of years Arabia had existed on the margins of wealthier societies. Even though its trade routes brought goods and people from outside the peninsula and fostered contact among the Arabs themselves, the peninsula lagged behind its neighbors in acquiring new technologies of metallurgy, toolmaking, and so on.<sup>57</sup> An archaic sense of economy and society survived in Arabia, as if the outside world of the great empires and trade were not there—even though the Arabs knew perfectly well of the existence of that world and often came into contact with it.

From the sources available to us we may identify two main articulations of that archaic economy. The first has to do with competition and waste, of giving away and even, on occasion, destroying one's wealth, in order to maintain or improve one's position within a group. Here the main resource in circulation is the camel. Most important, however, is that questions of leadership and power are decided in these or similar ways: The sayyid or shaykh must be the most valiant and the most generous.

The second articulation of the archaic economy is a larger-scale economy of return. Here there are many goods in circulation—the camel is only mentioned in these contexts as a means of transport—which follow in an annually repeated movement circumscribing the entire peninsula. If the economy of waste reminds us of the potlatch of the American Pacific Northwest, the economy of return reminds us of the *kula*, the twin cycles of exchange described by Malinowski in the

western Pacific.<sup>58</sup> Although this return was connected with generosity and gift-giving, it did not require that the participants know one another and did not easily allow for any individual to establish or express domination over others. Despite the apparent contradiction between return and waste, these two must have coexisted for a long time.

There is reason to believe that the notion of return was gaining strength in the centuries just before Islam. In those same years a new group was emerging—the poor—both a cause and an effect of dislocation and the weakening of old ties. On the one hand, the sa‘alik poets object, in words and actions, to this state of affairs; while on the other hand, it seems (though it remains to be proved) that the acts of generosity in Arabia just before Islam, as described by Bravmann, are aimed increasingly at recipients outside the donors’ own groups.

One thing to emerge from all this is the importance of the annual fairs at ‘Ukaz and neighboring locales. There the wasteful and return trends came together, with minimal violence, beyond the domination of any individual or group, and on a pan-Arab basis. In these and other ways the annual fairs were precursors of Islam.

This brings us back to the historiographical dilemma of Meccan trade. Even though I cannot resolve that dilemma, I can suggest that the rise of Islam brought together two things that had been hatching more or less independently of one another for some time. One of these was the growing idea of circulation as return, receiving its geographical expression in an idealized, constantly moving cycle of markets culminating in the fair of ‘Ukaz and the pilgrimage. The second was a change in the way goods and power were distributed locally, resulting in the brutal fact of poverty: not that there was any more or less objective need in Arabia than before, but rather that this new category was now growing for a number of reasons that remain to be spelled out. This category of poor had counterparts in the settled societies of the Mediterranean and Fertile Crescent, and so we see the entrance into Arabia of such concepts as ‘sadaqa’ and ‘zakat.’ Meanwhile, older Arab concepts relating to distribution and redistribution underwent a transformation that resulted in the charitable practices and in the broader economy of poverty, including the return of wealth, which have characterized Islamic societies ever since.

## Notes

1. The phrase is borrowed from the European medievalist G. Todeschini. See his “‘Quantum valet?’ Alle origini di un’economia della povertà,” *Bullettino dell’Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medioevo* 98 (1992): 173–234; and his *Il prezzo della salvezza. Lessici medievali del pensiero economico* (Rome: La Nuova Italia Scientifica, 1994). See also L. K. Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978).

2. M. Bonner, "Definitions of Poverty and the Rise of the Muslim Urban Poor," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 3rd series, 6 (1996): 339–340. For a critique of this article, see Ingrid Mattson's contribution to this volume (chapter 2).

3. The hadith may be more closely defined as authoritative sayings and deeds attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, but also in some cases going back to those around the Prophet (the Companions) and to authoritative figures of the next generations (the Successors). These were transmitted orally, from quite early on with the support of written texts. After a few generations these written collections of hadith became numerous and voluminous.

4. *Ruddu l-sa'il wa-law bi-ra's al-qata*. Muhammad b. Isma'il al-Bukhari, *Jami'* (Leiden: Brill, 1862–1908), 1:352, zakat 2; 1:369, zakat 41; 1:380, zakat 63; Bonner, "Definitions," 339, n. 16.

5. Malik, *Muwatta'* (Cairo: 'Isa al-Babi al-Halabi, 1370/1951), 2:282, zakat 26, nos. 49, 50; Bukhari, *Jami'* 1:379, zakat 59; Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, *Musnad* (Bulaq: al-Matba'a al-Amiriyya, 1313; reprint, Beirut, 1389/1969), 1:25, 2:55.

6. F. Løkkegaard, "Fay'," *EF*, 2:870; and his *Islamic Taxation in the Classic Period* (Copenhagen: Branner and Korch, 1950); W. Schmucker, *Untersuchungen zu einigen wichtigen bodenrechtlichen Konsequenzen der islamischen Eroberungsbewegung* (Bonn: Selbstverlag des orientalischen Seminars der Universität, 1972),

7. At 69:7–9, 74:11–15, and numerous other places.

8. O. Carré, *Mystique et politique: lecture révolutionnaire du Koran par Sayyid Qutb* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1984), 152f.

9. C. Décobert, *Le médiant et le combattant. L'institution de l'islam* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1991), esp. 238f.

10. On calls for almsgiving in the earliest layer of the Quran, see M. W. Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), 72f. On the ridda wars, see E. Shoufani, *Al-Riddah and the Muslim Conquest of Arabia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973); translation of Tabari's chronicle covering the ridda is by F. Donner, *The Conquest of Arabia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

11. G. W. Heck, "Gold Mining in Arabia and the Rise of the Islamic State," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 42 (1999): 364–395.

12. A. Noth, *Quellenkritische Studien* (Bonn: Selbstverlag des orientalischen Seminars der Universität, 1973); new version, based on a translation by M. Bonner and in collaboration with L. Conrad, entitled *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition: A Source-Critical Study* (Princeton, N. J.: Darwin Press, 1994).

13. Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*, 72–73.

14. *Ibid.*, 75, 82, referring to volume 1 of I. Goldziher's *Muhammedanische Studien* (Halle: M. Niemeyer, 1888). A translation of this book has been published: *Muslim Studies*, ed. Stern, trans. S. M. Stern and C. M. Barber (London: Allen and Unwin, 1966).

15. W. M. Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: S.M.: Clarendon Press, 1956), 250–260.

16. Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*, 3.

17. M. Rodinson, *Mahomet* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1968). A translation of this book has been published: A. Carter, trans. *Muhammad* (New York: Pantheon, 1971); R. Simon,

*Meccan Trade and Islam: Problems of Origin and Structure* (Budapest: Akademiai Kiadó, 1989); M. Ibrahim, *Merchant Capital and Islam* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), with observations on Meccan poverty within the context of capital accumulation by the Meccan leadership. Earlier work on Meccan trade, going back to Lammens, is summarized by Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*, 3, and by P. Crone in *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 231.

18. Set out in *Muhammad at Mecca*, xi–xvi.

19. Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 231.

20. *Ibid.*, 90.

21. *Ibid.*, 111; see also 203–230.

22. These include Ibrahim, *Merchant Capital*; J. Chabbi, *Le seigneur des tribus. L'Islam de Mahomet* (Paris: Noësis, 1997); Décobert, *Le mendiant*; and M. Bamyeh, *The Social Origins of Islam: Mind, Economy, Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

23. The term *revisionist*—used by J. Koren and Y. Nevo in “Methodological Approaches to Islamic Studies,” *Der Islam* 68 (1991): 87–101, as well as by Décobert and others—has acquired currency, even though the revisionists themselves mostly have not adopted the term.

24. S. Bashear, “On the Origins and Development of the Meaning of *Zakat* in Early Islam,” *Arabica* 40 (1993): 84–113. See also the articles in *EP* on “Sadaka” (A. Zysow), 9:708–716, and “Zakat” (A. Zysow), 11:406–422; and Timur Kuran’s contribution to this volume (chapter 14).

25. Sadaqa and zakat do not appear in the massive concordance by M. Arazi and S. Masalha (*Six Early Arab Poets: New Edition and Concordance* [Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Max Schloessinger Memorial Series, 1999]); nor in the important essay by M. M. Bravmann (“The Surplus of Property: An Early Arab Social Concept,” *Der Islam* 38 [1962]: 28–50, also in *The Spiritual Background of Early Islam* [Leiden: Brill, 1972]: 229–253). On the other hand, see E. Landau-Tasserion, “Asad from Jahiliyya to Islam,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 6 (1985): 13; Bamyeh, *Social Origins of Islam*; and Ibrahim, *Merchant Capital*. However, references to pre-Islamic sadaqa in the latter two do not hold up to scrutiny.

26. These two trends appear in the article by the late Bashear (“On the Origins and Development”).

27. Décobert, *Le mendiant*, 28–29.

28. *Ibid.*, 33f., 181–185.

29. See note 3 above.

30. For an example, see M. Bonner, “*Ja’ail* and Holy War in Early Islam,” *Der Islam* 68 (1991): 45–64; and his *Aristocratic Violence and Holy War: Studies in the Jihad and the Arab-Byzantine Frontier* (New Haven, Conn.: American Oriental Society, 1996), 11–42.

31. A strategy along these lines has been suggested by J. E. Wansbrough in *Lingua Franca in the Mediterranean* (Richmond, U.K.: Curzon Press, 1996), 55–58; see also his reviews of Crone’s *Meccan Trade* in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 52 (1989): 339–340, and of Robert Simon’s *Meccan Trade* in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 53 (1990): 510–511.



32. Modern reworkings of tribal data extracted from medieval Arabic genealogical sources include Werner Caskel, *Ġamharat an-nasab. Das genealogische Werk des Hišam ibn Muhammad al-Kalbi* (Leiden: Brill, 1966); T. Nishio et al., *A Dictionary of Arab Tribes* (Tokyo: Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 1999). For a dense description of tribal occupation of territory and local networks, see M. Lecker, *The Banu Sulaym* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press 1989).

33. On this see Noth, *Early Arabic Historical Tradition*.

34. P. Crone, *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

35. For a less optimistic view, see G. R. Hawting's review of Lecker's *Banu Sulaym* in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 54 (1990): 359–362; and his *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 111–129.

36. *Ta'aqur, ta'ati, munajada, tanajud, mumajada, mijad.*

37. I discussed this practice in a paper, "God's Camel: Competitive Feasting in Ancient Arabia and Early Islam," at the American Oriental Society in Philadelphia, March 1996. J. Stetkevych has also taken up this topic, noting the parallel with the potlatch in *Muhammad and the Golden Bough: Reconstructing Arabian Myth* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996). On sacrifice, the main authority is still J. Chelhod, *Le sacrifice chez les Arabes: recherches sur l'évolution des rites sacrificiels en Arabie occidentale* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1955). In referring to the "classic" potlatch of the Pacific Northwest, I mean the idea that is commonly held about that potlatch as the exemplar of self-destructive, competitive feasting and gift-giving. Much recent research indicates otherwise.

38. Yaqut, *Buldan*, ed. F. Wüstenfeld (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1866–1877), 3:430–431; Ibn Habib, *al-Muḥabbar*, ed. I. Lichtenstadter (Hyderabad: Matba'at Jamiyat Da'irat al-Ma'arif al-'Uthmaniyah, 1942), 142; J. Wellhausen, *Reste arabischen Heidentums* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1927), 90; Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, 1:62; M. J. Kister, "Ghalib b. Sa'sa'a," *EF*, 2:998.

39. A. J. Wensinck, *Concordance et indices de la Tradition musulmane* (Leiden: Brill, 1962), 4:296.

40. Bravmann, "The Surplus of Property."

41. Bonner, "Definitions," 337.

42. M. Mauss, "Essai sur le don. Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques," *Sociologie et anthropologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950), 30–186.

43. An important question is whether the challenger in ta'aqur is a member of the group. As far as I can tell, sometimes he is and sometimes he is not.

44. Simon, *Meccan Trade*, 78–91.

45. Abu 'Ali Ahmad al-Marzuqi, *Kitab al-azmina wal-amkina* (Hyderabad: Da'irat al-Ma'arif al-'Uthmaniyya, 1332/1914), 2:161–170; Ibn Habib, *al-Muḥabbar*, 263–268; Ahmad al-Ya'qubi, *Tā'rikh* (Beirut: Dar Sadir lil-tiba'a wal-nashr, 1379/1960), 1:270–171; S. al-Afghani, *Aswaq al-'Arab fi l-jabiliyya wal-Islam* (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1960); Simon, *Meccan Trade*, 78–91; Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 170–175, 183.

46. Abu Muhammad al-Hasan al-Hamdani, *Sifāt Jazirat al-'Arab* (Leiden: Brill, 1884–1901; reprint, 1968), 179–180.

47. The tradition on the markets does not make the Arabs and their merchandise complete the circle by going back to the starting point of Dumat al-Jandal in the north.
48. Yaqut, *Muʿjam al-buldan*, s.v. “Ukaz”; Wellhausen, *Reste*, 88–91.
49. al-Marzuqī, *Kitāb al-azmina wal-amkina*, 2:165.
50. Wellhausen, *Reste*, 92; “niemand war hier Herr im Hause.”
51. On the relation between Mecca, the pilgrimage, and the fairs, see Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 170ff.
52. Bravmann, “Surplus,” in *Spiritual Background*, 237.
53. See A. Arazi’s article “*Suʿluk*” in *EF*, 9:863–868, and literature cited there.
54. ‘Urwa b. al-Ward, *Diwan* (Cairo: n.p., 1966), 91; Abu l-Faraj al-Isfahani, *Kitāb al-aghani* (Cairo: Matba‘at Dar al-Kutub al-Misriyya, 1927–1958), 3:75; ‘A. ‘A. Salim, *Tārīkh al-‘Arab fi ‘asr al-jabiliyya* (Beirut: Dar al-Nahda al-‘Arabiyya, n.d.), 439–440.
55. Abu l-Faraj, *Kitāb al-aghani*, 3:78. At 3:81, when the Banu ‘Abs cried out to him, “O father of the *sā‘alik*, help us!” ‘Urwa “had mercy on them and went out raiding with them,” again without taking the fourth or fifth of the spoils. On the sayyid’s share, see A. Morabia, *Le ġihād dans l’Islam médiéval* (Paris: A. Michel, 1993), 40; Løkkegaard, “Fay’,” 2:1005.
56. Ibrahim, *Merchant Capital*, 145–146.
57. G. Garbini, “Preistoria e protostoria,” in *I primi arabi*, ed. B. Chiesa et al. (Milan: Jaca Book, 1994), 11–18.
58. B. Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (New York: Routledge, 1922).