A picture of the possible origins of Islam in the light of early material sources: why digging at Al-Hira is key

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The picture of the emergence of Islam had long relied on written records. The historical events described in the mid-8th C by Ibn Ishaq,[1] two or three generations later by Ibn Hisham[2] as well as Al-Baladuri and the polymath Al-Tabari[3] in the 10th C were long taken for granted. Though some work, such as that by Al-Waqidi was questioned by many even in the Islamic fold, scholarly skepticism proper came, as you could imagine, from the West, and came quite late. Despite some mainstream scholars being charged with conspiracy theories at times before[4], en masse it surfaced after WWII and sought to contextualise Islamic origins by making references to earlier, chiefly Syriac sources[5]. The job was made all the easier by the work of 19th and early 20th C Orientalists and Syriacists.[6] One of the protagonists of what came to be called a revisionist school, using a historical-critical method, was John Wansbrough, who claimed the Quran itself must have been written as late as two centuries after Hijra. He pointed to the Arabic script we see in the Quran having not really evolved until mid 7th century and the available later-date variants pointing to a lack of an original text. It was thus believed to be the work of Ibn Hisham[7] and the creation of the texts was put down to a need for a scripture to guide Abbasid jurisprudence[8].

Another claim by Wansbrough, a major early revisionist and inspiration for later scholars[9], was that there was no archeological evidence for the places featuring in the early Islamic narrative[10]. Therefore, it is in archeology, ancient art and contemporary 7th C writing where we perhaps ought to look for clues as to the nature of the origins of Islam, which might or might not corroborate the image we are familiar with.

This brief outline, possibly and hopefully of more detailed research, proposes the following approach. A selection archeological evidence that seems representative of mainstream and heterodox scholarship is presented and compared to some popular theories, a working interpretation is then formulated. This interpretation in turn points back to the archeological site of Al-Hira[11] as a place whose more thorough excavation may shed some new light on the nature of early Islam.

The picture we are rather familiar with is that of Islam being from an outset a self-contained religion, combatting polytheism and distinct from preceding monotheisms. The early military campaigns pitched early Muslim commanders against the Byzantine and Persian empires, inhabited

1 Some reconstruction of Ibn Ishaq available with a newer translation. Most of the work, now lost, has been preserved in Ibn Hisham and Al-Tabari.

2 More discussion of modern scholarship, as exemplified by Donner (1998)

3 Some of the work available online, such as *The History of Al-Tabari*, vol. 6

4 "The recent campaign to cast aspersions on the relevance and reliability of the whole corpus of classical Arabic literature of the *jahiliyyah* period which began with '*Usul al-Shu'ara al-'Arabi'* by the famous orientalist D.S. Margoliouth and reached its zenith with Dr Taha Hussain's '*Fi al-Adab al-Jahili'* has unfortunately even influenced some Muslim scholars." in studying-islam.org

5 For a representative selection of these cf. Penn (2015). Studying early sources, Günter Lüling, believed early followers of Muhammad were Unitarian Christians, whereas the polytheists they fought were Trinitarians. Interesting discussion of Lüling in Grodzki (2020); Loosley, E. (2002) also gives this information "the emissary sent by the Byzantine Emperor Constantius II (337-61) to Yemen made converts as far as the Hadhramaut [...]Theophilus the Indian was, like the emperor, a follower of the Arian heresy" but "here is no record of the Arian heresy ever gaining a foothold in the Arabian peninsula." [p.7] Interesting, considering the Muslim stance on Jesus.

6 I Goldziher, T. Nöldeke, C. Snouck Hurgonje, E. W. Brooks, J. B. Chabot, P. Bedjan, I. Guidi, A. Mingana, E.A.W Budge, F. Nau, J.M. Fiey and T. J. Lamy among others.

7 Wansbourgh (1987)

8 Wansbrough (1977)

9 Cf. Crone & Cook (1977: viii, n. p. 167) in their repeated acknowledgments there.

10 Wansbrough, *op. cit.*, 1987.

11 My special thanks to Hasan Al-Khoee, Institute of Ismaili Studies, London, for his valuable suggestions on the sources for the history and religion of Al-Hira.

mostly or largely by Christians. The ensuing conquest was presented by many sources as rather bloody and the impression we had until recently was one of Islam standing in opposition and involved in conflict with and persecution of other faiths, including the oppression of *Ahl-e-Kitab*[12].

Gideon Avni, a long-time head of the Archaeological Division of the Israel Ministry of Antiquities, has conducted extensive research into late Byzantine and early Islamic period in Palestine and concluded that "The gradual change in settlement culminated during the Early Islamic period, and collapse occurred as late as the eleventh century. The process of Islamisation was even slower, and Christianity prevailed under Islamic rule as late as the eleventh century. The archaeological findings provide a firm basis for a reconsideration of current historical paradigms." Avni then calls for "more subtle use of arguments in stone alongside the written documents" (2014)

Admitting it is far from easy to establish a link between archeological findings and religious identities[13], he nonetheless lists the numbers of sites studied, with 40,000 excavated ones in Israel; slightly fewer in Jordan; 500 churches in Palestine, 150 in Jordan, 130 synagogues and somewhat fewer mosques. Avni says that "none of them bear any evidence of destruction or violence in the 3rd decade of the 7th C." On the contrary, many churches had been (re-)established in Palestine and Trans-Jordan not only in 630-640 but by as late as the 9th century.

Citing work of Griffith (2008), Guidetti (2013) on the contiguity between churches and mosques in the early Islamic period, Avni points to archeological evidence demonstrating a process rather than a sudden change. Some well-known structures, such as the Central Mosque of Damascus betray this very phenomenon: a pagan temple of Hadad and the Jupiter, turned a Byzantine church, finally became a Muslim mosque, but not without almost a century of sharing the church between Christians, praying in the West side and Muslims, gathering in the East end, under the Umayyads. Waldemar Januszczak (2003), the art critic calls it "religious timeshare" that held until Caliph Al-Walid purchased the land from Christians. Finished in 715 at a time when Muslim became much more assertive, it cost seven years of taxes from Syria. Yet, contrary to popular belief, the lush mosaic greenery on the golden walls surely represents peace and Paradise, rather than Walid's conquest. A number of sites feature churches literally adjacent to mosques, as in the case of a basilica and a mosque constructed adjacent to it from the south in Regiopolis, northern Syria, pointing to the coexistence of the two communities in 8th early 9th C[14].

Another example of uninterrupted Christian worship comes from the Negev. The site of Nitzana[15], with a church established in end 7th C, shows no evidence of Muslim presence, going on to the early 10th C. The nearby site of Shivta-Subayta (not scientifically published), however, demonstrates contiguity between a larger southern church in Shivta and a small adjacent mosque. Many excavated but not published studies are now raising questions, such as about the use of decorated artefact spolia such as lintels in the construction of the mosque there: stones with crosses were excavated in a threshold of the mosque. Shivta/Subayta's Islamic dwellers there[16] had a mosque erected there in 7/8 C, possibly c. 700-725. There was, however, a stage of abandonment before building the mosque, which questioned the theory of coexistence, with door sealing of uncertain timing[17]. This raises a question of what had happened to the Christian community before

12 As in the famous quote by Moshe Gil "It appears that the period of the conquest was also that of the destruction of synagogues and churches of the Byzantine era" Gil (1992: 61)

13 In this context he discusses some Byzamtine-Islamic connections, as in the find near Kibbutz Beth Guvrin/Eleutheropolis in 3-8/9th C. Research there focussed on an urban necropolis having 6 concentrations of tombs with openings to catacombs. As late as 9th C it was still a multireligious city, the graves having ornamentation with Christian, pagan and Jewish affiliations. Same Jewish burial tombs in found in Christian caves. In this context he asks "Should we divide artefact symbolism from the affiliation of the deceased? Is a lamp a lamp or a symbol? Should we take archaeology with a grain of salt?" Avni (2016). More information in Avni's other publications *A Contiinuity...* and *From Polis ...*

14 *Cf.* Guidetti (2013) on the situation in Homs, Edessa, Amida and Aleppo as well as Amman, suggesting that mid 7th C surrender pacts were kept and mosques barely encroached on the Cristian temenos.

15 a place known for the papyri archive, late Byzantine early Islamic, coming from end 7th C to AD 705

16 These were educated people, doing jobs betraying professional continuity of the previous trade of cistern cleaning, typical of the Christian population, thus sparking a question of the community's possible conversion to Islam.

17 Teper *et al.* (2015)

the place assumed an Islamic character. A tentative answer will be provided further on along with the interpretation of the "arguments in stone."

Not only did mosques not markedly encroach Christian holy precincts, but churches were renovated and erected long after conquest. Christian presence was long marked in the western part and around Lake Kinneret, with a church renovated 107 AH (721), one that used a new Hijra calendar. Churches were constructed or redesigned as late as in 785 (!), with traces of pilgrimage still seen in that period. Capernaum demonstrated a continuity in Christian worship between 8-11 C. Like Tiberias, Jerusalem witnessed a clear distinction between the Christian quarter and Haram-e-Sharif, but there was some additional construction of chapels 8-10 C in Holy Sepulchre Basilica. The strong presence must have been striking as the 10th C traveller Mukaddasi seemed rather angry when asking why Jews and Christians were still dominating Jerusalem (Avni, 2016).

The material evidence thus points to a coexistence of communities, with some differences between regions. Large scale conversions apparently started no earlier than 11th C. This indicates a "process, not crisis, and change rather than dissent.[18]" There are reports coming from antiquity, some of which related to the excavated places, but some of those pointing to a conflict have not been corroborated by evidence[19]. Still, the literature referring to the period – the very words by Mukaddasi as well as stories of 9th Century persecutions[20] – seems to fly in the face of the finds.

One interpretation of the contradiction is that at some point the origins of Islam had possibly come to be seen as necessarily resembling the relations that obtained several hundred years later. A mismatch between the version of events as known to Ibn Hisham and what could actually have happened in the first four decades of the 7th C is quite clear in the debate over the 7th C qiblas and the exact location and character of the holy place they point to. Avni (2016) also discusses some open mosques in Negev highlands. These open mosques face Mecca. City churches-turned-mosques face further north, though. The flagship revisionists Patricia Crone and Michael Cook entertained the possibility that early Muslims bowed to another site, possibly Ta'if or Petra with its many polytheistic temples (1973. p. 23, n. 19). Having analysed early inscriptions from the Negev, written in the Kufic script, Nevo (1993) theorised that Palestine was in fact overridden by Arab pagans in 630[21], while the other Arabs must have represented "confessionally indistinct monotheism (Donner, 2015)."

The qibla change has more recently been further explored by Gibson in his book (2011) and broadcast in the film *The Sacred City*[22], where he compares the geographical references in the Quran with historical locations and discusses the qiblas of 12 early mosques. He has found, using satellite imagery, that they all point to Petra. Though controversial, his research seems reliable as he explains exactly how he arrived at the results, what parameters he looked at and how he processed them. There are some criticisms pointing to Gibson's lack of understanding why early qiblas point in various directions[23]. However, there are a number of other arguments why Mecca did not correspond to *masjid-al-haram* and, indeed, it is very strange why – for all the reasons King provides to rebut Gibson on the qiblas – the earliest ones, from various directions point to Petra which, incidently, does correspond to the holy temple on a number of counts[24].

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18 Avni stresses the phrase in his papers and lectures.

19 Jarash/Gerasa: 8th C saw the introduction of a congregation of mosques, but a continuity of Byzantine churches lasted only until mid-8th C. In Cesarea, there is the famous octagonal church on temple platform. Apparently a major mosque was built there in the 11th C but no archeological evidence remains. Cesarea was long believed to have been destroyed by Persians and/or Muslims between 618 and 642, but newer evidence suggests that after the Muslim conquest, with the flight of Byzantine aristocracy, the city very quickly declined and its buildings fell into disrepair. In Ramla, the early Islamic capital, there is Islamic presence that apparently entailed a conflict: Christians were said to have been trying to hide columns from their church so these could not be used for mosques. No archeological evidence has been found, though.

20 *Cf.* the story of the 9th C Christian martyr Abd-al-Masih, former Arab soldier, once fighting Byzantium, who was killed in Ramla for converting to Christianity and abandoning Islam in 860. *The Cambridge History...* p. 182.

21 a theory now commonly questioned, also by Avni.

22 The film is available online at Dan Gibson's Youtube channel. The part on qiblas further elaborated there, too.

23 King (2017); Gibson responded to this rebuttal, but his paper is no longer available online.

If we do not agree with the theory of Mecca gaining importance only in the aftermath of the *fitna* between Umayyads and Ibn Zubayr and the apparent transfer of the black stone from there to today's Mecca, perhaps Crone&Cook have a point in their alternative identification of *masjid-al-haram* in Ta'if, then. It is just 40 kilometres away from the actual Mecca and indeed there were major pagan temples there[25]. The added value of such a hypothesis is that Ta'if had a vast Jewish presence. Muhammad's highly likely encounters with these neighbour of Mecca's and the opposition to him from the Jewish clans of Ta'if would go some way in explaining the prophet's insider knowledge of Judaism[26] and the subsequent pejorative references to Jews in the Quran[27].

Tantalizing as the prospect of the Kaaba being a place other than Mecca may be to some people[28], the discussion about Petra highlights another, perhaps much more important aspect of the origins of Islam: the close and long-standing geographical and cultural connections of the influential section of the 6th and 7th C Arab elites with northern Arabia and the fringes of the Byzantine Empire. It needs to be borne in mind that Arab culture and trade featured very prominently as far north as Palmyra, Edessa and Hatra. After all, the Nabateans are thought to be the same people who are called Ishmaelites (name similar to Nabaioth, the firstborn of Ishmael's sons) in the Hebrew Bible and who, in public perception, have became conflated with Edomites. Some today point to Nebat being an old name of a region in today's Iraq, thus suggesting a Babylonian origin[29]. Still, the Nabateans shared their origins, culture and language with Arab tribes,

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24 Discussed by Gibson. Also, the Quranic verse 48:24 speaks of "within/in the womb of Mecca," and taking into account the gorge, where the place is situated, it makes perfect sense. On top of the arguments presented there, there is also a mention of people stopping believers from bringing over animals for a sacrifice. There is a famous, picturesque site in Petra, used for animal sacrifices and there is Mt Hor, with its namesake tomb of Aaron, a site of pilgrimages. Such sites were situated near camps [*hirta/hira*]. *Hirta/hira* and Hor somehow reverberate with the name of the cave where the Quranic *risala* is said to have taken place. Petra and the other names under which it is known, is strangely absent from the list of places conquered by the early Muslims, as if it had already been in their possession from the outset. 'Kaaba' is the term of a major temple in Arabia (like the kaaba of Najran). Last not least, the conquest of Palestine, undertaken in the same year as the campaign launched from Medina ending up in taking over Mecca, seems a little far fetched given the geographical location of Mecca and the necessary consolidation of power it would have required. If we assume 'the holy temple' to be closer to Palestine, the idea of both events occurring in the same year becomes more feasible.

25 Hisham Ibn Al-Kalbi, in his *Book of Idols*, mentions the destruction of the temple of Lāt in the aftermath of the conversion of the town and its tribes.

26 This is the fundamental message of *Hagarism* by Crone&Cook: Islam was a new incarnation of Jewish Messianism: the "*Muhajirun*" were initially those Arabs who thought they were returning to Palestine to take dominion of God's Kingdom in the Holy Land, with Omar dubbed "*Farooq*" (Redeemer). This would explain the Islamic emphasis on the Torah and Moses and disregard of the prophets. Needless to say, the caliphs were later to change tactics as Muslims sought to emancipate themselves form the Jewish religion, which had its own establishment and which would sooner or later have taken them up and the caliphs would have lost control over the religion. Methodologically, Crone&Cook seem to betray some over-reliance on the Monophysite authors, such as BarHebraeus. Monophysites had had an extremely troubled relationship with Jews, especially in Alexandria (Cyrillian Monophysites in the 5th C) and Najran in the 6th C. They also experienced particular disappointment and had serious grievances against Muslims. The predominantly Monophysite Syrians are shown in the same Syriac sources to have welcomed Muslims, whom they treated as liberators from Byzantines. The Miaphysite patriarch of Alexandria at the time of the Muslim conquest took a pro-Muslim stance. The Miaphysite patriarchs must have expected to be among the religious leaders, recognised by the Arabs as such in that they would not have to pay the *jizya;* for some time were said to have received gifts and support from the leaders of the Believers. Also, Loosley (2002) talks about the Muslim preferences among Christian sects: "It seems that the first Muslims had better relations with the Church of the East than with the Syrian Orthodox" [p.10]. By the 13th C (Bar Hebraeus lifetime) Muslim attitudes to Christians, incl. Miaphysites, had changed diametrically. Already in the 680s Miaphysite clerics are reported as having to pay *jizya* in Egypt: al-Qāḍī (2018: 113, n. 254)

27 See the bolded references at The Jewish Virtual Library This site misses Sura Al-Burooj/Constellations (85) with verses 4:10 showing the Jewish murderers of the Christians in Najran as the type of those who put Believers to test and then do not convert, earning the fires of Hell. Quite evidently, Muhammad felt he had an important message to the Jews, a people of the Book, but their opposition made them look like enemies of God.

28 ...which would obviously mean that many Muslims were unable to perform one of the pillars of Islam, with all the consequences for their afterlife.

29 Zahran (2009): the author claims the Iraqi Nebat and the Arab Nabateans should not be confused. On the Mesopotamian origin see Taylor (2001)

such as Ghassanids, who were Byzantine *foederati*, guarding the eastern border of the empire against the Persian Sassanians. Interestingly enough, the first Muslim Caliphate had its headquarters in Damascus and relied on the economy and administration provided by people of the same religion and largely the same ethnic origin as the federated tribes – the frontmen of the Romans. These tribes had long been Christian: some Chalcedonian but, apparently, in the late 6th C mostly Miaphysite[30].

Exactly the same situation obtained in the northeastern frontier of Arabia, or rather, the southwestern fringes of the Sassanian Empire. Today's Iraq, as well as Eastern Arabia had become largely Christian by end 6th C. And like Ghassanids on the Roman side, its leading tribe – the Lakhmids – were key allies of the *Shahinshah* it his campaigns against the Byzantines. The *Ibad* – the elites of the Lakhmid capital, Al-Hira – had long[31] been Christians, except that they were mostly affiliated with the Church of the East, sometimes called the Persian Church. Interestingly, with the rapprochement between the Persians and Romans, their Arab allies fell out of favour, their polities were crippled and their rulers eliminated. One reason that becomes quite obvious is that by the early 7th C Arabs had become a true power, strong enough for both superpowers to wish to suppress. With the change of rulers in both empires, though, the relative friendship and cessation of warfare came to an end and the two were fatally weakened by the devastating war that only ended in 628.

Syriac sources speak of a king of the Arabs in approx 620[32]. This corresponds to the *hijra* to Medina. Yathrib is known to have paid contributions to the Lakhmid rulers of Al-Hira, and following the assassination of the last Lakhmid king by the Persians, most Arab tribes are known to have rebelled against the Sassanians[33]. Perhaps we ought to see the Constitution of Medina – another witness of the time – in this context. Looking *ex post*, we can see that the rationale for subsequent attacks on faraway Arab tribes came at the pretext of breaking the Medinan pact[34]. One cannot help but see the alliance signed there and then as a political union of Arabs against the Byzantines and Sassanians, cemented by a shared religion: one very well known to the signatories, but expressed and interpreted with a certain twist[35].

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30 This is evidenced not only by the remains of churches and monasteries in *Palestina Secunda* and *Tertia* but by the vast popularity with the Arabs of pilgrimage sites such as this of St Sergius near today's Deir ez-Zor and by an interesting story of a Ghassanid ruler Al-Harith ibn Jabalah undertaking a religious mediation between the Byzantine emperor and Miaphysite monks. His son, Al-Mundhir ibn al-Ḥārith (569 to circa 581) remained loyal to Miaphysitism despite the fortunes of the confession having changed as there was no longer the kind of protection formerly offered by empress Theodora. This and other factors added up to get the Byzantines to disband this Arab federation and get rid of the Arab ruler upon a pretext. Interestingly, it seems to be common knowledge in Ethiopia that – as narrated by Ibn Ishaq ans Al-Tabari – the first Muslim refugees fleeing the Quraysh persecution of the 610s, eyed protection with the Miaphysite Abyssinian Negash, reportedly called "righteous" or "having the Truth" by Muhammad.

31 The *Chronicle of Seert* speaks of a monk Abdisho, active under Catholicos Tomarsa (363-371). He founded some monasteries before returning to Hira: Trimingham (1990: 280). As early as end 4th C it had the first Christian king. By the 6th century, the camp-city had Christian elites and a number of monasteries. The areas to the south and southeast had long seen Christian penetration and the provincial area of Beth Qatraye (South East Arabia) had dioceses in Mashmahig, Dairin, Hagar, Hatta, Soqotra and Yemen. More on the pre-Islamic (first) Syriac and (then) Christian penetration of eastern and southeastern Arabia in Loosley, E. (2002). The source also reports the council of Darin in 476 stipulating that Christians pay poll-tax to the Muslim authorities but the bishops shall not. Syriacs/Christians were important pearl traders, setting off on long voyages from today's Bahrain, Qatar and Oman and the local Christian population was very well educated and produced great religious figures: "Only an entrenched system of organised and well equipped monastic schools could have trained these men and this argues for a vibrant religious life in Bet Qatrayeh in the seventh century" [p. 17]. Also see: Potts (1990:242) & Bernard *et al* (1991: 145-181, 165)

32 Von Sivers (2017); and the polity needed a religion; the Quran thought by him "communal work of scribes deeply steeped in the scriptures of Christianity incl. All non-canonical ones[...] a concordance of […] Christian writing"

33 Landau-Tasseron, ḎŪ QĀR

34 Al-Tabari mentions a "rebellion against the state of Medina" as a pretext to attach Bani Yarbu and their chief Maik ibn Nuwayrah, who had ordered that the tax be kept by the people following the death of their sheikh (Muhammad). Al-Baladhuri (1916)

35 Just a working hypothesis or just a hunch here from someone who was once into politics: aware of a large presence of both Christians and Jews and seeking to keep peace in his kingdom, an Arab leader may have just wanted to bring Christians and Jews together on an agenda and creed they could share with the ruling Arab clans acting as arbiters in religious disputes between Christians and Jews.

Donner offers an interesting insight into the nature of the term "Believers" as expressed in the constitution, signed by some Jewish tribes. In his opinion, Jews were considered to be among Believers[36], as were Christians. One God and the Last Day as well as living righteously seemed the most essential early tenets[37]. He thus sums up the beginnings of Islam: "In my own work I have proposed that Muḥammad began a movement of "Believers" (*mu'minūn*) that at first included not only those who followed the Qur'ān but also other monotheists, such as Jews and Christians, who were deemed adequately righteous[38], and only about the year 700 C.E. redefined itself as the distinct monotheistic confession we know as Islam.[39]" (Donner, 2019)

Peter von Sivers[40] also takes up the theme of Islamic sources being quite late, so he also embraces the contextualism approach (2017). However, he recognizes that, as carbon dating reveals[41], the Quran is indeed a 7th or possibly even a late 6th C source. He sees the beginnings of Islam in the religious conflicts within Christianity, which reached a peak in the 6th C, with numerous assassinations and scandalous depositions of bishops in a very fragmented Christianity, with the Emperor trying to retain ecclesiastical control.[42] The Christological debates culminated in the emergence of a theological current among the Miaphysites (Syriac Orthodox or "Jacobites', after the 6th C formation of a separate church by Jacob Baraddaeus) that was called Tritheism[43]. A deep

36 "There is then every reason to believe that the Jews of Yathrib who worked with the Believers were full members of the community of Believers in every sense." Donner (2002-2003: 9-53); *cf. idem* (2010).

37 "B3a. It is not lawful to (any) Mu'min who has affirmed what is on this sheet and/or believes in God and the Last Day, to support or shelter an aggressor/innovator." (*Constitution of Medina* as quoted by Donner (2002-2003*) Ibid* Donner claims there are 3 references to Muhammad, but the analysis of textual variants led Donner to believe the honorifics there ('*nabu'*, 'glorious', etc.) were later additions. Donner claims that the role of leader and arbiter was the most important. He also says there is no documentary evidence of Muhammad until the mid-60s AH. "Arabic inscriptions from the first seventy years of the first Islamic century (some of which include quotations or paraphrases of the Qur'an) make no reference to the prophet:; many are invocations of God, requests for divine mercy […], [and] while filled with monotheist piety, are not distinctively 'Islamic.' The earliest dated inscription mentioning Muhammad still seems to be on an Egyptian tombstone bearing the date 71 A.H." Elsewhere (2019) he quotes a very early papyrus OIM E 17861 from the Oriental Institute Museum of the University of Chicago that typically for the period only invokes a monotheistic formula of 'God the Compassionate and Merciful' with no reference to the Quran or Mohammed. In the same talk, he says there is no way to verify the authenticity of most hadiths and as a historian he "cannot use any of these." Christians and Jews saw Muhammed as "an inspired preacher striving to attain his community's salvation by purifying it." In my view [L.K.], the riddah wars of 632-634 demonstrated a danger of an outcrop of claims to prophethood and this would have demonstrated a need for a limitation principle.

38 Donner refers to a Nestorian Catholicos (Isho'yahb: 251), writing: "Arabs not only do not fight Christianity; they also recommend our religion; honour our priests […], make gifts [...]" but he fails to add that the same patriarch deplores the Christians of Oman [Beth Mazunaye] converting to Islam "for money."

39 And he attributes it to Caliph Malik, drawing the line between Christianity and Islam with the anti-Trinitarian formulae on the Dome of the Rock.

40 The 19th and early 20th C Orientalism in his view used an 'onion-peel approach', but in the 1980s scholars concluded that nothing tangible was left when you got to the kernel.

41 University of Birmingham

42 Chiefly the Chalcedonian-Miaphysite strife in the Byzantine Empire and Miaphysites vying for influence with Nestorians/Church of the East in Persia. While the Council of Ephesus of 431 condemned Nestorius to please the Miaphysites, Chalcedon looked set to appease the supporters of the Dyophysite persuasion 20 years later. Neither did much good and left the empire deeply divided, with Egypt, Armenia and Syria (incl. many Arabs) remaining Miaphysite. Constantinople II decided to condemn the *Three Chapters* (writings of Ibas, Theodoret and even Theodore of Mopsuestia, hitherto considered an icon of the Church). The emperor at the time had a Miaphysite wife and tried, in vain, to bring Miaphysites and Chalcedonians together. By the time, the hierarchy of the Church of the East, embracing the writings of the three was already part of Persian establishment, but the Council caused major scandals, so much so that even many churches of the western tradition do not recognise it as ecumenical. This was the time of mass assassinations, such as that of more than 300 Levantine monks by the Miaphysites and bloody imperial crackdown of the latter.

43 Von Sivers (2017): "John Philopponos developed the following definition of Trinity that contradicts that of Chalcedon: Father, Son and Spirit as representing manifestations or individualities of the Divinity [...] was rejected […] and he instead proposed that the Trinity is its own God: three gods. The Aristotelian philosophy is quite ambiguous as to what the substance is. […] Nature is personal to each of us. If we are individuations of humaneness, but as individuations we are not persons. We still need to be called by name. This double definition of what nature is plagues the 500s and is the background for all these quarrels […] among the Christians. […] Each of

split ensued, which even the Byzantine Arab *foederati* leader Japhna el-Ghassan could not put out. It was echoed in the Quran, which in its reference to the *Mušrikūn* apparently targets the Tritheists.

Although, as Von Sivers admits, the Quran is friendly to all mainstream Christians, he quotes the Nestorian metropolitan Elais of Nisibis explaining that the incriminated trinitarian idea was that of *thalatha*/ *thaluth*, rather than the Syriac word for Trinity. So, it was some Western Arabs, Tritheists in particular, who apparently were targeted, not the regular Trinitarians. According to Von Sivers, the Quran in many ways comes out of Nestorianism[44]. In this context the year 602 seems to be crucial. After the Byzantines had disposed of their Arab allies, so had the Persians now by killing the Nestorian king of the Lakhmids, sending many Arab tribes scurrying from Al-Hira. No sooner had both empires got rid of their Arab allies, than Maurice, the Byzantine friend of Khosrow II was deposed (602...) and the war resumed. Medina had recently been under Persian control, meaning the Lakhmids and the allied tribes from Hira had some working relations with Medina and many must have gone there. Von Sivers also says that these Hira Arabs had now got stronger and this Arab neutrality in the hostilities between between Persians and Byzantines allowed them to form their own two kingdoms, possibly along the former allegiances, political and religious, but with a marked participation of the Eastern Christian Arabs who had dispersed from Hira

Numismatics seems to give some evidence to the early Muslims being a loose union, dominated by the post-Lakhmid and post-Ghassanid elements. Richard Bulliet (2010) observes that "60 years after the major battles of conquest and the are still putting out currencies that show images that appear to be those of Byzantine Christians and Zoroastrian Sassanians […] a very slow process of wedding together two very different sections of the conquered territory." Some coins in the West tend to display a cross alongside Arabic inscriptions that say the coin is approved or when it was minted. Bulliet says that there hardly seemed to be a demand for conversion as the non-Muslims had to pay the *jizya*. Also The Umayyad family, ruling from Damascus were said by Bulliet to have left no lasting mark on the city other than the Great Mosque and coins. The founder of the dynasty did take steps to bring religions together[45] by introducing a new gold coin, with a pole instead of a cross. He was not very successful, though, as Christians objected[46].

Some events marked a separate Muslim identity and a less accommodating attitude to the other monotheistic faiths, though. Caliph Al-Malik famously had the Dome of the Rock built on the site of the sacrifice of Isaac and inscribed an Islamic motto on its dome that defied the Christian belief in Trinity. This came 60 years after the *ridda* wars (where a major contestant in Bahrain reverted to Christianity and Hirans were later punished with having to pay the *jizya[47])* and just in the

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the three represent his own substance so what unites them is really only in name. Divinity does not exist. It is a figment of our imaginations. They are only vaguely united in one's mind, but they are apart from each other."

44 He probably means some passages in Theodore of Mopsuestia's *Commentary* ...: "pagans had no faith they were unable to understand how God was able to create and to make everything from nothing and establish it in substance, and in their error they gave fancifully to God a consort to whom He had given a seat with Him"; "He is the firstborn of all the creatures because all the creation was renewed and changed through the renewal which He granted to it by His grace from the renewal into which He Himself was renewed, and through which He moved to a new life and ascended high above all creatures"; possibly also a reference to the very contemporary work of Babai the Great who, while staunchly embracing Trinity, emphasised the human nature of Christ. Babai abhorred the notion that God can suffer and here is a clear parallel to the Muslim notion of Christ leaving the cross laughing. It Muslims were to believe Jesus was just human (he was a prophet, not a God [anti-Tritheism?] but was conceived by the Divine Logos…), they would have no problem with Jesus dying on the cross.

45 Some others (Odon Lafontaine's youtube podcasts) see mockery in this.

46 "The obverse showed figures like the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius, who ruled from 610 to 641[...]; while the reverse showed the characteristic Latin inscription, the cross of the Byzantines was replaced by a staff with a small crossbar like an elongated letter "T". *The Maronite Chronicles*, written in the mid-seventh C [...], asserts that the population, which was then still overwhelmingly Christian, boycotted these early coins because they had no cross, and indeed they were withdrawn from circulation. […] These new bilingual coins still functioned in a traditional context, with [...] crosses prominently displayed" Foss (2015) .

47 The rebel king Mundhir Al-Maghrur, son of the last Lakhmid king the Christian Nu'man, like his tribe of Rabia, are said to have come back to their Nestorian faith after the death of Muhammad. The king had briefly ruled Al-Hira, before being chased away by the Persians. The leader of the local Ibad Abd Al-Masih ibn Buqayha was reported as complaining "we pay taxes like the Jewish tribes of Qurayza and Nadir!" Al-Tabari vol. 1, p. 37; Al-Himyari p. 209, cited in Zahran (2009). The latter also mentions Bani Yarbu as hereditary highest Lakhmid *ridafa* officials (Zahran

aftermath of the second *fitna*. One can easily see the need for a strong central authority. Like in Byzantium and in the now gone Persian empire, a distinctive state religion was apparently key to taking dominion. This stint of leaving *dhimmis* to their faith seems to have come to an end with the Umayyad Umar II (717-720) and his policies of promoting conversions among non-Arabs, but it would take many more years before religious landscape in the Middle East changed.

How do we interpret this picture that emerges from the brief sketch of archaeology, politics and theology: one of a relatively unimposing Arab leadership, embracing a faith that long looked like a variety of Christianity to the Middle Eastern patriarchs and a possibly a Christian-friendly Jewish Messianism to some others, but one not without some hostile policies and occasional violence? In political terms, the Arab army had to toe the religious line and in return be somehow privileged by not having to pay poll tax. The Sassanians had, too, been furious to see its Lakhmid military ally embrace Christianity as they could imagine a conflict of loyalties once the Christian army were to fight the Christian foes of the Persians. Probably for this reason, also Arab military leaders were expected to maintain a distinct religious affiliation. Perhaps this accounts for the Muslim Arab troops staying in garrison towns, which made sure they had little contact with the surrounding Christian, Zoroastrian or Jewish societies and could not be affected by the mainstream religious ideas. For a time, local governors were unhappy with conversion (Ahmed). Religion may have been seen as a political force that must not be outside the control of Arab elites, who otherwise espoused broad religious toleration. Thence, after a long period of perceived monotheist and Messianic affinity, the detachment first from Jews and then from Christians. Still, Islam could survive so long precisely because it emulated the Persian policy of religious toleration and Byzantines' imperial role of the controller of faith.

This working hypothesis seems plausible in itself, but I present it here to highlight the significance of Al-Hira for the immediate context of the emergence of Islam. The ideas that shaped the nascent Arab polity and its Messianic, supra-religious nature and distinctly Arabic culture would have largely come from this city. With some political and religious setting laid out above, this is to focus on what A. Neuwirth (2009) calls the "rhetorical speech-nature of the Koran, disassociated from a historical narrative." Neuwirth claims that Quran is "mostly misinterpreted as a written corpus of premeditated sayings where it is a transcript of open-ended oral communication that meets the pre-existent knowledge and expectations of the audience." She notices that despite much similarity to the Hebrew Psalms, most of the corresponding passages in the Quranic suras serve as "counter-text," highlighting the polemical nature of the Quran. Neuwirth explains that "for the audience of the Quran to become a scriptural community more is required […]; the core texts of the older traditions have to be re-read and adapted to the newly developing worldview" so that this audience can become the true *Ibad* over which Iblis has no power. Note that the well-educated and religiously zealous community of Hira is known under that term, too[48]. Sizgorich (2010, cited in Wood, 2016, n. 23) notes that early Muslims were very happy to invoke their Hiran ancestry as the local Christians were seen as precursors of monotheism. Incidentally, references to *jahiliya* often feature the excesses of the Hiran, mostly non-Christian kings[49]. Neuwirth also indicates the near identity in the organization of some suras with the structure of Talmudic passages. This is interesting as Al-Hira did have a small Jewish population and was itself situated in the proximity of the most famous and learned Talmudic centres of Nehardea and Pumbedita. Finally, Hira is believed to be the cradle not only of Arabic poetry but also Arabic script. It was on the tomb of the emigre Hiran king in Syria, that the first Arabic inscription found uses Nabatean letters[50].

2009: 133). The tribe would then rebel against Medina after Muhammad's death. This suggests that, though Christian, they expected to be exempt from the poll tax for the sole virtue of being Arabs.

48 More in Toral-Niehoff (2010) Toral-Niehoff also cites Griffith (1985: 159-166) for evidence that there may have been an Arab Gospel that had originated in Hira or Najran.

49 Such as tyrannical acts of Al-Nu'man I. *Cf.* Wood (2016: 792, n. 53) quoting Al-Tabari (vol 1:851).

50 "The Lakhmids of Hira gave the Arabs the greatest gift of all – the Arabic script." Also, "Hira became a Mecca for Arabic poets, for whom it opened its court." Zahran, *op. cit*, p. 14; on Imru Al-Qays, the first Christian Lakhmid king, who died in the early 4th C is buried in Namara: "The Namara inscription in Nabatean Aramaic with five lines in Arabic in a Nabatean alphabet is the most ancient North Arabic script" *ibid*. p. 26.

Toral-Niehof (2013) noted that Hira was a major urban centre of the Arabs alongside Mecca, Medina and Najran, and yet quite recently complained of very little Christian archeological excavations there. Still, whatever was found early last century shows a curious overlap of Islamic and Sassanian motifs[51]. Hira had indeed been subject to some domestic archaeological exploration by Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH), who most recently have liaised with German scholars from Bonn University, most notably M. Wiener-Mueller, some scholars from TU Berlin as well as Margarete van Ess from Deutsches Archäologisches Institut in Berlin. Archaeological survey was started in 2015[52]. 2017-2017 saw the project called 'Archaeological Survey of the area of al-Hira/Iraq'[53], which has very recently been completed and whose results have been published (Müller-Wiener *et al.*, 2019). Thorough excavations are set to start in the autumn of 2021. There has been some delay due to Covid19. The project involves a major application of artificial intelligence and the survey of the area has been very extensive. It was was conducted in three campaigns, a total of approx. 625 ha were examined, increasing the knowledge of the location, range, spatial order and the history of settlement in al-Hira. Among the most interesting finds is that, contrary to earlier beliefs, the city was not abandoned after the arrival of Muslims but continued to be developed in the Abbasid period. Some notable Islamic figures even had very ambitious plans for the city[54]. The survey so far seems to confirm the picture of al-Hira drawn by the Arab sources.

The report concludes that although the historical research of Al-Hira has a long history, "**archaeological research on al-Hira is clearly out of proportion to the significance of the site,**" and that "further archaeological investigation of this zone is highly desirable and the area should be protected by all means." The most important sites in the area are endangered by industrial development, the most wide-ranging of those being the development of the airport in Najaf which, incidentally, occasioned the emergency excavations. The site also witnesses the expansion of residential areas, is endangered by waste disposal and has long been exploited by farming. Last not least, the work is not only slowed down by the pandemic but, in my view, may also be affected by the prospect of resuming hostilities in the part of the world involved in sectarian strife at a time of the imminent takeover of some Central Asian countries by radical Islamists, which can send shockwaves all the way to Iraq.

And yet, Al-Hira is one of the oldest and most important Arab cities: the cradle of Arab poetry and rhetoric; the birthplace of probably the oldest Arabic scripts; the missionary hub, radiating Christianity onto the whole of Arabia; the burial place of patriarchs of the Church of the East, which was said to have influenced Islam at a time when Islam was a Messianic movement not that far-removed from the other monotheist religions; a city of numerous unexplored monasteries, with so many vital early writings still missing; home of legendary architecture and gardens; a centre of major political and religious migration at a time just preceding the formation of the Muslim state of Medina; an ally to early Muslim conquerors of Persia, once having such magnetism for Caliphs; the determining factor for the establishment of the garrison town of Al-Kufa, with its paramount importance for Islamic politics and culture; a city whose name is identical with the toponym of where the prophet received his revelation, and a place once inhabited by many a learned Gabriel...

The German-Iraqi project seems rather last minute and yet very timely. Perhaps their resources will suffice and secure a major breakthrough in solving some mysteries behind this place of shared heritage. If not, hopefully others, too, will realise how vital the place is. If there is still time.

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51 "It is unfortunate that Christian archeology in this region is still in its infancy, and that East Syrian Church architecture has not yet been well explored." Toral-Niehoff *The Ibad … op cit.* p. 12. Wood, op. cit., quotes Talbot-Rice to state that the early 20th C surveys determined the Christian character of Hira but also that "all of these [Sassanian and Islamic decorative motifs] are of the same date and come from the same house":Talbot-Rice (1934); and *Encyclopedia Iranica* suggests that Hira merits proper excavation. This may be coming true as of Sep., 2021, with thorough excavations planned by a joint German-Iraqi team.

52 Its description in Muller-Wiener (2015).

53 Its rationale in GEPRIS.

54 The report quotes literature in noting that […] according to aṭ-Ṭabari, Harun ar-Rashid sought to build his capital in al-Hira and that the foundation of al-Hashimiyya by Ja'far al Mansur, said to have been built in the vicinity of al-Kufa, was also devised under these circumstances.

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