

FRED M. DONNER

Fred M. Donner continues to await the appearance of his segment of the translation of the Arab historian al-Tabarī's extensive universal history, still in press; for details on this project, readers can consult the *Annual Reports* for the preceding two years. While taking care of proofreading and indexing this volume in spare moments, he proceeded with several case studies that form part of his continuing work on the origins and early development of historical writing in the Islamic community. In particular, he has collected material for studies dealing with the Islamic conquest of Egypt and with the treaty terms for

the town of Khaybar, in western Arabia, at the time of the Prophet Muhammad. His general approach is to view the historical narratives not simply as collections of “facts,” but as reflections of the self-conception of the early Islamic community as it evolved between the seventh and tenth centuries C.E. That is, the modern reader must first ask of these historical narratives what kind of image of the Islamic community they strive to represent, before he or she can assess the accuracy of what the narratives say about a particular set of events.

In November 1991, Mr. Donner presented a draft paper on “The Origins of the Conceptual Dichotomy ‘Abode of Islam’/‘Abode of War’ (*Dâr al-Islâm / Dâr al-Harb*) in Islamic Law” at the Middle East Studies Association annual meeting in Washington, D.C. He looks forward to developing the tentative conclusions of this paper in fuller form after some of his other projects have been submitted for publication.

During the winter, he drafted the article on “Arabs” for the next edition of the *World Book Encyclopedia*. This proved to be a challenging task because the entry was expected to provide not only a summary of all major aspects of life in the Arab world today, from food and clothing to patterns of family life and aspects of high culture, but also a summary of the history of the Arabs, which reaches back about three thousand years—and to do all of this in a very brief article. Writing such a piece forces one to leave behind the scholarly minutiae on which most of us spend much of our time, and to try to present a general picture in bold strokes that is comprehensible to those with little or no background in the subject. Because such publications shape the basic attitudes of people learning about a subject for the very first time, they have a much more direct impact on the knowledge of the Near East among the general public than most of the technical scholarship we at the Oriental Institute produce. Yet, we recall that writing for a general audience is also an old tradition here; after all, the founder of the Oriental Institute, James Henry Breasted, authored a textbook and produced films designed to communicate the importance of the Institute’s work to a broad public.

During the year, Mr. Donner was engaged in his usual teaching and administrative duties for the Oriental Institute, the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, The Center for Middle Eastern Studies, and the Humanities Division. He was gratified to receive at the spring convocation the Quantrell Award in Humanities for excellence in undergraduate teaching. He continued to serve as coordinator of the University of Chicago-University of Damascus Affiliation program, which arranges research visits to Chicago by scholars from the University of Damascus, Syria, and sponsors Chicago scholars in Syria. During the winter of 1990–91 the Oriental Institute benefited from the presence here of Dr. Najda al-Khammash, an early Islamic historian

from the University of Damascus' Department of History, who proved to be a lively participant in several classes and in a workshop on Middle Eastern urbanism organized by Donald Whitcomb.

In November, Mr. Donner was elected president of Middle East Medievalists, an international organization that serves as a network for those who have a special interest in the Near East and North Africa between roughly 500 and 1500 C.E. Part of this job involves editing *Al-'Usûr al-Wustâ*, the Bulletin of Middle East Medievalists, which Donner enlarged so that it could include more material of scholarly interest and could better serve the organizations' members as a vehicle for the exchange of information, opinions, and opportunities. John Sanders of the Oriental Institute Computer Laboratory, and Tom Holland, Tom Urban, and Richard Schoen of the Publications Office, all helped provide technical assistance in producing an improved version of *Al-'Usûr al-Wustâ*.

In the autumn, Mr. Donner was elected to serve a three-year term on the board of directors of the Middle East Studies Association of North America, the main scholarly organization serving the needs of those concentrating on the study of the modern and medieval Islamic Middle East.
