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Spengler *redivivus*? Garth Fowden's First Millennium

Garth Fowden has reopened “the debate about ,the West and the Rest“.¹ He modestly claims that he has written a “programmatic book”, which overcomes “Eurocentric stereotypes about the past and present” and reformulates “the history of the First Millennium in order to fit Islam into it”.² He is prepared to propose “a new historical periodization designed to bring late Antiquity and early Islam together in a single narrative” and believes that the idea of “the First Millennium was brought to birth in the mid-1980’s in the a-textual world of pre-Christian North European archaeology”.³ He suggests a new concept—“maturation”—by which he means “the development of such systems from their beginnings—often hard to pin down and differentiate from other systems—to a point where they acquire a recognizable identity, which may resemble how they appear today, assuming they have survived.”⁴

Although Garth Fowden asserts that he has reflected on “the roots of late antique studies”,⁵ his perception of the history of his crucial question, when Islam was included in historical narratives, is rather idiosyncratic. It is surprising that he has ignored Oswald Spengler’s most influential work *Decline of the West* (*Der Untergang des Abendlandes*), published in two volumes in 1918 and 1922 respectively.⁶ The gentleman scholar, whose academic career had failed, interpreted the military defeat of the *Kaiserreich* in World War I as symptom of the decline of the European-American culture.⁷ The book keenly touched contemporary sensibilities and determined the historical—and political—perceptions of a whole generation. Already by the mid-1920s more than 100,000 copies were sold; quite an impressive figure for a severe and difficult book on the philosophy of history. Readers were fascinated by his at-

1 Garth Fowden, *Before and After Muhammad. The First Millennium Refocused*, Princeton/Oxford 2014, 1.

2 *Ibid.* 3.

3 Cf. Garth Fowden, “Late Antiquity, Islam, and the First Millennium: A Eurasian Perspective”, *Millennium* 12 (2106), [1].

4 *Ibid.* [2].

5 Fowden, *Before and After Muhammad* (n. 1), 18 ff.

6 Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes. Umriss einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte*, 2 vols. (Munich : C.H. Beck, 1918/22). I refer to the special edition in one volume of 1981.—An English translation was published between 1926 and 1929: *The Decline of the West. Form and Actuality*. Authorized translation with notes by Charles Francis Atkinson, 2 vols. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926/29) (various reprints). An electronic version is available: <https://archive.org/details/Decline-Of-The-West-Oswald-Spengler>. I quote from this version.

7 Cf. Stefan Rebenich, *C.H. Beck. 1763–2013. Der kulturwissenschaftliche Verlag und seine Geschichte*. Munich 2013, 287–310 with further reading.

tempt to understand the predetermining power of history.⁸ In accordance with the organicist model of birth and death, Spengler predicted the inescapable end of West-European and American culture. Hardly anybody remained unaffected by the concept of the radical imperilment and dissolution of all that had been considered important up to that time. Spengler provided, especially in intellectual circles, a way of understanding and rationalizing the contemporary rise of totalitarian dictatorships. Democracy became an ephemeral middle stage between monarchical and dictatorial rule. From a historico-philosophical perspective, the Republic of Weimar was deconstructed.

These introductory observations are hardly new, since Spengler's *opus magnum* has often been discussed. For our purposes, however, it is striking that Fowden's idea of a First Millennium and his concept of "maturation" at least implicitly reflects key elements of Spengler's narrative. Although the latter took a major interest in the analogy between antiquity and the Occident,⁹ he developed a comparative "morphology" of eight "high cultures" (*Hochkulturen*): the Babylonian, Egyptian, Indian, Chinese, Mexican (i.e. Mayan and Aztec), Graeco-Roman, Arabian, and Western (i.e. European and American). The interpretation of world history formulated by Spengler was based on the assumption that every culture advanced in accordance with natural law through the ages of man; they were thus to be divided into youth (*Jugend*), growth (*Aufstieg*), maturity (*Blütezeit*), and decay (*Verfall*).¹⁰ Civilization was "the inevitable destiny" of every culture: The transition from culture to civilization indicates the moment when cultures are no longer expanding and innovative.¹¹

Fowden has obviously advanced the concept of "maturation". It is applied "to cultural and conceptual systems", and he is confident that 'decline' does not necessarily follow immediately upon maturation".¹² Despite these considerations and restrictions, both Fowden and Spengler postulate an "organic succession"¹³ and are thus advocating an evolutionist reading of history. "Fulfilment and finale (*Vollendung und Ausgang*)"¹⁴ of a culture—or a system—is, for both, a decisive part of historical analysis.

And Spengler invented the first millennium. He concluded antiquity with the reign of Augustus; thereafter followed an intermediary period of a thousand years without any development, which he saw as characterized by the Arabian culture.¹⁵ With regard to its structure this culture was still influenced by antiquity, or more pre-

8 Cf. Spengler, *Decline* (n. 6), vol. i, 3.

9 Detlef Felken, *Oswald Spengler. Konservativer Denker zwischen Kaiserreich und Diktatur*, Munich 1988, 42.

10 Cf. Spengler, *Untergang* (n. 6), 36 = Spengler, *Decline* (n. 6), vol. i, 26.

11 Cf. Spengler, *Untergang* (n. 6), 43–4 = Spengler, *Decline* (n. 6), vol. i, 31–2.

12 Fowden, *Late Antiquity* (n. 3), [2]; id., *Before and After Muhammad* (n. 1), 55.

13 Spengler, *Untergang* (n. 6), 43 = Spengler, *Decline* (n. 6), vol. i, 31.

14 *Ibid.*

15 Cf. Spengler, *Untergang* (n. 6), 234–5 = Spengler, *Decline* (n. 6), vol. i, 183.

cisely by Greek civilisation; its nature, however, was fundamentally characterized by the Orient. The crisis of late antiquity and the turmoil of barbarian migrations were a consequence of the ossification of the once lively ancient culture, which began with Augustus. It was Spengler who created a new millennium by separating late antiquity from the preceding classical period and the early Middle Ages from the subsequent High Middle Ages. Diocletian was thus described as the first "Caliph", who "had linked the Imperium with the pagan cult-Churches",¹⁶ and Augustine as "the last great thinker of Early Arabian Scholasticism", who is said to have been "anything but a Western intellect".¹⁷

Spengler broke with the received conventions of western history and historiography. He rejected not only the traditional periodization of history into antiquity, the Middle Ages and modernity, which goes back to Christoph Cellarius (1638–1707),¹⁸ but he explicitly adopted a perspective of universal history which placed the Arabian, Indian, Babylonian, Mexican, Chinese and Egyptian "high culture" side by side with classical antiquity and the West. The geographic expansion, which he called a "Copernican discovery", was meant to overcome "the Ptolemaic system of history."¹⁹ At the same time, Spengler broadened his perspective so as to understand late antiquity as a cultural entity which integrated Judaeo-Christian and Arabian elements. The study of this period requires a new type of "historical research" which integrates different disciplines and allows the scholar to grasp the problems of the Arabian culture. But "theological research, in its turn, broke up its domain into subdivisions according to the different West-European confessions, and so the 'philological' frontier between West and East came into force, and still is in force, for Christian theology also. The Persian world fell to the student of Iranian philology, and as the Avesta texts were disseminated, though not composed, in an Aryan dialect, their immense problem came to be regarded as a minor branch of the Indologist's work and so disappeared absolutely from the field of vision of Christian theology. And lastly the history of Talmudic Judaism, since Hebrew philology became bound up in one specialism with Old Testament research, not only never obtained separate treatment, but has been *completely forgotten* by all the major histories of religions with which I am acquainted, although these find room for every Indian sect (since folk-lore, too, ranks as a specialism) and every primitive Negro religion to boot. Such is the preparation of scholarship for the greatest task that historical research has to face to-day."²⁰

Certainly, Spengler's philosophy of history can only be judged sceptically; his crude division of different cultures, characterized by a specific cultural unity and its underlying soul (the Apolline soul of classical antiquity, the Faustian soul of

¹⁶ Spengler, *Decline* (n. 6), vol. ii, 178 = Spengler, *Untergang* (n. 6), 771.

¹⁷ Spengler, *Decline* (n. 6), vol. ii, 241 = Spengler, *Untergang* (n. 6), 851.

¹⁸ Cf. Spengler, *Decline* (n. 6), vol. i, 18 = Spengler, *Untergang* (n. 6), 24.

¹⁹ Spengler, *Decline* (n. 6), vol. i, 18 = Spengler, *Untergang* (n. 6), 24.

²⁰ Spengler, *Decline* (n. 6), vol. ii, 191 (original accentuation) = Spengler, *Untergang* (n. 6), 786f.

the West, and the Magian soul of the Arabian period) cannot persuade; his biological and evolutionist periodization of history has rightly been criticized; numerous shortcomings, exaggerations, inconsistencies, factual errors, questionable analogies and misinterpretations have been observed.²¹ But Spengler, while responding to the crisis of historicism and the constitution of a long late antiquity at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, also transcends traditional stereotypes. So he abandons 476 as a boundary between two epochs and along with Alois Riegl, Eduard Meyer, and Matthias Gelzer stresses the continuity of the epoch despite political discontinuities. He recognizes the Arabian tradition as an autonomous entity between Graeco-Roman antiquity and western modernity, or more precisely: between Greek civilisation and the premodern culture of the West. He interprets the coming of Islam as an integral part of rather than the end of late antiquity. He makes late antiquity the subject of interdisciplinary and comparative research *avant la lettre*, research not directed by religious or epistemological presuppositions. Spengler created the basis of a new understanding of the first millennium and of an innovative approach to research in the field of late antiquity, which necessarily includes the Arabian history and Islamic culture.

It is to be regretted that Garth Fowden has not read—and discussed—Spengler. What a pity!

21 Cf. Alexander Demandt, "Spengler und die Spätantike," in Peter Christian Ludz (ed), *Spengler heute. Sechs Essays*, Munich 1980, 25–48 (= id., *Geschichte der Geschichte. Wissenschaftshistorische Essays*, Cologne 1997, 60–80).