

Fred M. Donner

Fred M. Donner spent the academic year 2007–08 on a leave of absence, pursuing a project on the early development of Arabic-Islamic political vocabulary, for which he was awarded a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship. His hypothesis is that the early community of Believers — the forerunner of what we know as the community of Muslims — underwent a change in self-conception in the period around A.D. 680–720. The Believers had originally focused on the ideas of strict monotheism, the coming of the Last Judgment, and the need to observe strictly God’s law (as revealed in the Hebrew Bible, the Gospels, and the Qur’an). This meant that the community of Believers also included some righteous Christians and Jews, as well as “Qur’anic” Believers (whom we would call Muslims). With time, however, the leaders of the Believers’ movement began to focus more closely on the Qur’an as the true revelation, which they held to be superior to the others, and on the person of the prophet Muhammad, who had first instigated the Believers’ movement through his preaching and building of a new community. It is at this time that the community shifted from being a community of Believers to being a community of Muslims, restricted to those who revered the Qur’an. During this process of redefinition, the Muslim leadership made an effort to re-name various political and communal institutions and practices that had grown up in the initial, “Believerish” phase of the community’s history, by attaching to these institutions and practices terms drawn from the Qur’an. In this way, they attempted to legitimize these institutions and practices in “Islamic,” that is, Qur’anic, terms.

The only way to test this hypothesis is to see if actual documents from the first Islamic century (seventh century A.D.) — that is, from the “Believerish” phase in the community’s history — provide hints that other terms, different from the usual Qur’anic terms that have since become well established, were in use for various institutions and practices. Few actual documents survive from this period in the community’s history; the most important are undoubtedly Arabic papyri. Donner’s research consequently took him to some of the most important collections of Arabic papyri in Europe — in Paris, Strasbourg, Heidelberg, Vienna, and Oxford — to look for traces of what we might call “pre-Qur’anic” terminology referring to various institutions and practices. He

spent the period from September 1, 2007, to mid-January 2008, and again from roughly April 1 to mid-August, 2008, in these collections.

During the year, Donner delivered several lectures. “Visions of the Islamic Conquests: Between the Heroic and the Horrific” was presented at a conference held at the American University of Beirut in July 2007. In October, he presented his ideas on the transformation of early Islamic political vocabulary at the Sorbonne in Paris. In May, he delivered a talk on the Arabic word *fath* and whether, as is the norm, we should translate it as “conquest,” at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris. He also served as final commentator at a conference held in Paris in mid-May on “Documents et Histoire.”

The year 2007–2008 saw the appearance of Donner’s article, “Qur’anic *Furqan*,” in *Journal of Semitic Studies*, a book review, and a volume entitled *The Expansion of the Early Islamic State*, for which Donner selected the articles and wrote the Introduction and provided a bibliography; the last-mentioned was published by Ashgate in the series *The Formation of the Classical Islamic World*. During the year, he also submitted for publication the manuscripts for two further books and three articles. The books include a second Ashgate volume on *The Articulation of Early Islamic State Structures* (again, Donner provided an Introduction, bibliography, and selected the articles), and a monograph entitled *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam*, which has been accepted for publication by Oxford University Press. The articles include the written versions of the papers mentioned above, on “Visions of the Islamic Conquest” and “Does Arabic *fath* Mean ‘Conquest?’”, and an article (still under consideration) entitled “The Holy Man in Late Antique and Early Islamic Syria.”
