

Selection of Reviews

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I have watched veiled widows gather in a medieval cemetery filled with the white-washed tombs of saints. I have observed Tunisian villagers in their formal red skull-caps take turns shouldering a funeral bier which will be carried at a trot to the burial ground in total silence. I have heard the ululation of mountain women calling out for vengeance for spilt blood, and I have inhaled the overpowering scent of camphor surrounding a corpse being "rolled" in a dark room beside a desert mosque. I have listened to ghoulish Moroccan tales about the misuse of dead men's hands, and cryptic popular jokes told in Cairo about the likely punishments of dead politicians in the grave. In each case, I have found that none of these actions has any direct kōranic precedent – yet at the same time realize that knowledge of the graveyard is a requirement for understanding many of the above-ground activities of any Muslim society. For one of the enduring fascinations of studying Islamic societies is in the difference between the practice of faith and the actual authority of the Koran.

In Leor Halevi's book, *Muhammad's Grave*, I have at last found a reliable guide to what on earth is going on. He has sympathetically and rigorously examined a whole system of belief while at the same time chronicling the formation of a canon from the accretion of 300 years of traditions. It is a truly impressive display of textual scholarship fused with historical anthropology and lit up by enthusiasm.

Halevi chronicles how, in the absence of any scriptural directions, the oral traditions of early Islamic society became the vital first source from which generations of pious legislators later created a law code. They were especially curious about how the Prophet Muhammad buried his own daughter Fatima, which happened just before his own death. But even this example, once examined in detail, should have been recognized as an insecure foundation for doctrinal authority. Although it was remembered that Fatima had been washed before burial, it was disputed whether this happened three or five times or "maybe more than this". The washing may have been at the direction of her father, though others remembered that it had been performed by the loving hands of her grief-stricken husband, Ali. It was recalled that

Rites and wrongs

BARNABY ROGERSON

Leor Halevi

MUHAMMAD'S GRAVE

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Fatima's hair had been braided three times and that the ground leaves of the lotus tree (indigenous to western Arabia) had been used to anoint her body as well as camphor oil imported from the East. Others recalled that she herself (gifted with insight from her father) had carefully bathed and arranged herself on her couch facing Mecca, so that she had effectively prepared her own body for the grave.

About the Prophet's own burial the traditional sources are even more tantalizingly vague; he is believed to have died either in the arms of his wife Aisha or leaning on the shoulder of his son-in-law Ali, though all acknowledge that he was buried (somewhat mysteriously) in the floor of his wife's hut

beneath her bed, not in the burial ground of Al-Baqi, which had been used for almost all other believers in Medina. The shroud used was variously remembered to have been three white lengths of Yemeni cotton, or of that woven in a seaport in Oman, while others remember it was a "red mantle", or two luxurious cloths given by the Christian weavers of Najran, or a striped woollen cloth of red and white, or one that had been heavily embroidered in Bahrain. Some said three shrouds were used, others claimed seven, but all agreed that if you had to make a personal choice, odd was better than even.

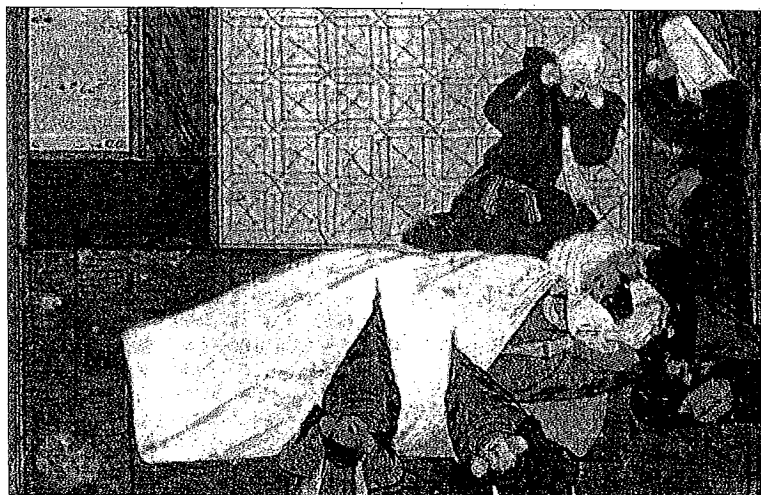
The legislators could be highly selective when it suited them, quibbling over unknowable details into eternity while completely ignoring inconvenient well-known historical examples. One such is the burial of Muhammad's widow Aisha, who was carried to the grave in the darkness of a Ramadan night, on the Prophet's own bed, by thousands of Muslim men and women. The vast crowd (encompassing the last generation of true companions) escorted her shrouded figure through the palm orchards and oasis gardens of Medina equipped with oil-drenched palm

torches, so that her cortège was like the Milky Way reflected upon this earth.

The ritual of pronouncing the graveside prayer of "Allahu Akhbar" was traced back to an inspiring event, when the Prophet had formally honoured the death of the Negus (the Emperor of Christian Ethiopia) with public prayer. Once again the experts disagreed whether it had been said four, five, seven or eleven times. It was a matter of faith that a Muslim should be buried facing towards Mecca, but no one knew what should be directed towards the Kaaba: should it be the faces of believers or the tops of their heads?

From these tenuous trails of historical memory, literate, male scholars came to strangle the freedom of a living, inspirational religion with the chains of clerical authority and a scarcely credible mythology. So we find that three centuries after the burial of Muhammad in the floor of his wife's bedroom, it was decreed that women must not be washed by men, even their loving husbands (for death was believed to sever the marriage contract), that women must stay at home rather than honour the dead by attending a burial, and that the tears they shed tortured the dead. It became an item of faith that the dead will be questioned in their grave by two inquisitor angels, Munkar and Nakir, and that they will be punished in their graves twice a day (but not on Fridays) for their sins. It was also explained that the soul will be separated from the body and that the chastisement of the grave will end only with the Last Judgement and the greater punishments of Hell. Even more bizarre was the doctrine that martyrs and saints have the power to intercede for their neighbours or family members in the cemetery. This rich accumulation of belief is still honoured by most Muslims, even though it might stand on the tottering foundations of the most dubious traditions.

For there is only one verse in the Koran that makes any reference to the Prophet's death (there are none concerned with his burial or what became of his corpse). The Koran warns believers that "other prophets have already passed away before him, so if he dies or is slain, will you turn on your heels?". It was this verse which the first Caliph, Abu Bakr, recited to calm the hysterical crowds when they first heard that their Prophet had died.



The death of Muhammad; from a manuscript of *Siyeri Nebi* held in the Topkapı Sarayı Library, Istanbul, Turkey

LEOR HALEVI:

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A significant chapter, and one always found in works of *fiqh* literature written during the post-formative period of Islamic law, is that dealing with funerary practices (*kitāb al-janā'iz*). This chapter traditionally discusses broad issues of death and offers specific procedures for treating the dead, such as how to bathe, pray over and bury the corpse. In one Shafiite work, the *Minhāj al-ṭālibīn* of Muḥyī al-Dīn al-Nawawī, for example, readers are told that the dead and the dying should be directed to face the Ka'ba, that the confession of faith is to be spoken so that the dying can hear, that the thirty-sixth chapter of the Quran be recited, that a man's corpse should be washed by a man and a woman's by a woman; and that the *walī* of the deceased is more competent to lead the prayer than the chief of the state or governor. However, very few scholars in the history of Islam have engaged in the study of how death rituals were constructed in Muslim society, particularly during the first to third centuries, which period is often described as the cradle of Islamic law. What we find in al-Nawawī's text as well as others is the product of sophisticated fourth-century traditions, a period when legal methodologies had been established and the boundaries of the *madhhabs* fully identified.

Muhammad's Grave represents an attempt to get around this impasse. It seeks to increase understanding of the development of death rituals during the period when *uṣūl al-fiqh* did not yet constitute a synthesis of rationalist and traditionalist beliefs. Halevi highlights how the Muslims of the *ahl al-'ilm*, who lived after the death of Muḥammad and who resided for the most part in Kūfa or Basra, struggled to find legitimate and legal ways to treat the dead, which were in keeping with the revelations and traditions of the prophet and therefore distinctly Islamic. The term "Islamic" in this case is generally considered to create boundaries between Muslims and non-Muslims, either to respond to (adaptive) or abolish (reactive) the older traditions. Muslims, he argues, even though they share the tradition of burial with Jews and Christians, feel it necessary to separate themselves from the latter, and to some extent from Zoroastrians, by creating death ritual traditions that differed from those of their predecessors.

In support of his narrative on the Islamization of death rituals by the Muslims, Halevi uses both Muslim oral traditions and archaeological evidence, particularly epitaphs or inscriptions and tombstones, for each represents a particular idea of Islam. As for the first, one may question the reliability of the Muslim oral tradition and be sceptical as to its usefulness as a historical source for the early Muslim community. However, Halevi had warned himself of such scepticism and affirms that he himself benefited from many of their methodological insights. Moving beyond historians who doubt the reliability of Muslim tradition, Halevi reads oral traditions and texts as literary products of early Muslim culture, hoping to gain an insight into the ideological agenda of the transmitters of the traditions and their social function in the rapidly growing Muslim society.

One of the fruits of his readings of Muslim oral traditions as literary products is his insightful narrative on the historical origins of the reaction against wailing for the dead by the early Muslim pietists, in this case the Kūfans. This opposition not only continues the departure of Muslim rituals from their Jewish and Christian setting, but also indirectly elevated men of learning at the expense of women, eventually leading to social dependency and the exclusion of women from the ritual of funerals as we see today.

Guided by gender historians, among others, Halevi points out that wailing for the dead is a universal phenomenon, practised not only by the Greeks or Jāhiliyah but also animals. That wailing is practised predominantly by women, he writes, can be explained by the fact that this was a system in which women were economically dependent on men; it is the women who naturally felt the loss of men who were supposed to be their protectors. Muslim tradition, however, considered wailing to be an act of the devil and consistently reject such a practice. One prophetic *ḥadīth*, for example, says that the person who “tears at the garment [to expose] the breasts, and strikes at her cheeks, and calls out the invocations of *al-Jāhiliyya* is not one of us”. The reason for the opposition is simple: “wailing was an act of complaining against the judgment of God, a manner of rebelling with exasperation against His decree”.

In order to be socially effective the repression of wailing needed the co-operation of the pietists, who sometimes did more than transmit the oral traditions of the prophet. The Kūfan traditionists, Halevi notes, were more inclined to fabricate traditions to achieve what they considered the ideal Muslim society. A statement attributed to the prominent Kūfan jurist Abū Ḥanīfa, “let women not be present at funerals, lest they try the living and harm the dead” is the best example of how oral tradition was constructed to move the community of believers towards an ideal society and distance it from Jāhili practice. The idea that women bewailing the dead would cause harm to the dead is by no means justified by the Quran. Neither do we find opposition to wailing in Malik’s *Muwattaʿa*, which is considered authoritative in the Medinese tradition. To support their position, the Kūfans found it necessary to build up their Arabian credibility by linking some of their traditions with Meccan authorities. The Meccan links, therefore, were intended to strengthen the traditions of the Kūfans *vis à vis* the Medinese tradition.

Another important finding in this book is the analysis of tombstones discovered in the cemetery of Aswān in southern Egypt bearing dates between 721 and 729 CE. In past decades we have been convinced by John Wansbrough’s argument that the canonization of the Quran took place in ‘Abbāsīd times, around the ninth century, and that the process occurred due to “interconfessional polemics”, rather than as a result of simple, gradual progress. The precise quranic quotations found on the tombstones, however, although they do not reveal anything about the collection of the standard ‘Uthmānic text, call into question Wansbrough’s theory of polygenesis. For this reason Halevi argues that the scriptural diffusion of canonical verses into provincial location had begun by the third decade of the eighth century, thus

undermining Wansbrough's canonization process via interconfessional polemics in the ninth century.

Halevi's findings in this book – the development of urban processions and communal prayers, the issue of the politics of burials, or the torture of the spirit and corpse in the grave – generally confirm the author's contention that, after the death of the prophet, it was the learned men who acted as the agents of Islamization in society, not the official caliphs or sultans.

Halevi, with a matchless imagination in relating the traditions and events of the past, has brought home the significance of Islamic death ritual for our understanding of the past. He has opened the way for further research in this much-overlooked field.

Fachrizaral Halim

LEOR HALEVI, *Muhammad's Grave: Death Rites and the Making of Islamic Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). Pp. 413. \$36.50 cloth.

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The study of death within an individual religious tradition can take a number of forms. One concentrates on the place that death holds in the philosophical thought of the tradition. A recent example of this is Jan Assman's *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt* (Hamilton, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005). Assman examines how the idea of death served as a generator for the thought superstructure of an entire tradition. In *Muhammad's Grave: Death Rites and the Making of Islamic Society*, Leor Halevi examines death from a different direction. His interest is mostly in the social forms that surround death and the way those forms interact with formal religious thought.

Each chapter but one of Halevi's book addresses a different social form related to death. In order, these include tombstones, washing the corpse, shrouds, wailing for the dead, public processions, and tombs. This series of topics allows for a pleasing mixture of material remains (tombstones, shrouds, tombs) and social practices (washing the corpse, wailing for the dead,

processions). In examining each, Halevi follows a careful methodology. He begins by relating an example of the practice in question drawn from the life of Muhammad or some other early Islamic figure. This becomes the jumping-off point for a detailed look at the topic, typically involving three separate concerns: the prescriptive content of hadith and early legal texts, the social practices as they can be determined through material remains or other forms of evidence, and the parallel practices of Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians. Each chapter involves a careful triangulation of these sources to resuscitate the lively debates revolving around how to treat the deceased in a fully Islamic way.

Chapter 4, on wailing for the dead, is exemplary of Halevi's method. Islam inherited from the *jāhiliyya* the tradition of women loudly wailing at the death of a loved one. This tradition of wailing is evident from the remains of pre-Islamic poetry and early Islamic reflection on the origins of this practice. The introduction of Islam brought about a new discourse concerning the treatment of the deceased as pietists began to teach that "silence, haste, and austerity" should be the marks of the Muslim treatment of death. Efforts were thus made to curtail women's wailing. It was in the community at Kufa that this curtailment was most zealously pursued. Halevi also points out that Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian communities were not nearly as interested in limiting wailing, thereby cutting off one line of thought that portrays early Muslims as conforming to the practices of the religious traditions around them. This is what I previously called "triangulation" because popular practices, Islamic legal opinions, and non-Islamic practices are each made to stand independently. This allows Halevi to pinpoint specific historical forces that gave rise to debate on this issue—as opposed to seeking one-dimensional development of theological ideas.

Muhammad's Grave is obviously an important work in reconstructing early Islamic practices surrounding death; it should win a broader audience, however, for its careful attention to the process of Islamization. The reader will be struck by the complexity of this process. It is clear from these chapters that Islamization was not under anyone's control. The pietists who formulated an ideal vision of the Islamic community could not actually impose that vision. Yet an Islamic community nevertheless did form—one that was distinguishable in numerous ways from surrounding religious communities. The end result of Islamization was not always to the liking of pietists, nor could it have been predicted, but it did turn out to be distinctive. Reflection on the process of Islamization could be pursued from any number of angles, but Halevi's focus on the practices surrounding death—which must be dealt with in every tradition—allows him a unique vantage for tracing the way in which Islam made its way into these deeply felt rituals.

The one chapter that does not quite fit the pattern described previously is the final one, "The Torture of Spirit and Corpse in the Grave." This chapter fills out early Islamic beliefs regarding the whereabouts of the soul immediately after death, but in pursuing this topic the book breaks from its focus on social practices. Issues connected to theological envisioning of the afterlife demand their own separate treatment, and this chapter resides uneasily with the more methodologically unified chapters that precede it.

This book will be highly valued by anyone who works on early Islam and the process through which a distinctively Islamic community came about. It should be emphasized, however, that this is a book about the early development of Islam. The earliest practices and debates are illuminated, but the burial practices that led to the splendid Mamluk-era tombs in Egypt or the more exotic cultural compromises made as Islam took root in cultures beyond the Middle East are not dealt with here. *Muhammad's Grave* is a reminder of the complexities that we should expect to discover as we examine the process of Islamization outside his temporal and geographical frame.



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Book Reviews

Muhammad's Grave: Death Rites and the Making of Islamic Society. By Leor Halevi. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. Pp. xii + 400. ISBN 0-231-13742-7. \$38.00.

In *Muhammad's Grave*, Leor Halevi uses a rich selection of sources to compose a multi-faceted picture of the funerary practices cultivated by Muslims in the opening centuries of the Islamic era. The study not only provides a finely-textured description of a religiously and socially central set of ritual practices, but also offers a prism for the examination of much broader questions involving the emergence of Islamic identity, the interrelation of different types of sources, and the competition of various groups to define Islamic norms. This book provides a much-needed corrective to the abstract and textual nature of much of the debate over the nature of early Islam, plunging the reader into a thoroughly imagined and painstakingly documented material world. Its textual sources, as well, are both diverse and well-chosen; for instance, rather than limiting himself to normative sources addressing the protocol of interment and funeral prayers, Halevi mines biographical dictionaries for accounts of a wide variety of individual burials. Each chapter functions as a self-enclosed study, two of which have previously been published as journal articles, but the book coheres as a well-integrated and cumulatively powerful whole. The subjects examined include grave markers, corpse washing, shrouds, ritual wailing, funeral processions and prayers, and the erection of tombs.

The book's most effective chapters are those that combine textual evidence with studies of material culture. Halevi's discussions of the material and symbolic dimensions of grave inscriptions and shrouds provide illuminating insights into the spiritual and social worlds of early Muslims, whose preferences did not always reflect the conventions embraced by textualist classical Islam. Careful study of these artifacts provides a frame of reference completely independent of the more widely-studied textual sources, and often (at least in the case of the gravestones) much more precisely datable. The voices of *hadith* transmitters and early jurists emerge as specific strains of piety within a much larger range of early Islamic practice. For instance, the gradual emergence and prevalence of Qur'anic inscriptions on tombstones reflect crystallizing Islamic identity and ideals, while contrasting with early scholarly reservations about the erection of grave markers and the recitation of the Qur'an in cemeteries. Pietist reservations about the acceptance of government largesse and emphasis on the purchase of shrouds from licit wealth, both manifest in the hagiographic literature, are balanced by surviving shrouds bearing sumptuous caliphal *tirāz* bands. Halevi takes a measured and somewhat

noncommittal approach to the authenticity of *ḥadīth* and the dating of sources, carefully discerning echoes and engagements among a wide range of early sources rather than constructing bold arguments about origins or chronological development. While he does not provide a free-standing and comprehensive account of his own attitudes towards such issues as the chronology of the canonization of the Qurʾān, he does make many observations that will contribute to the debate on this and other issues. One could take issue with some of his individual observations (for instance, he describes a 7th-century C.E. grave inscription as having “no distinctive Islamic formulas,” although it begins with the *basmala*); nevertheless, the overall picture is rich and compelling.

Gender recurs as a pervasive theme of the book, usually (and usefully) integrated into a spectrum of concerns rather than isolated as a separate field of inquiry. Halevi’s discussion of funerary wailing highlights the social value and deep embeddedness of women’s ritual practices, while acknowledging that the point of view of female wailers ultimately eludes reconstruction. By decentering the textual traditions of *ḥadīth* specialists and jurists, he is able to recover the activities of other agents—including women and artisans—from the margins. He also sees distinctive attitudes towards gender as key to emerging Islamic identities. Discussing early grave inscriptions, which (unlike their pre-Islamic predecessors) refer exclusively to paternal descent, he argues provocatively that “[p]erhaps conversion to Islam implied, more than a confession of faith, a shift in social orientation toward a post-conquests culture dominated by patriarchal ideals” (p. 20). With respect to the scholarly disciplines of law and *ḥadīth*, Halevi sees a concern with the circumscription of women’s public mobility and visibility as pivotal to the early Kufan tradition (in contrast to a more relaxed Medinese approach). Rather than reflecting the influence of Mesopotamian Jews and Christians, as some authors have argued, Halevi sees this concern as both distinctive and new. Typically, he does not speculate on its origins or rationale, but simply examines and critiques interpretations that would explain it as extrinsic to Islam. He draws on Jewish and Christian sources to place Islamic trends in a broader context, without recourse to simple assumptions about “influence” or “borrowing.”

Another theme that interweaves multiple chapters is the centrality of material wealth and social distinction, both as a theme evoked and problematized by the normative sources and as a prominent dimension of the material record. In some cases, as with the erection of sumptuous tombs for the wealthy and powerful (as well as for some pious dead), the austere ideals of the scholarly tradition contrast somewhat predictably with the more exuberant contributions of craftspeople, rulers, and other social actors. In other cases, as in the chapter on shrouds, Halevi demonstrates that early scholars did not always adhere to an ascetic or egalitarian ideal. Rather, a “triumphant early Islamic economic ethos” was reflected in widespread support for the use of multiple shrouds (a large expenditure in an age of relatively rare and costly textiles) and of adorning the deceased with opulent fabrics and garments. Here again, Halevi suggests that the early Islamic ideal diverges substantially from a well-established late antique Jewish and Christian ideal.

Halevi's erudite and engaging study will be of interest not only to scholars and graduate students with an interest in early Islamic piety and ritual, but to everyone concerned with the emergence and coalescence of Islamic identities. Rare in these days, the book is both beautifully produced and affordable; it will be a welcome and often-consulted addition to many people's libraries.

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AAR

BOOK REVIEW

Muhammad's Grave: Death Rites and the Making of Islamic Society. By Leor Halevi. Columbia University Press, 2007. 416 pages. \$35.00.

Leor Halevi's *Muhammad's Grave: Death Rites and the Making of Islamic Society* represents an important and timely contribution to the study of early Islamic religious and social practice. At the center of the book is Halevi's protean study of the social valences of death, burial, and care for the dead within the early Islamic world. From the relative propriety of reading from the Qur'an in burial ceremonies to the place of bereaved spouses in the ritual cleansing of their husbands' or wives' bodies, Halevi seeks not only to locate and elucidate normative strains of praxis among diverse groups of early Muslims, but much more importantly to understand and explain how and why each actually became normative. This often involves locating and historicizing traces of now mostly invisible debates among authoritative eighth- and ninth-century Muslim legal scholars and traditionalists, but also divining the even less visible non-traditionalist trends these scholars sought to contain or eradicate.

In tracing these conversations, Halevi deploys what are in many ways very traditional modes of text critical analysis of early Muslim *ḥadīth* collections, *sīra*, and other literary sources. That is, Halevi works his way carefully back through the chains of tradents or transmitters (*isnāds*) attached to individual pronouncements attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (*ḥadīths*) in order to establish as closely as possible their provenance. In doing so, Halevi attributes the interpretations and attitudes communicated within individual *ḥadīths* or clusters of *ḥadīths* to specific traditionalists, and so to specific regions, towns, and communities. However, he also draws in convincing and innovative ways upon the often under-utilized material remains of the early Muslim world as a means of tracing the historical development of burial practices and the debates these practices provoked. These remains include seventh- and eighth-century CE Arabic tombstones, fabric from burial shrouds, and other archaeological evidence.

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All of this is exciting stuff for students of the early Muslim world, in part because Halevi has suggested and demonstrated several possible ways forward in a notoriously unyielding field of inquiry. The early development of the community or communities of Arab and non-Arab monotheists that gathered around the revelation of the Prophet Muhammad has long remained a particularly forbidding arena of historical study. How precisely this community defined itself at any given moment and in any given place between the prophetic mission of Muhammad and the ninth century of the Common Era (third-century AH) has remained the basis for ongoing and hotly contested conjecture on the part of modern historians of culture, politics, and religion. This is largely unsurprising given the fact that the early Muslim community itself recognized and fretted greatly over the difficulties inherent in recollecting the Islamic community's origins.

The problem, as is so often true for scholars of the late ancient Mediterranean and Middle East is the number, character, and provenance of our sources. In short, for scholars interested in very early Islamic history, these materials are late—deriving in the form that we have them from the later second century after the *hijra* at the very earliest—and they have come to us in the form that they have only after long periods of oral transmission. Deciding what to do with these sources has long been a crucial topic of concern for students of early Islam. For much of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century, source criticism married to a kind of empiricist positivism held sway. As the twentieth century wore on, this methodology left increasing numbers of researchers dissatisfied and seeking new ways forward.

In the later part of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first, the focus of much research on the early Islamic world shifted. Recent scholarship has sought to better understand the array of imaginative, hermeneutic, and intellectual possibilities the early Islamic *umma* enjoyed. These projects have sought to answer questions such as how and why historical writing emerged among Muhammad's followers in the centuries after the Arab conquests, for example, or how the multiple and diverse ways in which the Qur'anic injunction "to command right and forbid wrong" was received and acted upon. Halevi's book is in many ways an example of this more recent (and often more fruitful) trend of inquiry, albeit marked, as we have noted, by a very traditional handling of source material. Abutting (and abetting) this traditional methodology, however, are several surprising (and salutary) interdisciplinary flourishes.

It is for this reason that while Halevi's book can be treated as a useful and important survey of eighth- and ninth-century Muslim traditionalist opinion concerning issues such as the wailing of women, the marking of grave sites, or the washing of corpses, this is not its true significance. Rather, its significance resides in the ways that Halevi departs from or re-imagines traditional Orientalist scholarship. In his first chapter, for example, which examines the use of tombstones as grave markers and as sites of inscription and memory-making, Halevi buttresses his meticulous reading of juristic texts with an examination of archaeological evidence to reveal a rough chronology of the evolving

use of Qur'anic passages in burial ceremonies, and as an incitement to personal remembrance and prayer for visitors to graves. Elsewhere, he draws upon the (admittedly dated) insights of the sociologist Marcel Mauss in order to better interpret such phenomena as gift exchange. Similarly, he invokes the works of the scholars of Christian late antiquity Andrew Palmer and Peter Brown as the basis for the comparative analysis of Muslim funerary practice, just as he also looks beyond the boundaries of the early Muslim *umma*—to the traditions of Jews, Zoroastrians, and Christians—for possible influences in accordance with which specifically Muslim funerary practice evolved.

In all of this, Halevi locates and convincingly describes a series of ongoing negotiations between everyday followers of Muhammad's revelation, who seem to have elaborated on existing burial traditions for themselves in the lands outside of Arabia, and traditionalists who imagined and championed a primordialist ideal for specifically "Muslim" interment. Halevi argues that, unlike so many other phenomena in the early Muslim world, the historical development of this conversation and its outcome are traceable when archaeological and literary evidence are read in tandem. Halevi suggests, moreover, that it was precisely because everyday Muslims were willing to adopt pre-Islamic cultural forms in spite of the objections of those traditionalists who imagined a pure, unadulterated Islamic praxis that Islam was able over time to become a "world religion" rather than an exclusive and isolated sect of Arab monotheists (41–42).

While I find this suggestion and Halevi's methodology to be compelling, some inevitably will not. Indeed, *Muhammad's Grave* will probably provoke discussion and debate among specialists, and this is one of its strengths. In fact, whether Halevi's suggestions or conclusions are ultimately deemed "correct" is in many ways immaterial; what is important about his work is its commitment—in addition to its expert handling of source material—to critical analysis and its attendant risk-taking. Even when this commitment leads Halevi out onto possibly tenuous interpretive limbs as, for example, in his attempt to understand why traditionalist hostility to the wailing of bereaved women was particularly acute among Iraqi scholars, the risk (to my mind) pays off. His suggestion (132–133) that Iraqi anxieties about wailing women were linked to the civic topography of al-Kūfa, with its tribal cemeteries that sometimes doubled as sites of incipient insurrection, is as intriguing as it is speculative. More importantly, however, here as elsewhere, Halevi invites us to think about the relationships between lived experience, inhabited environments, and the ongoing normativizing project in which the authors of so many of his literary sources were subsumed.

In those rare instances in which Halevi's analysis seems less convincing—as, for example, in his attempt to compare the relative enthusiasm for sex segregation between Muslims and Christians on the basis of prescriptive behavior at funerals—it is most often because he wishes to draw conclusions on the basis of overly specific evidence, or because his categories of analysis are so broad ("Christians," for example) as to be almost meaningless. These moments

are few and far between, however, and they serve to underscore the sagacity of his more general policy of seeking to understand the early Islamic community as an evolving entity, full of sub-communities and diversity of opinion. Indeed, much more common than Halevi's very occasional missteps are such dead-on insights as those that adorn his chapter on urban burials and their role in projects of differentiation between confessional communities and status groupings. Here, Halevi effectively diagrams the syntax of Muslim urban burial processions to reveal subtle, relational modes of comportment that served also as confessions of anxiety regarding the fluidity of communal boundaries in Muslim urban space, and the discrete jockeying for social position and rank that urban burials might occasion.

In short, *Muhammad's Grave* is a success even where it is subject to criticism, and represents an important advance in our understanding of the early Muslim world.

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