

*The Balzan Seminar  
for the Study of the Formation, Maintenance,  
and Failure of states in Muslim Societies*

**Michael Cook**  
**2018 Balzan Prize for Islamic Studies**

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*The Formation, Maintenance, and Failure of States in Muslim Societies*, focuses on the pre-modern period, but includes the nineteenth century where appropriate. It examines the respective roles of Islamic and non-Islamic values in the process over time and space, together with the roles of more material resources and obstacles, and the interactions between all these elements. In the first phase, a core group of advanced graduate students, postdocs, and holders of entry-level positions assembled to work on relevant questions and look at them in a wider comparative perspective. They also produced drafts giving a synthetic account of the ways in which they see the issues playing out in the broad region and time of their research. In the second phase, the core group would constitute the backbone for a series of conferences, each with a focus on a particular segment of Muslim history. Each conference would be devoted to a different region of the Muslim world, with the exception of the last, which might serve as a summation. In terms of publication, the central idea would not be to publish the papers of the individual conferences, but rather revised versions of the initial papers written by the members of the core group.

The following report relates to the period from August 2021 to June 2022. It covers semi-regular Zoom meetings, two conferences held that year, and plans for the future, in particular for publication.

### **I. Zoom Meetings**

In June 2020, a series of meetings was instituted in which each member in turn presented a paper for discussion by the group. The series resumed in the fall of 2021 as follows:

August 27, 2021

Pamela Klasová, “A tyrant’s legacy in a medieval Arabic biographical dictionary: al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf on trial in Ibn ‘Asākir’s *History of Damascus*”

October 20, 2021

Rushain Abbasi, “Towards the immanent order: the Islamic roots of political modernization in the Ottoman Empire”

December 13, 2021

Aurora González Artigao, “History writing between the Andalusí *fitna* and the arrival of the Almoravids”

Pamela Klasová’s paper was published in the first issue of the new *Journal of Late Antique, Islamic and Byzantine Studies* (issue 1, September 2022, Edinburgh University Press), of which Marie Legendre is a co-editor. This opportunity was created by the Balzan Seminar.

A presentation by Kader Smail was planned for November, but ill-health precluded this, and he will likely present at a later date. Plans are also underway for another presentation by Xiong Huei Lan, a new member replacing Zoe Shan Lin, who had to leave the group owing to the pressures of her teaching load and tenure clock. Hopefully, she will return in the future, to provide a forum for workshopping her book manuscript). Once Kader and Xiong have presented, this series will be complete, and it will have served its original purpose of getting everyone to know each other under pandemic conditions and building trust between them.

In the first months of 2022, with conferences scheduled in both January and June, fewer meetings were held. Instead, two meetings on the present state of the study of the state with a theoretical emphasis were held. Two of the group members (Lorenzo Bondioli and Merle Eisenberg) set up these meetings, providing those attending with literature to be read in advance and discussed there:

May 5, 2022

A chapter from Bob Jessop, *The state: past, present, future*

May 13, 2022

A chapter from James Scott, *Against the grain*  
Pierre Bourdieu, “Rethinking the state”

The small groups also held discussions of their own, some of them substantive, and an *ad hoc* group organized a session on Thomas Ertman, *The birth of the Leviathan: building states and regimes in medieval and early modern Europe*. Other meetings were devoted to the preparation of position papers for the conference in June.

## **II. Conferences in January and June 2022**

Each member had to submit a position paper to one conference or the other. These papers were not expected to be finished products, but nevertheless to be ancestral to publishable papers. In practice they varied considerably in how far along they were on this trajectory.

The first conference was held from 15 to 17 January 2022. As the fall advanced it became increasingly clear that holding it in person was doomed; accordingly, a Zoom meeting was set up. For this conference there were three papers:

Kate Pukhovaia, “Sayyid elites in pre-modern Muslim political systems”

Marie Legendre, “The disintegration of the Abbasid Empire, or was the early Islamic empire ever integrated?”

Merle Eisenberg, “Puppets, blood, and taxes: rulership in late antique states”

The second conference was recently held in person at Princeton University (June 3-6), though unfortunately three members could not travel and attended by Zoom (in one case the member in question was unwell, in another the member’s spouse was suffering a severe health crisis; in the third, the problem was obtaining a US visa). This conference netted six papers. The full names of the members and the titles of their papers are listed below:

Ian Morris, “Eunuchs on the margins: from Eurasia to the Americas”

Christian Mauder, “A tale of four rulers: transforming the relationship between political power and religious authority in confessionalized early 16<sup>th</sup>-century Eurasia”

Lorenzo Bondioli, “State, capital, and the Islamic commercial revolution”

Pamela Klasová, “Wonder and empire: medieval expeditions and explorations (7<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century)”

Shaya Landa, “Famines, the state, and the stability of Mongol Eurasia: preliminary remarks”

Naveena Naqvi, “Figurations of the Sayyids in pre-colonial North India”

The procedure adopted was to start with the author presenting the paper in about 15 minutes, followed by a first discussant speaking for up to 15 minutes on the first half of the paper, followed by open discussion, followed by a second discussant and open discussion of the second half. Four members of the group have yet to submit position papers.

At the June conference a two-hour planning session was also held, followed by an ad hoc second session at one of the dinners.

### **III. Planning**

Before mentioning the plans developed at the June conference, it should be noted that this conference was the first time the group had gathered in person—even if three members had to attend remotely. The experience was transformative. In the two years in which the

group met only by Zoom, everyone did their bit for the Seminar, that the members got to know each other and each other's work, and that they cooperated in creditable ways. It was nevertheless very clear that the pandemic had had a strong negative impact on everyone concerned. It was not just that interacting in a normal human fashion was possible – the pandemic had created strain in members' everyday lives, eating into their time budgets, and their institutions had imposed additional burdens; the withdrawal of Zoe Shan Lin from the group was in a sense just the tip of an iceberg—feelings of being overwhelmed were epidemic. Successful under these conditions is a source of considerable satisfaction, and several members have remarked that the Balzan meetings over these difficult years were a bright spot in their pandemic experience.

Nevertheless, the transformation was like the breaking of a dam. At the start of the conference members were encouraged to have fun and enjoy themselves, and they did just that. It was clear that they had been pining for the kind of human interaction in an intellectual context that they now experienced, and the result was a quite remarkable unleashing of sociability, energy, and creativity. The energy was manifest in the vigour and quality of the discussions, while the creativity strongly shaped the planning, not least with regard to publication.

The basic framework for future meetings involves no drastic change.

First, the semi-regular Zoom meetings will continue, with two of them assigned to the two members who have not yet submitted a sample paper to the group. Another two meetings are earmarked for continuing the theoretical discussion of premodern states begun in May, but with an emphasis on non-Western traditions (perhaps one on China and one on Ibn Khaldun).

Second, two three-day in-person conferences are planned for next year, one in January at the University of Leiden and the other in June at the Villa Cagnola near Milan. The agendas of these conferences will include the presentation of the remaining four position papers, including one by Rushain Abbasi with the title "'Ulama'-state relations in comparative and historical perspective." But the business of the conferences will by no means be limited to this; anything Balzan-related that is destined for publication may be workshopped at these conferences. Discussions on the theoretical aspects underpinning our work (state theory, relation between state and empire) may also be held. Likewise, such conferences may also be used as venues for small workshops to meet, though obviously they can also meet outside this framework if more convenient.

With regard to such small workshops, several ideas are currently on the table, some already well-developed and some still very tentative. One, for example, concerns relations between religious and political authorities, one concerns the role of descendants of the Prophet (Sayyids) in Muslim polities, one is about proto-globalization under the Mongol Empire. Book-manuscript reviews for some of our members will also be arranged.

Another important aspect of project activities concerns on-line resources. Zotero and Google Drive are already in use to archive relevant materials, and there are plans to allocate

some of our funds for the construction of a website linked to the Balzan Foundation. This website will be useful for the group and will also show the world what it is doing with the Balzan funds.

Finally, we have decided on a change in leadership: Marie Legendre has kindly agreed to join Antoine and Michael as a deputy director of the Seminar.

#### **IV. Publication**

In the planning session members shared a number of ideas. There was sentiment in favour of “one big book”, an analytical work to which all would contribute—a major venture in cooperative writing. Members also expressed readiness when publishing articles that have benefited from the group in one way or another to acknowledge the role of the Balzan Seminar, and two have already done so (Lorenzo Bondioli, “The Sicilian tithe business: state and merchants in the eleventh-century Islamic Mediterranean”, *Medieval Worlds: Comparative & Interdisciplinary Studies*, vol. 14 (2021), 208-28); Pamela Klasová, “A tyrant’s legacy in a medieval Arabic biographical dictionary: al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf on trial in Ibn ‘Asākir’s *History of Damascus*”, *JLAIBS*, vol. 1 (2022), pp. 133-66.

But by far the most practical and imaginative suggestion, Marie Legendre’s, to establish a book series on premodern states with a university press, and Edinburgh University Press has expressed a strong interest in this idea. Hopefully, an arrangement can be formalized by the end of the calendar year.

Possible volumes for the series:

Michael Cook is planning to write a short monograph on the cultural role of the state in premodern Eurasia for the series.

Ian Morris has an excellent dissertation on the courts of early Muslim states that could be included in a revised form.

Rushain Abbasi’s interest in relations between religious and political authorities looks set to give rise either to a monograph or to a collective volume of papers, if not both.

Five of the position papers already submitted and discussed would make a good collective volume (those of Merle Eisenberg, Lorenzo Bondioli, Marie Legendre, Shaya Landa, and Christian Mauder). They will be asked to revise their papers for publication within a year.

Members set great store by open access, and some funds may be directed towards securing this for their publications, but not to defray the whole cost.

This series would benefit from the prestige of the Balzan Foundation, and at the same time would contribute to making the role of the Foundation more widely visible in the academic

world. Moreover, in the longer run, such a series would attract submissions from fellow scholars who have no direct connection to our seminar.

In any event, plans for publication are by no means limited to the series. Four members are interested in the roles of the descendants of the Prophet, and a workshop on the subject may lead to a publication in the form of a thematic issue of a journal.

## **V. Extended Timeline**

The project began in 2020, and as things stand it ends in 2025. For most of its first two years, activities were dominated by the restrictions and disruptions of the pandemic, and thus confined to Zoom. Those years were certainly not wasted—they did a lot to prepare the group for the resumption of in-person meetings near the end of the second year—but there is a sense that the in-person conference represents a new start. Thus, the project will continue for an additional two years with respect to the originally planned timeline.