

Studying Trade and Local Economies in Early Islamicate Societies: Responses to the ‘Long-Divergence’ Debate from Islamic History*

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With this article I take the opportunity to discuss recent scholarship on trade and the economy in early Islamic history (seventh–eleventh centuries CE), at a moment in which research on these subjects has become lively once again.¹ My discussion is limited to a selection of studies that deal with the history of trade in Islamicate societies and are concerned with problems of geography and comparability. The projects and publications I have selected belong in a much broader pool of studies; however, they may be considered representative of recent trends in scholarship on Islamic history and they have the quality of raising historiographical reflections that researchers interested in economic and social histories, even if focusing on other regions or periods, may also find important.²

Behind a renewed interest in economic matters in early Islamic history is a thorny matter of debate: that is, the idea that we might identify historical institutional patterns

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¹ See MAYA SHATZMILLER, ‘The Economic History of the Medieval Middle East: Strengths, Witnesses, and the Challenges Ahead,’ *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 44, no. 3 (2012): 529–31.

² This article focuses on the period 600–1000 CE and it aims at discussing trends in recent scholarship. For this reason, the terminology used here also relates to academic fields and historiography. Broadly following Marshall Hodgson, in what follows I use the adjective ‘Islamicate’ when referring to the societies, cultures, and literatures developed inside and characterising Islamic polities and regions in the period under discussion; and ‘Islamic’ for objects or concepts that refer more directly to Islamic rule as well as to Islam as a religious, a political, and a philosophical system. The rationale of this distinction in this article is not to separate religion from other spheres, but rather to more easily embrace in one term both Muslims and non-Muslims and the sources they produced, e.g., concerning trade or economy. In this article, I refer to Islamic history as a field of studies and as its historical period of focus, subsuming things both Islamicate and Islamic. Similarly, I refer to the Middle East (even if more precise geographic terms may be chosen) both as a region and as its related field of studies. See MARSHALL HODGSON, *The Venture of Islam*, Volume I: *The Classical Age of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 3–100; ZACHARY LOCKMAN, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); CHASE ROBINSON, ‘Introduction,’ in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, ed. Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1–16.

to explain the modern configuration of Muslim-majority countries in relation to the West. This general idea serves to situate the Islamic world, broadly defined, or the Middle East, more specifically, within a broader theorisation about the relative development of different regions or cultures through the study of institutions. The debate about Islam's historical place in this framework is an old one; it goes back to Weberian concepts about sovereignty, rationalism, and institutions, and it is connected to institutionalism as a tradition of studies. The history of institutions, in this respect, has been understood as a key to explain why the economies and political systems of some regions developed in one way, while others did not, or to compare the 'path' exceptionally taken by Western polities to those not taken by non-Western ones.³ Despite its many reiterations, the debate continues to be important in works of economic history, political science, and political economy. In recent years it has been raised at times with policy concerns in mind. The successful book by Tamim Ansary, *Destiny Disrupted*, is a good example of its having trickled down also to popular literature about Islam and the West.⁴ However, I raise it here as a matter of historiographical relevance, in particular, regarding early Islamic history and the medieval Middle East, and because of its capacity to sway historical questions.

The search for the historical roots of the Middle East's 'difference' from the West, which has developed mostly in economic history and political science, has encouraged the study of long-term trajectories between Islamic and European institutions in comparative fashion. In addition, the debate has pushed some historians of early Islamicate societies to explore also different kinds of connections, in particular, by evading Europe-centred geographies, and by downsizing global patterns to local and regional contexts. In moving away from broad comparative studies and bringing the examination of longitudinal 'paths' down to smaller scales of analysis, some were able to bypass altogether the question of capitalism's origins, which largely lies at the centre of Europe's 'exceptional path' thesis.⁵ In this, of course, scholars studying Islamic history have been aided and inspired by the work of those studying the early modern and the modern period, global history, and Mediterranean studies. Yet, I would like to suggest that the debate's reverberation in Islamic history has provoked responses that historians in other fields might also find helpful, as they similarly tackle

³ For an introduction to the debate, see HURİ İSLAMOĞLU, 'A Proposal for Global Economic History: Beyond the Histories of Stagnation and Deficiencies to "Living" Histories of Possibilities,' in *Histories from Below: A Tribute in Memory of Donald Quataert*, eds Selim Karahasanoğlu and Deniz Cenk Demir (Istanbul: İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2016), 189–96; JOEL BEININ, 'Introduction.' In *A Critical Political Economy of the Middle East and North Africa*, eds Beinin, Bassam Haddad, and Sherene Seikaly (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), 1–24. The phrase 'path not taken' was used, for example, by Jared Rubin: JARED RUBIN, *Rulers, Religion, and Riches: Why the West Got Rich and the Middle East Did Not* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 76.

⁴ TAMIM ANSARY, *Destiny Disrupted: A History of the World Through Islamic Eyes* (New York: PublicAffairs Books, 2009).

⁵ For an introduction on Eurocentrism and the question of capitalism, see JANET L. ABU LUGHOD, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 3–20; PRASANAN PARTHASARATHI, *Why Europe Grew Rich and Asia Did Not: Global Economic Divergence, 1600–1850* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1–18.

with the problem, after having identified Eurocentric models in contemporary historiography, of how to substantially uproot them from historical practice.

The ‘long divergence’ theory, early Islamic history, and comparative history

In recent scholarship, the idea that the separation between the Middle East and the West would have deep roots has been linked especially to the ground-breaking book of political scientist Timur Kuran, *The Long Divergence*, from 2011. Its emblematic title evoked Kenneth Pomeranz’s important study from two years earlier, titled *The Great Divergence*, which compared economic developments in Europe and in Asia.⁶ While Pomeranz advanced historical hypotheses to explain the exceptional economic growth of north-western Europe with the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century, Kuran and other scholars studying the Middle East have looked at the question of European ‘exceptionalism’ from a reversed angle. Namely, they have asked what prevented the Middle East, unlike Europe, from developing institutions that were conducive to growth or development. By ‘long divergence’ theory here I do not refer to a single hypothesis or study, but rather to a wide framework of analysis built on historical cases and by several authors. Put simply, the ‘long divergence’ theory is a framework that suggests that the modern Middle East has been stalled by inefficient Islamic institutions. Islamic law, Muslim religious authorities, or specific legal instruments are pinpointed in various studies as responsible for impeding growth or modernisation processes in the long run, even though they are often thought to have favoured premodern forms of commercialisation.⁷

The ‘long divergence’ theory about the Middle East is consequential to historical scholarship not least because it involves expertise on a variety of regions and sources. Insofar as its proponents refer to Islamic institutions that developed in the first centuries of Islam, the theory invites engagement from experts in early and medieval

⁶ TIMUR KURAN, *The Long Divergence: How Islamic Law Held Back the Middle East* (Princeton University Press, 2011); KENNETH POMERANZ, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). Pomeranz’s book compared the development of north-western Europe to the ‘paths’ taken by China and Japan, yet without assuming European normativity.

⁷ Some representative studies are KURAN, *Long Divergence*; TIMUR KURAN, ‘Why the Middle East is Economically Underdeveloped: Historical Mechanisms of Institutional Stagnation,’ *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 18, no. 3 (2003): 71–90; RUBIN, *Rulers*; LISA BLAYDES, ‘Mamluks, Property Rights, and Economic Development: Lessons from Medieval Egypt,’ *Politics and Society* 47, no. 3 (2019): 395–424. As Fahad Bishara wrote, ‘historians have placed a good deal of explanatory weight on Islamic law as one of the primary engines’ behind the ‘world of trade’ created after the Muslim conquests: Bishara, ‘Histories of Law,’ 2. Surveying the history and various versions of the ‘long divergence’ theory is beyond the scope of this article; for more detailed discussions, see MAYA SHATZMILLER, ‘Recent Trends in Middle East Economic History: Cultural Factors and Structural Change in the Medieval Period, 650–1500. Part One,’ *History Compass* 16, no. 12 (2018): 1–6; FAHAD A. BISHARA, ‘Histories of Law and Economic Life in the Islamic World,’ *History Compass* 18 (2020): 1–10; SASCHA BECKER, JARED RUBIN, and LUDGER WOESSMANN, ‘Religion in Economic History: A Survey,’ *IZA Institute of Labor Economics: Discussion Papers* (2020), <https://www.iza.org/publications/dp/13371/religion-in-economic-history-a-survey>, accessed 10 February 2022; ROGER OWEN, ‘Review of The Long Divergence: How Islamic Law Held Back the Middle East by Timur Kuran,’ *Middle East Report* 260 (2011): 47–48.

Islamic history. The search for ancient points of fracture between the West and the Middle East has brought together in new comparative syntheses specialised work about different contexts, including early and medieval Islamic states. Perhaps even more fundamentally, any formulation of the theory requires seeing different regions and the institutions characterising them as historically comparable. In other words, the theory emerges from a convergence of interests across disciplines and is built on comparative studies. Chronicles and court records in Latin, Arabic, or Ottoman Turkish, for instance, have been recently used for comparing the presence and the absence of concepts such as representative democracy or constitutionalism in different countries. One example is the comparison of political institutions in the Mamluk sultanate and in England under the Plantagenets in a study by Lisa Blaydes and Eric Chaney in which they tried to explain why the ‘checks-and-balances’ principle of government arose in northern Europe but could *not* have arisen in Egypt, also citing the work of historians that might lend support to the theory, such as early publications by renowned Islamic history scholar Patricia Crone.⁸

There is, in sum, a strong relationship between comparative history and institutionalist approaches, in which patterns of growth are foregrounded by institutional patterns. That relationship influences the historian’s choice of what to compare. The history of trade is key in this regard because it has been at the centre of many studies comparing different economic trajectories, with an eye to explaining the ‘rise of the West,’ and tying together historical and political analyses of development.⁹ One important example in Islamic history is Avner Greif’s work on medieval trade and institutions on the ‘path’ towards modernity.¹⁰ Not only what *things*, but also what *regions* one compares is a choice partly driven by the questions at the core of the ‘long divergence’ theory. In the 2000s and 2010s a renewed interest in the Mediterranean has encouraged scholars to test the comparability of Christian and Islamic institutions in late antiquity, early Islam, and medieval European history within a Mediterranean framework.¹¹ Significantly, the reception of Kuran’s book has been accompanied by

⁸ LISA BLAYDES and ERIC CHANEY, ‘The Feudal Revolution and Europe’s Rise: Political Divergence of the Christian West and the Muslim World Before 1500 CE,’ *The American Political Science Review* 107, no. 1 (2013): 16–34. On issues of method regarding the use of historical sources in political science, see, for example, IAN LUSTICK, ‘History, Historiography, and Political Science: Multiple Historical Records and the Problem of Selection Bias,’ *American Political Science Review* 90, no. 3 (1996): 605–18.

⁹ See HURİ İSLAMOĞLU, ‘Economic History in Middle Eurasia,’ in *Routledge Handbook of Global Economic History*, eds Francesco Boldizzoni and Pat Hudson (London: Routledge, 2015); and İSLAMOĞLU, ‘A Proposal.’

¹⁰ AVNER GREIF, *Institutions and the Path to the Modern Economy: Lessons from Medieval Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹¹ See, for example, JOHN TOLAN, GILLES VEINSTEIN, and HENRY LAURENS, eds, *Europe and the Islamic World: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), and JOHN HUDSON and ANA RODRÍGUEZ, eds, *Diverging Paths? The Shapes and Power of Institutions in Medieval Christendom and Islam* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2014); NÉRI DE BARROS ALMEIDA and ROBSON DELLA TORRE, eds, *O Mediterrâneo medieval reconsiderado* (Campinas: Editora da Unicamp, 2019). See also the recent study of Mediterranean trade by AHMET USTA, *Hilal ile Haç Arasında Hayatlar: Ortaçağ Akdenizi’nde Ticaret ve Tüccarlar* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınevi, 2022). Another example might be CHRIS WICKHAM, *Framing the Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), which to

discussions concerning earlier theories of ‘divergence’ centred on the Mediterranean trade. Thus, historians of medieval Europe and the Byzantine empire have been again debating Henri Pirenne’s 1937 thesis about ‘Muhammad and Charlemagne,’ according to which the Muslim conquests had severed trade in the Mediterranean, thereby ultimately allowing for the rise of capitalist entrepreneurship in medieval Europe. As Bonnie Effros has remarked, Pirenne’s theses have become newly influential in medieval and Mediterranean studies in the twenty-first century. Pirenne’s work has been recently rediscussed also by political scientists and economists, betraying the enduring relevance of his theses on medieval trade for studies of comparative development.¹²

In sum, the work of political scientists, economists, and policy experts interested in the ‘long divergence’ debate in the last two decades has developed through longitudinal comparisons between institutions in Europe and in the Middle East. The ‘long divergence’ as an interpretive framework has favoured historical comparisons within a Mediterranean setting. In turn, a renewed focus on the Mediterranean in recent years has contributed to tie with a double knot the study of premodern institutions, such as those related to trade, to the question of capitalism’s origins.

Conversely, the theory’s influence on and tenability for historical research is challenged when historians offer alternative takes on comparability. It matters if historical research is broadly more oriented towards comparisons or rather towards connections. Beyond individual case-studies, the ‘long divergence’ theory has been based on the possibility of comparative history and has been built by tracing comparisons between regions and institutions, which are seen as developing in parallel or next to each other. On the other hand, writing connected histories, in many a historian’s craft, has created the possibility of weaving together the history of premodern institutions through their diverse expressions in a variety of local contexts.¹³ Regarding trade in the early Islamic period, Effros noticed that Pirenne’s critics in the twentieth century focused almost exclusively on the economic arguments of his ‘divergence’ thesis, whereas they did not question the ‘larger civilisational claims’ that Pirenne had made about the relative place of Europe in world history. As she wrote, ‘medievalists should be mindful of the impact of Europe’s colonial relations with North Africa and the Middle East in the late nineteenth and early twentieth

some extent incorporates in a Mediterranean framework also early Islamic rule. On Mediterranean studies, see RAMZI ROUGHY, ‘A Mediterranean of Relations for the Medieval Maghrib: Historiography in Question,’ *Al-Masaq* 29, 3 (2017): 201–20.

¹² BONNIE EFFROS, ‘The Enduring Attraction of the Pirenne Thesis,’ *Speculum* 92, no. 1 (2017): 184–208; ERIK THOEN and ERIC VANHOUTE, ‘Pirenne and Economic and Social Theory: Influences, Methods and Reception,’ *Belgisch tijdschrift voor nieuwste geschiedenis* 41, no. 3 (2011): 323–53.

¹³ See SANJAY SUBRAHMANYAM, *Connected History: Essays and Arguments* (New York: Verso, 2022). I wish to thank Caterina Bori for making me aware of Giuseppe Marcocci’s introduction to the 2014 Italian translation and edition of various articles by Sanjay Subrahmanyam (published as *Mondi connessi*), which also discusses comparisons vs. connections: GIUSEPPE MARCOCCI, ‘Gli intrecci della storia. La modernità globale di Sanjay Subrahmanyam,’ in Subrahmanyam, *Mondi connessi: La storia oltre l'eurocentrismo (secoli XVI–XVIII)*, tr. and ed. by Giuseppe Marcocci (Rome: Carocci Editore, 2014), 9–22.

century on [Pirenne's book] *Mahomet et Charlemagne*.¹⁴ In recent scholarship on Islamic trade and economy, however, we see a wide variety of approaches that may help us overcome those deeper 'civilisational claims,' particularly by trying different scales of analysis. Some researchers have engaged directly with the 'long divergence' theory by undertaking comparative studies that undermine its empirical bases and by putting forward alternative explanations; while others have weakened the theory's premises by offering alternative views on institutions and geography. It is with those responses that the rest of this article is concerned.¹⁵

Early Islamic history and the question of economic decline

Much work depicting the Islamic Middle East as historically bound to become stagnant due to inefficient Islamic institutions comes from economic historians. It seems therefore significant that one of the major challenges to the theory's empirical bases in the last decade has been raised from within economic history. According to some, the proposition that Islamic institutions as such would have stalled economic growth does not rest on sound empirical grounds.¹⁶ Moreover, while most previous discussions on the 'long divergence' had focused on the Mamluk, Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires and on the early modern period, recent economic historical studies have tested the theory by looking at the economies of the earliest Islamic states.

One important research project in this respect is the *Measuring the Medieval Islamic Economy Project* led by Maya Shatzmiller at Western University.¹⁷ The project has been collecting data about topics such as monetisation, urbanisation, and labour in various regions of the medieval Middle East, especially Syria and Egypt, with the goal of assessing economic performance and structural changes from the rise of Islam to the early modern period. Its preliminary results challenge the idea that Muslim state authorities or religious elites as such had a generally negative impact on economic performance and therefore also that there is a necessary correlation between Islamic state institutions and economic stagnation or decline.¹⁸

Economic historians like Shatzmiller have challenged the 'long divergence' theory by working from within the same approach that provided arguments to support it. As Shatzmiller writes in a recent article about the early Islamic period, 'economic

¹⁴ EFFROS, 'Enduring Attraction,' 189.

¹⁵ A further line of research, which is not discussed in this article, consists of studies of early Islamic institutions in a historical perspective but targeting contemporary policy issues, finance, and banking practices. See, for example, SEYED K. SADR, *The Economy of the Earliest Islamic Period* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). For a critical discussion, see İSLAMOĞLU, 'Economic History.'

¹⁶ See ŞEVKET PAMUK and MAYA SHATZMILLER, 'Plagues, Wages, and Economic Change in the Islamic Middle East, 700–1500,' *Journal of Economic History* 74, no. 1 (2014): 196–229; MAYA SHATZMILLER, 'Recent Trends in Middle East Economic History: Cultural Factors and Structural Change in the Medieval Period, 650–1500. Part Two,' *History Compass* 16, no. 12 (2018): 1–11; and SHATZMILLER, 'Structural Change and Economic Development in the Islamic Middle East 700–1500: Population Levels and Property Rights,' *Scottish Journal of Political Economy* 69, no. 1 (2022): 4–22.

¹⁷ See the project's website *Measuring the Medieval Islamic Economy*, <https://www.medievalislamicconomy.uwo.ca/>, accessed 15 March 2022.

¹⁸ See SHATZMILLER, 'Recent Trends: Part One' and 'Part Two.'

theory and empirical evidence’ may be used ‘to show that the Middle East economy was powered by a series of changes to structural factors and that these and other changes to the economy implemented by the Islamic state [i.e., the Umayyad and the Abbasid state administrations] led to measurable improvement in standards of living and demonstrable growth in economic indicators.’¹⁹ At the same time, economic historians on both ends of the debate – either arguing or questioning that early Islamic institutions were likely to stall economic growth – have approached the subject with similar methods. In general, they have accepted the Neo-institutionalist principle that economic performance is linked to the performance of institutions. In fact, in the 2010s the New Institutional Economics inspired by Douglass North’s and Robert P. Thomas’s ideas, more than any other approach, appear to have sustained both studies rejecting and studies supporting arguments about the long-term economic decline of the Middle East, one that would be rooted in early Islamic history and institutions.²⁰ Following North’s foundational work, scholars on both sides have aimed at analysing the efficiency of institutions and institutions as tools for efficiency, focusing in particular on the role of the state in enforcing property rights – even as they came to differ on how to evaluate the impact of religion and religious values on the economy.

The history of trade is central in this regard because it has been used both for formulating and for disproving arguments about the long-term economic performance of Islamic states based on the study of early Islamic institutions. For example, in a widely-cited book from 2006 Avner Greif ambitiously proposed to integrate Neo-Institutionalism and economic game theory through a series of studies on medieval trade.²¹ One of the book’s main case-studies concerns a group of merchants whose letters were found in the Cairo Genizah, dating from the Fatimid period.²² The Genizah letters were used to illustrate the point that the merchants of the Fatimid caliphate operated in the absence of external institutional structures, autonomously, and through informal agreements. These conditions are considered incompatible with economic growth according to the Neo Institutional Economics, since it is postulated

¹⁹ SHATZMILLER, ‘Recent Trends: Part One,’ 2.

²⁰ On neo-institutional economics, see DOUGLASS NORTH, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). The influence of the Neo Institutional Economics certainly extends beyond Islamic history. Studies of ancient, late-antique, and medieval economies based on the New Institutional Economics boomed in the 2000s, and the trend does not seem to subside: see PETER FIBIGER BANG, ‘The Ancient Economy and New Institutional Economics,’ *The Journal of Roman Studies* 99 (2009): 194–206; JÉRÔME MAUCOURANT, ‘New Institutional Economics and History,’ *Journal of Economic Issues* 46, no. 1 (2012): 193–208; TACO TERPSTRA, *Trade in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 13–32.

²¹ GREIF, *Institutions*. For responses, see JESSICA GOLDBERG, *Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean: The Geniza Merchants and their Business World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 144–150; GREGORY CLARK, ‘A Review of Avner Greif’s *Institutions and the Path to the Modern Economy: Lessons from Medieval Trade*,’ *Journal of Economic Literature* 45 (2007): 727–43.

²² The Genizah materials consist in about 400,000 fragments of documents and manuscripts in Arabic, Judeo-Arabic, Hebrew, and other languages, found inside or associated with the Ben Ezra synagogue in Cairo, where they had been dismissed and preserved over time. For an introduction, see the *Princeton Geniza Lab*’s website, <https://genizalab.princeton.edu/>, accessed 15 March 2022. On the Genizah and economic history, see JESSICA GOLDBERG, ‘On Reading Goitein’s *A Mediterranean Society: A View From Economic History*,’ *Mediterranean Historical Review* 26, no. 2 (2011): 171–86.

that markets emerge only where and when institutions protecting property rights and enforcing contracts are in place. According to Greif's study, this was not the case in the Fatimid caliphate.²³

Thus, Greif's study of the Genizah letters used historical sources on trade to stress one central tenet of the New Institutional Economics, namely, that the efficiency of state institutions depends on the state's ability to enforce property rights. He concluded that Muslim authorities obstructed the formation of agency relations and did not protect property rights; consequently, Islamic polities like the Fatimid caliphate were unable to foster economic growth. Other studies, however, have leveraged the same economic theory to argue that, on the contrary, Islamic state institutions did not obstruct economic growth in the medieval period. Based on sources including chronicles, coins, and documents, Shatzmiller argued that in the Umayyad and the early Abbasid period the state authorities did enforce property rights and contributed to driving market expansion. Moreover, she suggested that the early Muslim rulers favoured commercialisation, for example, by enforcing contractual relations. She noticed that the 'liquidity and unified coinage system' introduced under the Umayyads, and then maintained by later dynasties, 'mutually reinforced urban and rural markets and encouraged inter-provincial trade.'²⁴

This double-edged function of Neo-institutionalist approaches seems interesting because, at its inception, North's studies aimed at finding economic and historical explanations for the 'rise of the Western world' and for Europe's economic 'divergence' from other regions.²⁵ In fact, what seems new in recent scholarship on Islamicate economies is not so much the influence of the New Institutional Economics but rather the fact that discording voices have emerged from within that same scholarly tradition to provide competing narratives of economic growth in the medieval Middle East. It is only recently that the Neo Institutional Economics has become an approach used for contradicting the same Eurocentric notions which provided its initial stimulus. In Islamic history, in particular, the emphasis has shifted from the negative impact of religious elites to the positive impact of administrative elites. For instance, Shatzmiller points out that the state administrations of the Umayyad caliphate undertook policies (e.g., monetisation) and enforced cultural processes (e.g., Arabicisation) that positively affected the economy.²⁶

Another group of economic historians have tackled the 'long divergence' paradigm from a different angle. Among Marxist historians and those broadly falling

²³ GREIF, *Institutions*, 58–90.

²⁴ SHATZMILLER, 'Recent Trends: Part Two,' 2–3.

²⁵ See DOUGLASS NORTH and ROBERT PAUL THOMAS, *The Rise of the Western World: A New Economic History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

²⁶ SHATZMILLER, 'Recent Trends: Part Two.' At the same time, the involvement of Muslim rulers in the economy has not been considered inherently positive regardless of the context and was identified as a limit to the rise of capitalist enterprises in the nineteenth century; see ŞEVKET PAMUK, 'Institutional Change and the Longevity of the Ottoman Empire, 1500–1800,' *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 35, no. 2 (2004): 225–47.

into the tradition of Marxist historiography, the debate on the efficiency of Islamic institutions has reverberated mostly because of its implications for the history of capitalism.²⁷ Here, early Islamicate sources about trade and commerce have become instrumental to argue for a global history of capitalism that would integrate into its narrative a variety of forms of premodern capital, including Islamic ones, also stressing the impact of non-European commerce on European economies. One example is Anievas and Nişancioğlu's interpretation of thirteenth-century Mongol trade.²⁸ Jairus Banaji explains that 'concepts of profit, capital, and the accumulation of capital are all found in the Arabic sources of the ninth to fourteenth centuries.'²⁹ In part, this reading of medieval Islamicate sources attempts to bridge the gap between European and non-European enterprises, again defending the vitality of Islamic institutions. According to Banaji, already in the seventh century CE the Arab Muslim conquerors were 'seeking to dominate existing networks of trade as the Portuguese would do centuries later' and they gave rise to an 'empire of trade' which contributed in various ways to 'the growth of capitalism in the Mediterranean.'³⁰ In this way, a number of economic historians have challenged the Marxian premise that the seed of Europe's 'divergence' would lie in the rise of capitalism in Europe, rather than elsewhere, in multiple places, or at least through the essential contribution of economic actors outside Europe. On the other hand, the question remains as to why such premodern forms of merchant capitalism did not turn into modern capitalism. In a recent book, Banaji refers to two main historical explanations, citing Malise Ruthven and Eric Mielants, to solve the conundrum of what was different in the Islamicate world compared to Europe. One explanation points to the absence of aggressive mercantilism; the other one to the lack of class solidarity among merchants in the Islamic states.³¹ These, as Jessica Goldberg's explained based on Genizah documents, lacked corporate forms of association insofar as they 'did not belong to a single corporate group that was a source of privileges, rules, and bounds of trust.'³² In either case, Banaji points out that the key factor in the rise of modern capitalism was the different way in which state and capital related to each other.³³

As these examples suggest, economic historical studies directly challenging the premises of the 'long divergence' theory – by claiming that early and medieval Islamic institutions were, in fact, not *bound* to cause economic stagnation or decline – have created more room for comparisons between state traditions. An important contribution to the comparative study of premodern economies, largely based on trade

²⁷ See BISHARA, 'Histories of Law.'

²⁸ ALEXANDER ANIEVAS and KEREM NIŞANCIOĞLU, *How the West Came to Rule: The Geopolitical Origins of Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2015), 64–90.

²⁹ JAIRUS BANAJI, 'Islam, the Mediterranean, and the Rise of Capitalism,' *Historical Materialism* 15 (2007): 47–74, qt. 57.

³⁰ BANAJI, 'Islam,' 57–62.

³¹ MALISE RUTHVEN, *Islam in the World*, third ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 122–74; ERIC H. MIELANTS, *The Origins of Capitalism and the 'Rise of the West'* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007), 125–64.

³² GOLDBERG, *Trade and Institutions*, 350.

³³ JAIRUS BANAJI, *A Brief History of Commercial Capitalism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020), 'Appendix.'

history, is Fibiger Bang's 2011 book comparing Roman 'bazaars' to the markets of other empires, including the early Ottoman empire.³⁴ Moreover, such studies have put forward new readings of medieval Islamicate sources, based on the collection of more data on topics like monetisation or labour contracts, and by re-interpreting the sources' own discourse on economic topics such as trade. At the same time, comparative history, institutionalism, and a focus on the origins of capitalism are all elements of continuity in scholarship on Islamicate economic history. In this sense, many of the questions at the core of the 'long divergence' theory have remained the same, even as the debate has given rise to competing answers, now often rejecting the negative judgement of Islam as a religion, and pointing to the vitality of Islamicate economies from New Institutional and Marxist perspectives alike.

The question of institutions

Scholars influenced by the Neo Institutional Economics, as mentioned, tend to approach institutions as 'efficiency-exchanging devices' that people use or with which they interact while competing with each other and trying to minimise their losses.³⁵ Economic historians following other traditions of studies have similarly been influenced by institutionalist approaches, whether deriving more directly from Marx, Braudel, or other foundational authors.³⁶ This helps us explain why so much of the debate has centered on the role of Islamic *institutions* in affecting economic performance and in determining future political choices. In this respect, the strongest rejection of the 'long divergence' theory has come from scholars putting into question the meaning and function of institutions. A number of recent studies on the social and legal histories of the early Islamic period build on Foucault's and especially on Bourdieu's ideas to claim that institutions are politically construed through people's interactions, so that, as Eduardo Manzano Moreno has remarked, we may compare institutions in the light of social, economic, and political relations rather than vice-versa.³⁷ One key feature of the latter approach is that it stresses the distinct relationships and struggles that give shapes to institutions in each historical context.³⁸

Scholars including Gadi Algazi and Manzano Moreno have criticised the influence of the Neo Institutional Economics on history writing by warning that, in measuring the efficiency of very different types of institutions without analysing the

³⁴ PETER FIBIGER BANG, *The Roman Bazaar: A Comparative Study of Trade and Markets in a Tributary Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). For the historiographical context, see FAHAD BISHARA, 'The Bazaar in the History of Global Capitalism,' *Islamic Law Blog* (2020): <https://islamiclaw.blog/2020/04/30/the-bazaar-in-the-history-of-global-capitalism/>, accessed 10 November 2021.

³⁵ THIERRY PÉNARD, 'Game Theory and Institutions,' in *New Institutional Economics*, eds Éric Brousseau and Jean-Michel Glachant, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 158–80, see 159.

³⁶ For an introduction, see İSLAMOĞLU, 'Economic History.'

³⁷ EDUARDO MANZANO MORENO, 'Why Did Islamic Medieval Institutions Become So Different from Western Medieval Institutions?', *Medieval Worlds* 1 (2015): 118–37, see 120–23.

³⁸ The importance of context has been recently underlined also in economic theory, leading to the conclusion that 'divergent paths of development need not imply – nor require – deep differences in economic institutions, for context matters:' PARTHASARATHI, *Why Europe*, 7–16, qt. 2.

power relations underlying them, scholars following this approach risk treating institutions as if they were apolitical; moreover, they risk conflating concepts that are meant to convey different things, confusing institutions for what sociologically may be better defined as organisations, practices, habits, or actions, from which institutions emerge or crystallise. This conflation, some argued, serves Eurocentric and teleological narratives in which the strength and complexity of premodern Islamic institutions is conveniently overlooked. Instead, for the comparison to be historically meaningful, they suggest to contextualise institutions within fields of conflict and negotiation.³⁹ In Huri İslamoğlu's words, 'institutions are viewed here not as neutral instruments in the service of given social-political interests, state or market imperatives, but as part of political processes rooted in the struggles of different actors.'⁴⁰ As an example of this trend, in a study from 2014, Eduardo Manzano Moreno and Susana Narotzki looked at the institution of the *hisba* and the official called *muhtasib*, which historically have been variously related to the regulation of urban markets and marketplaces in Islamic polities. The two authors aimed at tracing the effect of moral economic principles in early Islamicate societies, one in which economic, political, and religious goals were carried out simultaneously by officials like the *muhtasib*.⁴¹

Such a heightened level of confrontation in the 2010s – this struggle over the nature and function of institutions – has had the welcome effect of generating more methodological reflection about how to study Islamic and Islamicate institutions. Moreover, it has produced a body of new specialised studies on particular institutions and on their connection to social relations.⁴² One significant example comes from the collaborative project *Documents and Institutions in the Medieval Middle East* (2014–2017), connected to Princeton University's *Geniza Lab*, and centered on the study of legal and administrative documents.⁴³ As another example, a newly-started research project on water management in early Islamic cities, led by Maaïke van Berkel at Radboud University, combines questions about environmental and urban histories with an

³⁹ See GADI ALGAZI, 'Comparing Medieval Institutions,' in *Diverging Paths?*, eds Hudson and Rodríguez, 3–15; EDUARDO MANZANO MORENO and SUSANA NAROTZKI, 'The Hisba, the Muhtasib, and the Struggle Over Political Power and a Moral Economy: An Enquiry into Institutions,' in *Diverging Paths?* eds Hudson and Rodríguez, 30–56; MANZANO MORENO, 'Islamic Medieval Institutions.'

⁴⁰ İSLAMOĞLU, 'A Proposal,' 194.

⁴¹ MANZANO MORENO and NAROTZKI, 'Hisba.' On the *hisba*, see KRISTEN STILT, *Islamic Law in Action: Authority, Discretion and Everyday Experiences in Mamluk Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); CHRISTIAN LANGE, 'Hisba and the Problem of Overlapping Jurisdictions: An Introduction to, and Translation of, Hisba Diplomas in Qalqashandī Ṣubḥ al-a'shā,' *Harvard Middle Eastern and Islamic Review* 7 (2006): 85–107.

⁴² See, for example, the approach to the study of institutions described in EVE KRAKOWSKI, *Coming of Age in Medieval Egypt: Female Adolescence, Jewish Law, and Ordinary Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 1–32; NATHAN HOFER, *The Popularisation of Sufism in Ayyubid and Mamluk Egypt, 1173–1325* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 1–32.

⁴³ The project brought together Eve Krakowski, Marina Rustow, Tamer El Leithy, Craig Perry, Naim Vanthieghem, Brendan Goldman, and Jennifer Grayson. See the description on the website: *Documents and Institutions in the Medieval Middle East*, <https://genizalab.princeton.edu/projects/documents-and-institutions-medieval-middle-east>, accessed 11 March 2022.

organic approach to Islamic institutions of government.⁴⁴ In a study on water provisioning and distribution in the Mamluk sultanate, van Berkel exceeded the aim of showing that Islamic institutions were not any ‘weaker’ or less ‘formal’ (in a Weberian sense) than European ones; rather, she suggested to break altogether with the divide between ‘formal’ and ‘informal.’ That divide itself is a heuristic limit preventing us from studying how urban structures and institutions functioned on the ground, through multiple actors, methods, and strategies.⁴⁵

A very important study in this respect is Jessica Goldberg’s book from 2012, *Trade and Institutions*.⁴⁶ The book centred on the relationship between political, economic, and legal institutions and geographies of trade ‘in the Islamic Mediterranean’ in the Fatimid period, based on documents from the Cairo Genizah. Goldberg argued that that relationship, and not the absence of strong institutions, conditioned how the Genizah merchants operated in the Mediterranean. It determined what routes they chose, how they interacted with state authorities, how they related to the law, and how they entered into partnerships. Reacting to the success of the New Institutional Economics in Genizah studies, Goldberg proposed to put institutions back ‘in their place,’ that is, in relation ‘to other structural conditions and economic geographies.’⁴⁷ She showed that there is no ground for assuming the existence of a specially ‘Islamic informality’ behind the Genizah merchants’ activity in the Mediterranean, as Greif and others had argued; instead, the merchants were sustained and constrained in their actions by Islamic institutions of law and government and by legal tools including formal partnerships, contracts, petitions, and access to courts.⁴⁸ Similarly, as Hannah Barker has argued, the slave trade in the Mediterranean in the Mamluk period was both a product and an effect of ‘a set of assumptions and practices’ shared among Christian and Muslim inhabitants, including the diffusion of specific contractual languages and legal instruments; the dissemination of such practices was favoured and regulated, though not imposed, through imperial structures of government and law.⁴⁹

In researching institutions, scholars in the field of Islamic history have not always forsaken the question of how Islamic and European institutions compare to each other. For example, Manzano Moreno and Narotzki’s article on the *hisba*, mentioned above, was published in a volume dedicated to the very question of comparability

⁴⁴ See the project’s website: *Water Management in the Premodern Middle East*, <https://www.ru.nl/rich/our-research/research-groups/representations-city/current-projects/projects/project-source-life-water-management-premodern/>, accessed 11 March 2022.

⁴⁵ MAAIKE VAN BERKEL, ‘Waqf Documents on the Provision of Water in Mamluk Egypt,’ in *Legal Documents as Sources for the History of Muslim Societies: Studies in Honour of Rudolph Peters*, eds Maaïke van Berkel, Léon Buskens, and Petra Sijpesteijn (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017), 229–44.

⁴⁶ GOLDBERG, *Trade and Institutions*.

⁴⁷ GOLDBERG, *Trade and Institutions*, 17.

⁴⁸ GOLDBERG, *Trade and Institutions*, 120–80.

⁴⁹ HANNAH BARKER, *That Most Precious Merchandise* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), qt. 3; BARKER, ‘Like Sand Grouse Flocking to Water: Merchants, Mamluks, and the Geopolitics of the Slave Trade’ (paper delivered at the workshop *Networks and Ties of Exchange*, Leiden University, 3–4 June 2021).

between medieval institutions in Islamic states, Latin Europe, and the Byzantine empire.⁵⁰ Goldberg's book also considered the different institutional settings in which the Mediterranean-trade merchants worked. She suggested that, ultimately, the Genizah merchants' presence in the Mediterranean in the eleventh and twelfth centuries might have contributed to the rise of given institutional patterns in Europe, particularly in the Italian city-states. Seen from the Genizah, as she explained, it seems that the Italian merchants were interested in gaining 'the sort of legal geographic reach' that their colleagues, Muslim and Jewish merchants in the Fatimid empire, already enjoyed thanks to various forms of legal redress and formal contracts. In turn, the Fatimid merchants benefitted from and possibly boosted the success of Italian shipping in those centuries. However, such exchanges occurred through the establishment of markets in the Mediterranean which were regulated and sustained, among other things, also by Islamic legal institutions and Muslim political authorities.⁵¹

In other words, as a number of scholars have argued, any study considering seriously the historical differences between European and Islamicate economies cannot be based on the assumption that early and medieval Islamic states were characterised by weak or inefficient institutions, as it has often been supposed, because this is contradicted by the sources. In fact, neither adjective is suitable to describe how institutions took shape out of people's actions, movements, and relationships.

Other geographies

As Jessica Goldberg suggested, the real keystone for moving beyond Eurocentric views in the field of Islamic history has been the adoption of different perspectives on human geography. Several recent studies have contributed to upsetting the 'long divergence' theory by offering alternative research scales. They have done so mainly in two ways: first, by writing more localised histories of trade and commerce, and second, by following patterns of exchange that either exclude Europe or relativise its position. This has resulted in more specialised knowledge on regional trade, paving the way for future studies in a more connected perspective.

The most striking development since the 2010s is that historians have started paying more attention to regional trade *inside* Islamic polities, focusing on Islamic cities and their countryside. Overall, twentieth-century scholarship had given priority to long-distance routes linking India and China to Europe, while neglecting other connections, and it had conceived of Islamic lands mostly as transits or mediators for the passage of luxury items on their way to European cities. As a result, the vitality of sea trade in and between Islamic polities was often overlooked.⁵² Recent studies on inter-regional and cross-cultural networks have upset that perspective. A general shift from long- to short-distance trade routes has been favoured by the intervention of social historians working with archaeological and documentary sources. These have

⁵⁰ HUDSON and RODRÍGUEZ, *Diverging Paths*.

⁵¹ GOLDBERG, *Trade and Institutions*, 359–60.

⁵² For a discussion, see GOLDBERG, *Trade and Institutions*, 18–25.

both leveraged micro-historical studies and turned to a broader range of Islamicate sources than those conventionally available for writing economic histories, such as legal texts.⁵³ In fact, recent studies combine chronicles and local histories with archaeological findings and documentary texts in a variety of languages, at times tapping into *belle-lettres* and religious literature. For example, a forthcoming volume on ‘land and trade in early Islam,’ edited by Fanny Bessard and Hugh Kennedy, includes several contributions on trade in regional contexts, such as a chapter by Alison Vacca on Abbasid Armenia.⁵⁴

Besides the better-known merchant letters from the Cairo Genizah – which since the early twentieth century have provided much information on trade and economic matters, also fuelling discussions about Islamic institutions – scholars have started paying more attention also to the corpus of business documents excavated in central and southern Egypt, such as Arabic letters on papyrus, paper, and potsherd, many of which are earlier than the Genizah materials.⁵⁵ Thus, Stefanie Schmidt has recently studied regional trade in early Islamic Egypt based on papyri and archaeological sources, focusing on the border region between southern Egypt, Nubia, and historical Sudan.⁵⁶ In addition, Schmidt’s research on the city of Aswan suggests that, besides a better-known story of long-distance trade, in which Egypt functioned as the link between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, there are also more ‘threadlike’ stories to be written about networks of merchants who operated only in and around their towns.⁵⁷ With a similarly regional focus, Khodadad Rezakhani has

⁵³ Recent Islamic history scholarship has been reinvigorated by a ‘material turn,’ with the expansion of papyrology and archival studies, and more historians engaging with art history and archaeology and attempting at integrating literary and documentary sources. See, for example, the studies surveyed in URSULA BSEES, ‘Annotated Bibliography: Arabic Papyrology, Archives, and Times of Change in the Mediterranean and Islamicate World,’ *Der Islam* 98, no. 2 (2021): 546–645; see also SARAH MIRZA, ‘Shoes, Writing: Unspeaking Writing in the Material Culture of Pre-Islamic Arabia and Early Islam,’ *West 86th: Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* 24, no. 2 (2017): 159–76; PETRA SJPSTEIJN, ‘The Continuum Approach: Multiple Legal Solutions to Run a Diverse Empire,’ *Islamic Law Blog* (February 2021), <https://islamiclaw.blog/2021/02/18/the-continuum-approach-multiple-legal-solutions-to-run-a-diverse-empire/>, accessed 15 March 2022; SJPSTEIJN, ‘The Rise and Fall of Empires in the Islamic Mediterranean (600–1600 CE): Political Change, the Economy and Material Culture,’ in *The Routledge Handbook of Archaeology and Globalisation*, ed. Tamar Hodos (London: Routledge, 2017), 652–68.

⁵⁴ FANNY BESSARD and HUGH KENNEDY, eds, *Land and Trade in Early Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming). I wish to thank Hugh Kennedy for sharing with me a draft of the introduction before the volume’s publication.

⁵⁵ On the Genizah and trade, see ABRAHAM L. UDOVITCH, *Partnership and Profit in Medieval Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970); GOLDBERG, *Trade and Institutions*, 8–30; and GOLDBERG, ‘Reading Goitein.’

⁵⁶ STEFANIE SCHMIDT, ‘Economic Conditions for Merchants and Traders at the Border Between Egypt and Nubia in Early Islamic Times,’ in *Millennium Studien: Living the End of Antiquity*, eds Sabine Huebner, Eugenio Garosi, Isabelle Marthot-Santaniello, Matthias Müller, Stefanie Schmidt, and Matthias Stern (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 207–22.

⁵⁷ STEFANIE SCHMIDT, ‘Craft, Trade and Mercantile Networks in Aswan between the Late Byzantine and Early Islamic Period’ (paper delivered at the workshop *Networks and Ties of Exchange*, Leiden University, 3–4 June 2021). See Schmidt’s research project at the Free University of Berlin: *Greek, Coptic and Arabic sources from Aswan, Elephantine, Anba Hadra and Qasr Ibrim, Text and ConText*, <https://firstcataract.hcommons.org/contacts/>, accessed 22 March 2022.

recently undertaken research on the trade networks based in the strait of Hormuz, connecting sea and land posts, following the Muslim conquest of Sasanian lands.⁵⁸

Historians of Islamicate societies have altered Eurocentric views of trade history also in a second way, and that is, by studying how merchant networks located inside Islamic polities interacted with networks centred in other regions. In this respect, the field has benefited from a more general interest in cross-cultural sea trade and from studies on the early modern period emphasising the role of merchants as cultural brokers. Since the early 2000s, the study of cross-cultural trade by scholars including Ghislaine Lydon and Francesca Trivellato has been fundamental, among other things, in contrasting more conventionally Eurocentric geographical narratives.⁵⁹ In its turn, however, the study of cross-cultural trade in early and medieval Islamic history has been largely centred on the Mediterranean, as a space in which Jewish, Christian, and Muslim merchants crossed paths, collaborated, and competed. Once again, the Mediterranean lens has favoured the study of links and comparisons between Europe and North Africa and the Middle East, to the detriment of other geographies. It is therefore noticeable that a growing number of historians of early Islamicate societies have turned to stretching such connections onto other geographical axes. The Indian Ocean, in particular, has been attracting renewed attention.⁶⁰

Overall, thus, one notices a general shift towards reconsidering the importance of internal and regional trade routes inside and between Islamic polities, and not necessarily in relation to European economies. For example, recent archaeological research has brought up new information about trade posts and exchanges between Islamic polities in the Horn of Africa and India and Tang China, as well as about local routes connecting networks of close-by towns and sea-posts in East Africa.⁶¹ Moving the focus away from the Mediterranean towards other seas, and especially the Indian Ocean, has been an important (re-)development in Islamic economic and legal histories.⁶² But recent publications on trade, like Mohamed Ouerfelli's study of the

⁵⁸ KHODADAD REZAKHANI, 'Post-Sasanian Commercial Kingdoms and Trade Communities in the Western Indian Ocean' (paper delivered at the workshop *Networks and Ties of Exchange*, Leiden University, 3–4 June 2021).

⁵⁹ See LYDON GHISLAINE, *On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks, And Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nineteenth-Century West Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); FRANCESCA TRIVELLATO, *The Familiarity of Strangers: the Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); TRIVELLATO, LEOR HALEVI, and CÁTIA ANTUNES, eds, *Religion and Trade: Cross-Cultural Exchanges in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁶⁰ The classical study is KIRTI N. CHAUDHURI, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), on the early Islamic period see 34–62. On recent scholarship on the Indian Ocean, see FAHAD A. BISHARA, 'Ships Passing in the Night? Reflection on the Middle East in the Indian Ocean,' *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 48, no. 4 (2016): 758–62.

⁶¹ SADA MIRE, 'Mapping the Archaeology of Somaliland: Religion, Art, Script, Time, Urbanism, Trade and Empire,' *African Archaeological Review* 32 (2015): 111–36. As another example, see the work of Awet Teklehimanot Araya and other archaeologists working on Eastern Africa in the early Islamic period, including sources on trade: *Becoming Muslim: Conversion to Islam and Islamisation in Eastern Ethiopia*, <http://www.becomingmuslim.co.uk/2020/10/07/gias-global-islamic-archaeology-showcase/>, accessed 20 March 2022.

⁶² See BISHARA, 'Histories of Law;' and BISHARA, 'Ships Passing.'

Mediterranean sugar trade, or Ingrid Houssaye Michienzi's study of merchants networks between Tuscany and the Maghrib, show us that a Mediterranean setting needs not be oriented towards the rise of European markets either geographically or narratively.⁶³ As Jessica Goldberg has found, based on Genizah letters from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries, the impact of medieval transit routes linking India and Europe through the mediation of merchants based in Islamic lands should be resized in the favour of regional routes and, even more significantly, in the light of trade in primary agricultural goods.⁶⁴

The European markets, particularly those looking onto the Mediterranean, have become less central even in studies that have kept focusing on transit routes. Two examples are Melanie Michaelidis' study of the fur trade between the Samanids in Central Asia and the Vikings in north-eastern Europe, and Hugh Kennedy's recent work on Abbasid Baghdad and its connection to northern Iraq.⁶⁵ Kennedy has suggested that Baghdad's expanding demand in the eighth and ninth centuries CE reached out at the same time towards India and South-East Asia and towards the nearby Jazira, the region where most agricultural produce the city consumed came from. Such studies underline the ability of large Islamic cities to *generate* transit connections for their own population's consumption. Others have also focused on the creation of new trade routes to fit the needs of Muslim elites and of the populations they governed. For example, Parvaneh Pourshariati and Reza Huseini have independently argued for the rise of new merchant networks based in Khurasan, Bactria, Sogdiana, and northern Iran in the seventh and eighth centuries. They suggested that the Muslim conquests of those regions had the double effect of exploiting pre-existing, consolidated trade routes in Central Asia, and of creating new routes south of the Alborz chain. These movements, as Huseini suggested, might have favoured the foundation and growth of Baghdad in Iraq.⁶⁶ In a study on the island of Kish, Yasuhiro Yokkaichi has suggested that networks of Kish merchants were instrumental in linking two distinct sea routes that served the southern Indian trade in the Mongol period: one root centred in the Red Sea, the other one centred in the Persian Gulf.⁶⁷ As a final example, Koray Durak has been studying the exchange of medical knowledge and products between Byzantine and Islamic lands. His research had pointed to multiple trade hubs in Anatolia, such as the regional routes that

⁶³ MOHAMED OUERFELLI, *Le Sucre: Production, commercialisation et usages dans la Méditerranée médiévale* (Leiden: Brill, 2008); INGRID HOUSSAYE MICHIEZI, *Datini, Majorque et le Maghreb (14^e-15^e siècles)* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

⁶⁴ GOLDBERG, *Trade and Institutions*, 211–46.

⁶⁵ MELANIE MICHAELIDIS, 'Samanid Silver and Trade Along the Fur Route,' *Medieval Encounters* 18 (2012): 315–38; HUGH KENNEDY, 'The Globalisation of Baghdad' (lecture delivered at Leiden University, 21 October 2021).

⁶⁶ PARVANEH POURSHARIATI, 'The Abbasid Revolution, Overland Trade and the Opening of the Khurasan Highway,' REZA S. HUSEINI, 'Conquests and Trade in the early Islamic East' (papers delivered at workshop *Networks and Ties of Exchange*, Leiden University, 3–4 June 2021).

⁶⁷ YASUHIRO YOKKAICHI, 'The Maritime and Continental Networks of Kish Merchants under Mongol Rule: The Role of the Indian Ocean, Fārs and Iraq,' *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 62 (2019): 428–63.

developed around the ‘Cilician frontier’ in the Taurus, and the ‘international emporium’ of Trabzon in the Pontos.⁶⁸

Local contexts and empire studies

Thus, thanks to a more focused expertise in local contexts and in the study of documentary sources, accompanied by a sociological interpretation of institutions as ‘sites of contention’ rather than as ‘efficiency-exchanging devices,’ as mentioned above, over the last decade historians of Islamicate societies have ventured to trace meaningful connections between regions, such as those connections that were established through trade, by anchoring these into local and regional networks. One important consequence of these approaches has been that specialised knowledge about regional routes and patterns in Islamic history could now be better situated within imperial frameworks, in conversation with empire studies, yet without scholars losing sight of particular or even exceptional local circumstances.⁶⁹ Many have approached Islamic economic institutions as growing out of concrete practices of exchange, grounded in local realities, as far as these may be reconstructed from an array of historical and archaeological sources. This seems a significant development compared to studies taking Islamic empires as the starting point for drawing comparisons and parallels between institutions. To this end, experts in Islamic history have built on concepts of cultural brokering and political partnership that were first elaborated for studying early modern empires.⁷⁰ In turn, however, I believe that they have contributed to developing bottom-up and polycentric definitions of imperial structures and economic geographies before the modern period which scholars in other fields may also learn from. As a result, the economy of the early Islamic empires – caliphates and imamates – is now being presented at one time as locally diverse and internally interconnected; it is the sum of overlapping local practices, regional networks, and interregional routes. I would like to suggest that this multi-layered picture will allow for increasingly sophisticated comparative studies between premodern economies and for building more interconnected histories, in which early and medieval Islamicate economies interweave with those of other regions and polities, while also valuing internal connections and localised historical narratives.

⁶⁸ KORAY DURAK, ‘The Commercial History of Trebizond and the Region of Pontos from the Seventh to the Eleventh Centuries: An International Emporium,’ *Mediterranean Historical Review* 36 (2021): 3–41; DURAK, ‘The Cilician Frontier: A Case Study of Byzantine-Islamic Trade in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries,’ in *Center, Province and Periphery: The Age of Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos: From De Ceremoniis to De Administrando Imperio*, eds Niels Gaul, Volker Menze, and Csanád Bálint (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2018), 163–83.

⁶⁹ On empire studies and Islamic history, see the classical HODGSON, *Venture of Islam*, 101–230. See BISHARA, ‘Bazaar,’ SIJPESTEIJN, ‘Rise and Fall,’ MICHAEL COOK, ‘The Long-Term Geopolitics of the Pre-Modern Middle East,’ *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 26 (2016): 33–41. As an example of recent trends, see the research project *The Early Islamic Empire at Work* (2014–2019), including several forthcoming articles on the history of trade: <https://www.islamic-empire.uni-hamburg.de/publications-tools/publications.html>, accessed 17 March 2022.

⁷⁰ See, for example, CÁTIA ANTUNES and AMELIA POLÓNIA, ‘Introduction,’ in *Beyond Empires: Global, Self-Organizing, Cross-Imperial Networks*, eds Antunes and Polónia (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016), 1–11.

As an example of such trends, connecting imperial frameworks and local practices, Fanny Bessard's book *Caliphs and Merchants* masterfully traces the development of urban craft and retailing in Islamic cities of the Umayyad and the early Abbasid caliphate (seventh–tenth centuries CE). By studying workshops, marketplaces, food processing industries, and even private homes as sites of commercial activity, Bessard was able to inscribe a very concrete and every-day dimension of economic changes taking place inside Syrian towns such as Aleppo or Bosra and in their immediate hinterlands within broader patterns of transformation in the organisation of labour and in the regulation of markets, in which the rulers were also directly involved.⁷¹ Similarly, in her book on trade and institutions Goldberg highlighted the 'intimate bonds' established between merchants, state officials, and agriculturalists in the Fatimid empire. Goldberg linked both the production and the exchange of primary food products, at the regional level, with long-distance trade in the Mediterranean, at the interregional level, through the activity of specific groups of merchants who operated and moved within an imperial institutional framework.⁷² The lens of empire studies has sustained also the recent research project *Embedding Conquest*, led by Petra Sijpesteijn at Leiden University (2017–2022).⁷³ The project has investigated the social, economic, and political connections that allow us to study the early Islamic caliphates (seventh–tenth centuries CE) through the lens of empire studies. Material and invisible threads kept different regions of the caliphate well tied together, to such a degree of juridical and administrative cohesiveness between centres and peripheries that at times we may find the caliphate's overarching imperial organisation reflected in the administration of even small and remote villages, while at other times it was the craft of local scribes and village functionaries that became representative of imperial policies on the ground. Connective threads between the provinces were concretely knotted up by the movement of people (armies, government appointees, delegates, messengers, and tax collectors, among others), and perhaps even more crucially, by moving documents. Without always covering great distances, merchants in the Umayyad and the Abbasid caliphates transported objects, letters, and money, while also making use of imperial infrastructure, thus consolidating its connective force across regions. They travelled on imperial roads, followed pilgrimage routes, crossed bridges, used the postal system, and paid tax duties. They carried all that served for integrating the various regions of the caliphate into one coherent political space: from rough resources to refined goods, animals, and cash; from legal documents to books,

⁷¹ FANNY BESSARD, *Caliphs and Merchants: Cities and Economies of Power in the Near East (700–900)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁷² GOLDBERG, *Trade and Institutions*, qt. 338.

⁷³ See the project's website: *Embedding Conquest*, <https://emco.hcommons.org/>, accessed 17 March 2022.

private letters, and recommendation letters. All this contributed to establishing links between local and regional economies.⁷⁴

Moreover, while economic historians have often been criticised for decoupling economic institutions from political relations, recent scholarship on the early Islamic period has pointed to sodalities and conflicts in a very political realm. Several studies emphasise the involvement of even early state authorities, such as caliphs, imams, and *qadis*, in determining economic matters both through personal enterprises and political negotiation. Bessard has argued that the Abbasid caliphs intervened directly to promote economic investment in given sectors; they built covered markets, opened stores, and invested in agricultural work. But in this they were not alone: shopkeepers, retailers, artisans, and local officials like the *mubtasib*, mentioned above, also played an active role in shaping urban institutions. They were able to negotiate with the authorities and their representatives as well as to resist their interventions.⁷⁵

Finally, scholarship on the early Islamic empires has explored the convergence of different social circles built around regional business interests. Going beyond traditional dichotomies between merchants and scholars, or between rulers and religious elites, recent studies have attempted to identify networks that are different from commercial ones but that still had a prominent role in shaping economic life in the caliphate.⁷⁶ Thus, Koray Durak's research has pointed to overlaps between non-commercial networks of exchange involving soldiers, pilgrims, spies, captives, and other groups besides merchants.⁷⁷

Overall, such approach to commercial and non-commercial networks, looking for ties and obligations also beyond circles of merchants, has allowed scholars to connect groups that are more conventionally treated separately or whose activities are placed outside the traditional study of economy, such as religious leaders. For instance, Edmund Hayes has shown that the early Imami authorities and their agents were

⁷⁴ Several recent studies strive to connect empire-wide and provincial administrations. See, for example, HANNAH-LENA HAGEMANN, KATHARINA MEWES, and PETER VERKINDEREN, 'Studying Elites in Early Islamic History: Concepts and Terminology,' in *The Early Islamic Empire at Work Volume 1: Transregional and Regional Elites: Connecting the Early Islamic Empire*, eds Hagemann and Stefan Heidemann (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 17–46; PETRA SIJPESTEIJN, 'Loyal and Knowledgeable Supporters: Integrating Egyptian Elites in Early Islamic Egypt,' in *Empires and Communities in the Post-Roman and Islamic World (c. 400-1000 CE)*, eds Walter Pohl and Rutger Kramer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 329–59; SIJPESTEIJN, 'Rise and Fall,' and ANTONIA BOSANQUET and STEFAN HEIDEMANN, eds, *The Early Islamic Empire at Work Volume 2: The Reach of Empire* (Berlin: De Gruyter, forthcoming).

⁷⁵ FANNY BESSARD, 'The Politics of Suqs in Early Islam,' *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 61, no. 4 (2018): 491–518. The point that the Muslim highest authorities, like caliphs and governors, were directly involved in regulating economic matters – for example, by applying taxes on trade – has been recently discussed also by HUGH KENNEDY: 'Taxation of Trade in the Early Islamic Period (700-950)' (paper delivered at the workshop *Networks and Ties of Exchange*, Leiden University, 3–4 June 2021). On negotiation, see the recent research project *Social Contexts of Rebellion*, led by Hannah-Lena Hagemann: <https://www.gwiss.uni-hamburg.de/forschung/aktuelles-forschung/eng-islamwissenschaft/social-contexts-of-rebellion-hagemann.pdf>, accessed 17 March 2022.

⁷⁶ On the study of 'economic life,' see BISHARA, 'Histories of Law,' 5–6.

⁷⁷ KORAY DURAK, 'Non-Commercial Networks for the Study of Commerce in Medieval Eastern Mediterranean: The Case of Byzantine-Islamic Relations' (paper delivered at the workshop *Networks and Ties of Exchange*, Leiden University, 3–4 June 2021).

important economic actors in the early Islamic caliphate.⁷⁸ The Arabic papyri from Abbasid Egypt suggest that, in some regional contexts, merchants and businesspeople formed sodalities that crossed social strata and familial divides. At times, their connections and ties evaded religious and even linguistic borders. In fact, when studying documents from the early Islamic period, like the Arabic papyri, markers of religious identity are often difficult to spot. It is difficult to identify distinct groups of merchants separated from each other on religious grounds, even if still interacting or collaborating, because in the papyri expressions of religious affiliation and of communal organisation are generally absent or passed in silence. On the other hand, it is easier to see merchants of different religious groups coming together in the same documents and dossiers because of personal relations, conflicts, or partnerships, and because of their shared use of legal and political infrastructures.⁷⁹ Another aspect that is somewhat more visible in the sources is political sodality. Thus, in Reza Huseini's research on early Islamic Khurasan, the interests of local non-Muslim political elites met those of groups of Arab Muslim merchants, determining trade patterns in the region.⁸⁰ Such personal and political sodalities contributed to building and consolidating the early caliphates' social fabrics.

In conclusion

A well-established tradition of studies in economic history and political science has looked for the roots of the Middle East's 'failure' to adapt to a European model of economic growth and/or political development *in* the history of early Islamicate societies and institutions. Recent responses raised from within scholarship on Islamic history contribute to upsetting the theory's premises. First, in going back to the early history of Islamic institutions, Islamic history experts have put into question the historical plausibility of the arguments sustaining the 'long divergence' theory – in the broad sense used in this article – on empirical grounds. As mentioned, both economic and social historians have produced new studies on Islamicate documents and social practices. They have written on the relationship between institutions and trade, retailing, urban government, and other economic activities. This has created the premises for more complex and detailed comparisons between the institutions of medieval polities on a global yet interconnected scale. These studies, in turn, may help

⁷⁸ See EDMUND HAYES, 'Imams as Economic Actors,' in *Land and Trade in Early Islam*, eds Fanny Bessard and Hugh Kennedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming), and HAYES, *Agents of the Hidden Imam: Forging Twelver Shi'ism, 850-950 CE* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 28–41. I am thankful to Ed Hayes for sharing and discussing these works with me before their publication.

⁷⁹ See, for example, PETRA SIJPESTEIJN, 'Visible Identities: In Search of Egypt's Jews in Early Islamic Egypt,' in *Israel in Egypt: The Land of Egypt as Concept and Reality for Jews in Antiquity and the Early Medieval Period*, eds Alison Salvesen, Sarah Pearce, and Miriam Frenkel (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2020), 424–40; CECILIA PALOMBO, 'The Local Clergy and "Ties of Indebtedness" in Abbasid Egypt: Some Reflections on Studying Debt and Credit in the Early Islamic Middle East,' in *Ties that Bind: Mechanisms and Structures of Social Dependency in the Early Islamic Empire*, eds Edmund Hayes and Petra Sijpesteijn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: forthcoming); and PALOMBO, 'The Christian Clergy's Islamic Local Government in late Marwanid and Abbasid Egypt' (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 2020).

⁸⁰ REZA S. HUSEINI, 'Framing the Conquest: Early Muslim Domination of Bactria, 652–750' (in-progress Ph.D. dissertation, Leiden University).

historians in other fields to better situate the history of specific Islamic institutions into discrete political and geographic contexts and to put institutions back ‘in their place’ when assessing questions of continuity and rupture, for example, between late-antique and early Islamic conceptions of rule, or between premodern and modern economies.

One of the most significant outcomes of scholarship from the last decade has been the emergence of research on regional economies and commercial networks within Islamic polities. Social historians working with a combination of documentary, archaeological, and literary sources, and playing with alternative geographic scales, have been building layered connections between towns, provinces, and states without forsaking the discreteness of local contexts – even when adopting the perspective of empire studies – and without necessarily reading the formation of institutions in function of what they might entail for the rise of capitalism. Several historians of Islamicate societies, such as the ones mentioned in this article, have thus been able to study institutions through concrete political, economic, and social interactions. As mentioned, many have not only reduced the scope of their research to towns, villages, or islands, but also shifted the focus towards regional commercial networks and agricultural work. Finally, they have highlighted that a variety of actors besides merchants were part of commercial networks – including retailers, soldiers, administrators, religious leaders, and others. These had a part in sustaining economic and cultural exchanges across regions and in creating forms of political and social cohesiveness within Islamic polities, such as the Abbasid or the Fatimid caliphate. One question that remains open is whether putting ‘the local’ at the centre might also favour the writing of interconnected histories on a global scale entirely outside of imperial frameworks.