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The study of the 'Rise of the West', otherwise known as the 'Great divergence', appears to have dominated the field of economic history in recent years. Leafing through the literature, I would say that an entire generation of economic historians are devoted to investigating how and why Western Europe consistently forged ahead, leaving all other nations and societies behind.[1] In the process of investigating why certain societies were unable to stage their own 'rise' through intensive growth, maintain it once it occurred, or successfully emulate the European model, historical Islamic societies emerged as the antithesis of the European case. Islamic economic institutions were inefficient, paralyzed by unchangeable religious laws, inherently inept and hopelessly doomed.[2] To me, an economic historian of the medieval Islamic world, this literature provided intellectual legitimization of public opinion already alienated by Islamic extremism.

Historians of Islamic social and economic history are yet to respond to an analysis of medieval economic history as a proxy of historical inefficiency rooted in religious institutions. But the Euro-centrist methodological bias provoked criticism on the part of economic historians of the 'Orient'. Jack Goldstone wryly commented that "…this is hardly the first time that satisfied people reflected on their ascendance," and said that "if we are to understand economic progress we must do more than merely examine the growth of Europe, and instead study the "causes of economic progress whenever and wherever it has occurred."[3] Niels Steensgaard objected to a line of thought which "…has dismissed Asia as an outer arena of no significance in the development of a capitalistic world-system before the nineteenth century."[4] Ernest Gellner disparaged a interpretation in which "…non-Europeans

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1 For instance, P. O'BRIEN, *Ten Years of Debate on the Origins of the Great Divergence between the Economies of Europe and China during the Era of Mercantilism and Industrialization*, in "Reviews in History", http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/1008, accessed 16/12/2010.

2 A. GREIF, *Cultural Beliefs and the Organization of Society: A Historical Theoretical Reflection on Collectivist and Individualist Societies,* in "Journal of Political Economy", 102, 1994, n. 5, pp. 912-950. T. KURAN, *The Long Divergence: How Islamic Law Held Back the Middle East*, Princeton 2011.

3 J.A. GOLDSTONE, *Efflorescences and Economic Growth in World History: Rethinking the 'Rise of the West' and the Industrial Revolution*, in "Journal of World History", 13, 2002, n. 2, pp. 323-389.

4 N. STEENSGAARD, *Emporia: Some Reflections*, in *Emporia, Commodities and Entre-preneurs in Asian Maritime Trade, c. 1400-1750*, R. PTAK, D. ROTHERMUND eds., Stuttgart 1991, pp. 9-12.

constituted a kind of unproblematic and unexciting baseline, a moral null hypothesis, which invites no intellectual exploration, and contains no valuable lesson."[5]

I take this opportunity to revisit the monetary evidence and the historical links between the Middle East and Europe built on it. In light of new evidence from Middle Eastern monetary history I argue that the previous hypothesises were unfounded and that a new and different economic history interpretations of the links between the two societies is needed. The aforementioned theories are the following: The Pirenne Thesis, Bolin's theory about the role of the Islamic silver in the Carolingian Monetary Renaissance, Duby's theory about Islam and the abolition of slavery in Europe, and Lopez's idea of the 'dollar of the Middle Ages.'

Beginning with the Pirenne thesis.[6] Pirenne suggested that the rise of Islam interrupted a healthy trade relation across the Mediterranean and brought about Europe's regressing into feudalism and bartering. Numismatic evidence has now shown beyond doubt that Muslims on the eastern and southern shores of the Mediterranean had lots of coins and Europeans on the Northern shores, had none. This was not the result of the Islamic conquest but of a decline in monetary circulation and coinage supply in the European markets which preceded the Islamic conquest by hundred years. Spufford has convincingly demonstrated the long-term effect on European markets of monetary circulation decline and lack of precious metals supply. [7] Gold coin was slowly removed from circulation to the point that by 744 no gold solidi were minted in Western Europe. Most of the Carolingian lands did not benefit from sufficient monetary circulation and wages and taxes were paid in kind or in services. Spufford described the silver minting in Europe as a 'false dawn' of money economy.[8] In light of the lack of centralized monetary policy anywhere in Europe, the disparity in monetary conditions and circulation, lack of specie supply, lack of stock of precious metals, a different interpretation of the interruption of trade is warranted. One may suggest that the evidence of the little Islamic money found in hoards in Western Europe is relevant: between the 8th and 11th centuries only 447 dinars, 104 dirhams and 25 copper coins ended in European hoards, compared to the millions of dirhams in the Baltic hoards.[9] Europeans had no coinage with which to purchase Islamic goods and Muslim traders did not find much to purchase anyway.

Sture Bolin, the Swedish monetary historian, suggested that the Carolingian Renaissance and the minting of the new Carolingian deniers was grounded in the new supply of silver which arrived in Western Europe through the Vikings' trade with the Middle East via the Russian rivers. The fact that not a single Samanid dirham was found in the hoards in the Carolingian lands was explained away by imply-

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[5] E. GELLNER, *Introduction*, in *Europe and the Rise of Capitalism*, J. BAECHLER, J.A. HALL, M. MANN eds., Oxford 1988.

[6] H. PIRENNE, *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, New-York 1939.

[7] P. SPUFFORD, *Money and its Use in Medieval Europe*, Cambridge 1988, pp. 7-26.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 47.

[9] M. MCCORMICK, *Origins of European Economy, Communications and Commerce ad 300–900*, Cambridge 2001, pp. 344-346.

ing that all Islamic dirhams were effectively melted down to supply the silver to the mint. This explanation is unconvincing. It is hard to believe that in the decentralized, non-market economy of Carolingian Europe, a recall of all dirhams would be effectively enforced, and all holders of dirhams willingly submitted to it. While millions of dirhams found in hoards in the Baltics, there were none available in France. The source of the Carolingian silver should be found elsewhere.

George Duby suggested that Muslim traders purchased slaves from Western Europe in large numbers and paid massive amount of gold dinars for them. In return European elites, Church leaders and nobles, used these dinars to buy luxury goods such as fine textiles and spices from Islamic merchants. Eventually, the demand for slaves subsided in the East and with it the supply of dinars. As Europeans ran out of dinars they could no longer purchase luxury goods from the Orient, feudalism took hold and slave labour abolished.[10] Let's look at the evidence.

It is clear now that the Middle East suffered from population decline as a result of the Justinian plague and that the Islamic new rulers looked everywhere for manpower supply. While there was definitely demand, the question remains, could Europe supply the large amounts of slaves which appear in the Middle East? Indeed, William Gervase Clarence-Smith, suggested that the slaves which came to the Islamic lands should be viewed in the millions.[11] He proposed 6 million slaves sent from Africa to Islamic world between 650-1500, and 'several millions of Turkish slaves purchased by Muslims between the 9th and the 14th century. Concurrently, McCormick discovered in the sources purchases of slaves going to the Islamic world a grand total of 43 slaves sold from Western Europe between the 7th and 11th centuries.[12] From among those, 15 went to the Tunisian court, 11 to unspecified destination in the Arab world, 8 to Syria and Iraq, 3 to Crete, and 2 to Egypt. It is obvious that Europe could not have sent large numbers of slaves to the Muslim world since its population equally declined in the 6th to 9th centuries. The sources of the manpower supply to the Islamic lands were regions which were not affected by the Bubonic plague, such as Africa and central Asia. In conclusion, the large amounts of gold dinars which supposedly reached Europe, never existed and Islamic slave purchases were unlikely to play a role in the abolition of slavery there.

Robert Sabatino Lopez, the Italian born economic historian, coined the expression "the Dollar of the Middle Ages" as the money of trust in the medieval Mediterranean, referring to the Byzantine gold coin, the *nomisma*.[13] Yet, for many years, in fact between the 8th until the 13th century, Europeans of all political entities, monarchs and city states alike, minted imitations of Islamic coins each time they decided to introduce new coinage. Until Florence and Venice minted gold coins for the first time in 1250s, European coins imitated not only template, but shape and form of Islamic coins, including the Arabic script.

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10 G. DUBY, *Rural Economy and Country Life in the Medieval West*, Columbia 1968; IDEM., *The Early Growth of the European Economy: Warriors and peasants from the Seventh to the Twelfth Century*, Ithaca 1974.

11 W.G. CLARENCE-SMITH, *Islam and the Abolition of Slavery*, Oxford 2006, pp. 11-16.

12 M. MCCORMICK, *Origins of European Economy*, cit., p. 252.

13 R.S. LOPEZ, *The Dollar of the Middle Ages*, in "The Journal of Economic History", 11, 1951, n.1 p. 1, pp. 209-234.

European imitations of Islamic coins included the *mancus*, an imitation of the Abbasid dinar in 8th century England; the *bezant* in the Crusaders states, an imitation of Fatimid 11th century gold dinars (several coins); the *Morabetiono* or *Maravedi*, struck by Alphonso VIII in 12th century Castille, an imitation of the Almoravid dinar; the *ruba'ī,* minted by the Normans in Sicily in the 11th century, an imitation of a Fatimid quarter dinar. The lords of Norman Antioch, minted imitations of the copper coins of their enemies, the Seljuk Turks of Anatolia, ca. 1100-1130. The Byzantines minted the *milliareson*, an imitation of the Islamic dirham. Elsewhere the Euro-Asian tribes of the Khazars and the Bulgars, trade partners of Muslims, Vikings and Byzantines, chose to imitate not the *nomisma*, but instead the silver dirhams and dinars of the Muslims. One cannot but point to the obvious: when it came to coinage, rulers, in the Mediterranean Middle Ages and elsewhere, whose prerogative and duty was to provide coins for monetary exchange, chose the Islamic coinage, not the Byzantine *nomisma.*

In conclusion, I propose that new evidence seems to suggest that many of the old dictums about the role of the Middle East in the economic history of medieval Europe, are in need of revision. Europe's trajectory can no longer be explained by assuming actions and interventions from the Middle East. It was possible to do so as long as knowledge of the Islamic economic history was deficient and in the absence of better interpretation, but it requires reconsideration in a context of solid evidence and on the basis of sound methodology.