

The Early Religious Beliefs of the Arabs of Palestine

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I. Introduction

In this paper, I examine the archaeological record in Palestine¹ from the Arab conquest to the end of Umayyad rule and attempt to draw conclusions about the Arab conquerors' religious beliefs during this period. In so doing, I also make use of literary sources, including the Qur'ān, although I assign a secondary role to these. Such sources tend to be less reliable and many of them date from a considerably later time than that which they describe. I argue that very little is known about the religion of the Arab conquerors before the time of 'Abd al-Malik. What most people think they know derives almost entirely from a later (post-'Umayyad) understanding of Islam that they retrospectively apply to this early period.² Furthermore, what little is known strongly suggests that the Arab conquerors did not arrive in Palestine as Muslims as that term is understood today. It is more plausible that Islam developed gradually after the conquest and in the process incorporated many elements from the religions of the Arab rulers' subject populations: Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism – as well as from Arab paganism. For this reason, I prefer the term “Arab conquest”³ to “Islamic conquest” and do not use terms such as *Muslim*, *Islam*, *Islamic* or *mosque* where these might be anachronistic and therefore misleading.

II. Coins

It is instructive to begin by looking at the earliest coins minted by the Arab conquerors. The first phase of these dates from the time of the conquest (636-41 CE) to the sixth or seventh year of 'Abd al-Malik's reign (691-92 CE), when the “standing caliph” coins (assumed to depict 'Abd al-Malik himself) began to appear. In 696-97 CE, as part of 'Abd al-Malik's Reforms, the coinage of the Arab state underwent a complete overhaul after which it was purely epigraphic and contained no imagery.⁴ This third and final phase of coins will not be discussed here.

¹ I use the term “Palestine” to refer to the area covered by the Byzantine territories of Palaestina Prima, Secunda and Tertia (see map on p. 36).

² See for instance D. Woods, “Adomnán, Arculf, and the True Cross: Overlooked Evidence for the Visit of the Emperor Heraclius to Jerusalem c. 630?” *ARAM* 18-19 (2006-7), 405. Woods asserts that Adomnán “clearly knew next to nothing about the religious situation in contemporary Palestine, to the extent that he does not seem to have realized that the ‘Saracen’ rulers were not in fact Christian.” I argue here that not even this much can be assumed.

³ Even this term has its problems, however. See Chapter V.

⁴ Some of the post-Reform coins did, however, retain certain symbols (discussed below) on their obverse. See S. Heidemann, “The Standing Caliph-Type - The Object on the Reverse,” *Proceedings of the Seventh Century Syrian Numismatic Round Table* (2010), 26.

i. *Arab-Byzantine (Pre- 'Abd al-Malik)*

The Arab-Byzantine coins were Arab imitations of pre-conquest Byzantine coins. Arab-Sasanian coins, by contrast, were not imitations, but *continuations* of coins minted by the Sasanian Empire with minor alterations made along the way.⁵ It is evident that Arabs minted the former themselves because these contain the names of at least ten different towns that did not mint coins in Byzantine times.⁶ Indeed, there were no Byzantine mints anywhere in Syria-Palestine at the time of the Arab conquest.⁷ For this reason, Michael Bates believes that the decision of the Arab state to mint its own coins must have been significant. Since there was no previous tradition of minting in Syria-Palestine to continue, “engravers and strikers had to be found and organized, and procedures and fees determined.”⁸ Such trouble was obviously taken because many of the coins are the product of sophisticated workmanship with clear designs and inscriptions. Moreover, the copper coins differ from Byzantine coins in style and do not imitate any particular Byzantine coin.⁹



Fig. 1.

An Arab-Byzantine copper fals minted in Ba'alabakk, date unknown (obv. and rev.)

When one considers all this, it is somewhat surprising that the Arab rulers of Palestine did not choose entirely new designs as soon as they started minting its own coins. Even more intriguing is that many of their coins continued to contain the Christian symbol of the cross, as seen in

⁵ M. Bates, “Arab-Sasanian Coins,” *Encyclopedia Iranica* (1986), 225.

⁶ Bates, “Byzantine Coinage and Its Imitations, Arab Coinage and Its Imitations: Arab-Byzantine Coinage,” *ARAM* 6 (1994), 385.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 383-84.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 384.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Baldwin’s Islamic Coin Auction 24 (9 May 2013): no. 4063.

<http://www.sixbid.com/browse.html?auction=721&category=15843&lot=717319> (accessed February 18, 2015)

Fig. 1 above. According to Chase Robinson, “Muslims seem to have taken umbrage at the public display of crosses from an early period.”¹¹ Robinson does not specify how early he means, nor does he provide evidence for this statement. His use of the word “seem” also suggests that this is no more than a conjecture based on later Muslim attitudes towards the cross. If anything, however, the archaeological evidence (which also includes crosses on official inscriptions, discussed in the following chapter) supports the opposite assumption: that the earliest “Muslims” did not object – vociferously or even at all – to public displays of the cross.

There are some indications that within a few decades of the conquest, the Muslim attitude toward the cross began to change. One Arab-Byzantine coin has been found containing what appears to be a trident or cross with its arms bent upward (see Fig. 2 below).¹² Both the obverse and the reverse bear this trident-like symbol in place of where crosses would be on a Byzantine coin: at the end of the scepter (a cruciform scepter on Byzantine coins) in the right hand of the obverse figure, and above the cursive “m” on the reverse. In the figure’s left hand, however, where the cruciform orb would be on a Byzantine coin, is a staff resembling a shepherd’s crook.¹³ The coin could not be dated, but given that it appears transitional between the “standing emperor” and the “standing caliph” coins, one may guess that it was minted after the end of Mu‘āwiyah’s reign (661-80 CE) and shortly before—or possibly even during—‘Abd al-Malik’s reign (685-705 CE).



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Fig. 2.

Arab-Byzantine coin with “trident” and “shepherd’s crook”, date unknown (obv. and rev.)

¹¹ C. Robinson, *‘Abd al-Malik: Makers of the Muslim World* (Oneworld Publications, 2012), 78-79.

¹² Nevo and Koren, 290.

¹³ J. Walker, *A Catalogue of the Muhammadan Coins in the British Museum II, A Catalogue of Arab-Byzantine and Post-Reform Umayyad Coins* (London, 1956), 52.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Plate IX, no. 139.

ii. *‘Abd al-Malik’s reign*

The alteration of Christian crosses on coins only began in earnest during the reign of ‘Abd al-Malik. A coin dated by Philip Grierson to 691, six years into ‘Abd al-Malik’s reign, contains three standing figures.¹⁵ The Byzantine prototype of this coin is “Heraclius and his sons,” each of whom appears on the obverse holding a wand that terminates in a cross; on the reverse is a “cross on steps” (see Fig. 4 below for an example of this). In the ‘Abd al-Malik issues, however, the cross at the end of each wand is absent or has been replaced with a small sphere. On the reverse, the “cross on steps” has been replaced with the same symbol (see Fig. 5 below) or in some cases turned into a T shape. Another crucial innovation noticeable on these coins is inclusion of the Arabic word محمد (*muḥammad*).¹⁶



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Fig. 3. The first known coin to contain the word muḥammad (obv.)

This was in fact not the first mention of *muḥammad* on a coin. In 685-86 CE, at the very beginning of ‘Abd al-Malik’s reign, his rival Ibn al-Zubayr had minted an Arab-Sasanian coin (see Fig. 3 above) proclaiming: *bismallāh, muḥammad rasūl allāh* (“In the name of God, Muḥammad [is the] messenger of God”).¹⁸ In the context of this political rivalry between ‘Abd al-Malik and Ibn al-Zubayr, it makes sense that each would try to justify his claim by appealing to the “messenger of God” in official contexts. It nevertheless remains perplexing that Muḥammad’s name does not appear on any of the coins before this juncture in the history of

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 290-291, citing P. Grierson, *Byzantine Coins* (London: Methuen, 1982).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ T. Holland, *In the Shadow of the Sword: The Battle for Global Empire and the End of the Ancient World* (Anchor Books, 2012), Illustrations.

¹⁸ R. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Darwin Press, 1997), 694.

the Arab state, more than five decades after he is supposed to have died (632 CE, according to the traditional Muslim account). There are no coins bearing the names of the Rashidūn caliphs either. The first numismatically attested caliph is Mu‘āwiyah, the founder of the Umayyad dynasty. A number of Arab-Sasanian coins bear his name, dating from 661-62 and 664-65 CE.¹⁹

‘Abd al-Malik’s “three standing figures” coins were followed by the “two caliph” and “standing caliph” types. Both also follow the “cross on steps” design on the reverse, where the cross has been replaced with a “sphere on a pole” or a T shape. The T shape is more often found on North African coins and has a variation in which the horizontal bar has a perpendicular side arm at each end. The “sphere on a pole on steps” also has another variation in which the “pole” bisects a circle in such a way that it resembles the Greek letter φ.²⁰

Stefan Heidemann argues that these alternative forms are explicable mainly in terms of the coins’ monetary value. He notes that in Byzantine gold coinage, the *nomisma* (or gold *solidus*, Fig. 4, below) contained a “cross on steps”, while the *semissis* (half the value of a *nomisma*) contained a “cross on a sphere,” and the *tremissis* (one-third the value of a *nomisma*) a cross surrounded by a wreath or circular inscription. Since the *semissis* and *tremissis* weighed almost the same, distinguishing marks between these two were especially necessary.²¹ The Arab-Byzantine coins retained these denominations in North Africa, but new symbols were adopted for the *semissis* (“a sphere on a pole on steps”) and *tremissis* (the “T,” which he suggests may even stand for *tremissis*).²² In Syria, as Heidemann points out, the only gold coin struck was the *nomisma*, and the *semissis* and *tremissis* were not usually in circulation, allowing for “greater latitude in the appearances of a symbol on the reverse in Syria than in North Africa.”²³ The alterations could not depart too much from the original cross, however, lest the value of the coins cease to be recognized.²⁴

The obverse of the “standing caliph” coin has a number of interesting features. Its design is quite clearly, as Robert Hoyland points out, a response to the Byzantine emperor Justinian II.²⁵ In Fig. 4, on the obverse, Christ is holding a Bible in his left hand, while on the reverse the emperor Justinian is holding a “cross on steps.” In Fig. 5, elements from both the

¹⁹ Nevo and Koren, 153.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 291. Walker (p. xxiii) suggests that this may actually be the letter φ, which could stand for *folis* or *fals*.

²¹ Heidemann, “The Standing Caliph-Type,” 25-26.

²² *Ibid.*, 26.

²³ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 25-29, 32.

²⁵ Hoyland, “Writing the Biography of the Prophet Muḥammad: Problems and Solutions,” *History Compass* 5 (2007), 14.

obverse and the reverse of the Justinian issue appear to have been incorporated into the obverse design. The “caliph” depicted more resembles the Christ figure than the emperor figure, for instance, and yet like the emperor figure, he is standing with his whole body shown. Instead of holding the “cross on steps,” he is holding what appears to be sword in a scabbard.



Fig. 4.

Justinian II gold solidus (obv. & rev.)

Fig. 5.

'Abd al-Malik "standing caliph" (obv. & rev.)

Hoyland speculates that the figure on the “standing caliph” coin, although generally thought to be ‘Abd al-Malik, may instead be Muḥammad. His reasoning is as follows. Just as the image of Christ demonstrates Justinian’s divinely ordained rule, so too would ‘Abd al-Malik need to employ a religious image to justify his rule: only in his case, being a Muslim leader, this image would be of Muḥammad rather than of Jesus. Hoyland points out that in ‘Abd al-Malik’s time, theological debate around depicting Muḥammad would have been far from settled.²⁸ On the other hand, ‘Abd al-Malik’s depicting himself would have been “condemned by Muslims as an imitation of infidel kings, [making it]... much more likely that it is a religious personage, again most obviously Muḥammad himself.”²⁹ Moreover, the coin contains the name of Muḥammad, not that of ‘Abd al-Malik, and there is no known coin from the Hellenistic period in which the figure portrayed and the name inscribed on the obverse do not correspond to one another.³⁰ Hoyland further speculates that the sword in a scabbard may instead be a scroll inside a case. In support of his interpretation, he points to the tradition that Muḥammad’s son-in-law ‘Ali kept a scroll of the Constitution of Medina (given to him by Muḥammad) in a scabbard,

²⁶ Hoyland, “Writing the Biography of the Prophet Muḥammad,” 15.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 15, citing C. Foss, “Anomalous Arab-Byzantine Coins,” *ONS Newsletter*, 166 (2001), 9; Foss, “The Coinage of the First Century of Islam,” *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, 16 (2003), 758.

and notes that this would create a further parallel with the Christ figure, who is holding a book.³¹

Hoyland's argument is intriguing, and while it is certainly possible that the figure depicted is not 'Abd al-Malik, one might build an equally compelling—but equally speculative—case that it is Jesus.

Firstly, as Hoyland himself notes, its resemblance in several respects to the Christ figure is clear.³² Secondly, as Ibn al-Zubayr's Arab-Sasanian coin in Fig. 3 shows, there *are* other coins from the period that bear Muḥammad's name on the obverse without depicting Muḥammad (unless one supposes that the profile of a Sasanian king on this coin also represents Muḥammad).³³ If one accepts that Ibn al-Zubayr's coin portrays the last Sasanian king Yazdegerd III or one of his predecessors,³⁴ it also makes sense to see the “standing caliph” figure, which resembles that of Justinian's Christ, as a portrayal of Jesus. Even on the assumption that the obverse inscription should correspond to the image on the coin, the figure could still be that of Jesus. This is because *muḥammad* might be read not as a proper name, but as a gerundival participle, such that “*muḥammad rasūl allāh*” is rendered as, “Praised be the Messenger of God.” This reading, although controversial, has been proposed by Christoph Luxenberg, and will be discussed further in Chapter IV.³⁵ If however the Arabs of 'Abd al-Malik's time recognized Jesus (ʿĪsā) as a prophet, as do Muslims to this day, the description “the messenger of God” would fit him just as well.

The absence of a cross behind the “standing caliph” figure might be taken as evidence that the figure cannot be Jesus. Yet the Qur'ān, which by 'Abd al-Malik's time already existed in some form,³⁶ denies that the crucifixion took place:

³¹ Hoyland, “Writing the Biography of the Prophet Muḥammad,” 21.

³² *Ibid.*, 14.

³³ Hoyland may respond that he was limiting his claim to Hellenistic coins, thus excluding (Persian) Sasanian coins. Since the Arabs ruled over territories that were formerly both Byzantine and Sasanian, however, such a neat distinction can no longer be maintained after the Arab conquest. See S. Heideman, “The Merger of Two Currency Zones in Early Islam. The Byzantine and Sasanian Impact on the Circulation in Former Byzantine Syria and Northern Mesopotamia,” *Iran* 36 (1998), 95-112. One should also consider that the rivalry between 'Abd al-Malik and Ibn al-Zubayr is by itself enough to explain the presence the phrase *muḥammad rasūl allāh* on the “standing caliph” coins.

³⁴ Bates, “Arab-Sasanian Coins,” 225.

³⁵ See C. Luxenberg, “A New Interpretation of the Arabic Inscription in Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock,” in *The Hidden Origins of Islam: New Research into Its Early History*, ed. K. Ohlig and G. Puin (Prometheus Books, 2009), 125-151.

³⁶ See F. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Harvard University Press, 2010), 53-56. See also A. George, *The Rise of Islamic Calligraphy* (SAQI, 2010), 79. George discusses the extraordinary discovery, in 1965 at the Great Mosque of Ṣanaʿā, of Qur'ānic fragments that have been dated by radiocarbon analysis to between 657 and 690 CE. An unpublished chemical test dates them slightly later to between 700 and 730.

And because of their saying: We slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, Allah's messenger - they slew him not nor crucified him, but it appeared so unto them; and lo! those who disagree concerning it are in doubt thereof; they have no knowledge thereof save pursuit of a conjecture; they slew him not for certain (4:157-158).³⁷

It would thus make perfect sense for ‘Abd al-Malik to retain Jesus—understood not as the son of God, but rather as the messenger of God—on his coins, whilst excluding the cross, which symbolized an event that he took to be a fabrication.

Finally, the presence of the sword might suggest to some that—if the figure is not in fact ‘Abd al-Malik—it is more likely to be Muḥammad than Jesus. However, one should bear in mind the following verse of the New Testament or Gospel (called *al-’Injīl* in the Qur’ān, and recognized as an earlier revelation received by the Prophet ‘Īsā): “Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword.” (Matthew 10:34).³⁸ It would not therefore have been inappropriate to depict Jesus carrying a sword, especially if seeking an alternative way to portray him that did not involve the cross.

What, if anything, do the coins prior to ‘Abd al-Malik’s reforms demonstrate about the religious beliefs of the Arabs who ruled Palestine in the seventh century? Many interpretations are possible. It seems to me, however, that one consistent with the traditional Muslim account is strained at best.

Firstly, it is particularly striking that even after the advent of the term *muḥammad* on the Arab coinage in the 685-86 CE, none of the coins provide any real evidence that there lived a historical figure called Muḥammad. Nevo and Koren use this fact, along with many others, to support their argument that Muḥammad never existed. The usual response to this, as exemplified by Hoyland, is that it is an *argumentum e silentio* (“argument from silence”). In other words, absence of evidence for Muḥammad is not evidence of his absence from history. Nevo and Koren point out, however, that there are no references to him in the archaeological record before ‘Abd al-Malik’s reign “even where [these] should have been obligatory: on the

³⁷ Pickthall translation. Christoph Luxenberg, however, concludes from a contextual and philological analysis “that the Qur’ān does not deny the crucifixion as a historical fact; it refutes more precisely the claim of Jesus’ opponents” to have killed him. See Luxenberg, “A New Interpretation of the Arabic Inscription in Jerusalem’s Dome of the Rock,” 136.

³⁸ King James Version.

coins and in the official pronouncements of the Arab State.”³⁹ This is certainly surprising, but less radical interpretations of the evidence (or the lack thereof) are possible, especially when one takes into account non-archaeological evidence.

Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, for example, discuss a non-Muslim source from 634 CE that speaks of “a false prophet” who “appeared among the Saracens.”⁴⁰ Though not named, he is described as having “come with sword and chariot.”⁴¹ There are certain aspects to this account that do not fit well with the traditional picture of Muḥammad. The “false prophet” proclaims “the advent of the anointed one who is to come” and “says he has the keys to paradise.”⁴² He is also understood to have been alive during the conquest of Palestine, which contradicts the traditional Muslim account.⁴³ Nevertheless, if this source is accepted as contemporaneous and reliable, it demonstrates that there was *an* Arab prophet at that time. His unique importance as the ultimate prophet (*kātam an-nabiyyīn*, or “the Seal of the Prophets,” as the Qur’ānic expression has it) may not yet have been established, however.⁴⁴ Furthermore, according to the Muslim account, there were other prophetic figures among the Arabs of the day.⁴⁵

A less radical interpretation than that of Nevo and Koren, then, would be that Muḥammad was one of several prophets who was elevated in importance only decades after his death, probably during ‘Abd al-Malik’s reign when his name begins to appear on coins and inscriptions. A vast literature subsequently arose filling in the many forgotten details of his life, namely the Hadīṭ (the prophet’s example) and the Sīra (the prophet’s biography). This literature was, as Moshe Sharon puts it, “shaped and reshaped and contaminated by later political rivalries, theological disputes and social tensions,”⁴⁶ a problem well known to Muslim scholars themselves.⁴⁷

The second thing to note about the coins is that for a long time the Arab state consciously chose not to remove Christian imagery from its coins, even though it could easily

³⁹ Y. Nevo and J. Koren, *Crossroads to Islam: The Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State* (Prometheus Books, 2003), 11.

⁴⁰ P. Crone and M. Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge University Press, 1977), 3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 3-4.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁴ Moshe Sharon has alerted me to the possibility that *kātam an-nabiyyīn* may not have meant the “ultimate prophet” in the sense that his revelation could not be superseded, but rather that the End of Days were near. This interpretation would also fit better with the messianic “Saracen” prophet discussed above.

⁴⁵ See Donner, 76 and 101. See also M. Sharon, “The Birth of Islam in the Holy Land,” *Pillars of Smoke and Fire: The Holy Land in History and Thought*, ed. M. Sharon (Johannesburg, 1988), 226-27, 234.

⁴⁶ Sharon, “The Birth of Islam in the Holy Land,” 225.

⁴⁷ See Sharon, “The Birth of Islam in the Holy Land,” 233-34. See also Hoyland “Writing the Biography of the Prophet Muḥammad,” 1-22.

have done so. This suggests at the very least that whatever religious beliefs the Arab conquerors initially held, they did not see these as being incompatible with Christianity. A more radical thesis would be that the Arab conquerors (or at any rate some of them) *were* Christian, but soon after the conquest developed their own official version or “offshoot” of Christianity in order to assert their independence from the Byzantine Empire. This possibility, which will be discussed in more detail later, obviously fits well with my speculation above that ‘Abd al-Malik’s “standing caliph” could be Jesus.

Thirdly, the coins point quite clearly to a process of experimentation with alternative symbols once it was decided that use of the cross was no longer acceptable. The various alterations to the cross, most if not all of which were made during the reign of ‘Abd al-Malik, suggest that ‘Abd al-Malik was searching for a similar, but distinct symbol for the official religion of the Arab state. He seemed finally to settle upon the scepter-like “sphere on a pole on steps.” Grierson believes this symbol may not represent anything, “since its main function is negative, that of not being a cross.”⁴⁸ Nevo and Koren suggest, however, that it may also have had a positive significance that is now unknown. The same symbol is already present on Byzantine crosses, at the ends of their poles and side arms, as seen in Fig. 4 above. The ϕ -like symbol mentioned earlier can also be found on a number of Byzantine coins, along with variations that include a cross.⁴⁹ “It is thus possible,” they conclude, “that the symbol chosen to replace the cross—basically a circle or sphere—was one which already bore, for the Byzantines too, a meaning somehow connected with holiness. One may speculate that it was a visual expression of the unity, wholeness, and all-embracing nature of God.”⁵⁰

Hoyland also thinks it likely that this symbol has a positive function, but puts forward a different suggestion: “the obvious candidate would be the staff of the Prophet Muḥammad [*qaḍīb an-nabī*], which had miraculous properties... and is linked with the staff of Moses that is mentioned in the Qur’ān.”⁵¹ Heidemann points out, however, that no surviving images of the early Arab rulers show any staff.⁵² Heidemann, as discussed earlier, views the various alterations to the cross chiefly as marks of the coins’ value, but he offers some suggestions as to their “secondary” symbolic meaning.⁵³ In the case of the “sphere on a pole on steps,” the one he finds most plausible is that it represents a column such as that after which the *Bāb al-*

⁴⁸ Nevo and Koren, 291, quoting Grierson, “The Monetary Reform of ‘Abd al-Malik,” *JESHO* 3 (1961): 244.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 291-292.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁵¹ Hoyland, “Writing the Biography of the Prophet Muḥammad,” 21.

⁵² Heidemann, “The Standing Caliph-Type,” 30.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 34.

‘*Amūd* (“Gate of the Column”, the Arabic term for Jerusalem’s Damascus Gate) is named. The symbol on the coin may thus represent “Jerusalem, the place of the Imperial cult under ‘Abd al-Malik,” but could also represent Umayyad urban pride more generally.⁵⁴ Heidemann sees no reason to assume that the symbol was religious at all, let alone that it stood for “Islam as a religion.”⁵⁵ Similarly, he argues, one need not assume that the objection to the cross was religious in nature. He observes, for instance, that the Zoroastrian fire temple displayed on Arab-Sasanian coins was never altered. This suggests that the main reason for the alterations to the cross on Byzantine coins was that these stood for Byzantine temporal power.⁵⁶ Thus, even those coins minted during ‘Abd al-Malik’s reign do not really prove that the Arab state had officially repudiated Christianity as such; only that they had repudiated Byzantine imperial authority.

III. Official Inscriptions

I turn next to the official inscriptions from the period in question (those with a specifically religious purpose, however, will be examined in the following chapter). I shall discuss two examples here.

The first dates from the very beginning of Mu‘āwiyah’s reign and was found at Ḥammāt Gader. The script and language of the inscription are Greek, but it contains a number of Arabic words.



Fig. 6. Marble inscription at Ḥammāt Gader from 662 CE (left) and its transcription (right)

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 30-32.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁵⁷ M. Rosen-Ayalon, *Islamic Art and Archaeology in Palestine* (Left Coast Press, 2006), 27. Adapted slightly.

Judith Green and Yoram Tsafrir provide the following translation (square brackets mine):

In the days of ‘Abd Allah [i.e. the “servant of God,” not meant as a proper name here] Mu‘?wiya, the commander of the faithful, the hot baths of the people there were saved and rebuilt by ‘Abdallah son of Abuasemos (Abu H?sim) the Counsellor, on the fifth of the month of December, on the second day, in the 6th year of the indiction, in the year 726 of the colony, according to the Arabs the 42nd year, for the healing of the sick, under the care of Ioannes, the official of Gadara.⁵⁸

As with the coins, the cross on the inscription is immediately noticeable. It is perhaps even more significant in this case, however. In the case of the coins, the Arabs were at first largely copying the designs of the Byzantines. Here, on the other hand, a deliberate decision has been taken by one of Mu‘āwiyah’s officials to include the cross at the beginning of a state inscription. This further confirms that during Mu‘āwiyah’s reign, the Arabs had no religious objection to the display of crosses in a public or official context. It is also possible that the official who rebuilt the baths, ‘Abdallah son of Abu Hashim/’Asim, was a Christian.

As Fred Donner notes, literary sources support the idea “that some Christians and Jews may have been fully integrated, as such, into the early community of Believers.”⁵⁹ Donner uses the term “Believers” to refer to a community of monotheists led by the earliest “Muslims,” but which also included Christians and Jews as religious equals. He notes that the term *mu’minūn* (“believers”) appears nearly a thousand times in the Qur’ān, more than ten times as often as the term *muslim*, with fewer than seventy-five occurrences.⁶⁰ In Donner’s view, the two terms were originally equivalent in meaning, but *muslim* later came to represent a separate confessional identity that did not include Christians and Jews.

Note that the inscription above contains the term *amīr al-mu’minīn* (“commander of the believers”). This was the earliest title assumed by the leaders of the Arab state. Sharon also points out that *amīr al-mu’minīn* was a title borne by different leaders simultaneously and that it almost certainly existed before Muḥammad is said to have lived.⁶¹ The term *kalīfah* (caliph), on the other hand, does not occur before ‘Abd al-Malik’s time. Even then it was only used briefly and did not have the familiar sense of a political “successor” to Muḥammad. The “standing caliph” coins bear the full title *kalīfat allāh*, which according to Donner probably

⁵⁸ J. Green and Y. Tsafrir, “Greek Inscriptions from Ḥammāt Gader: A Poem by the Empress Eudocia and Two Building Inscriptions,” *Israel Exploration Journal*, 32 (1982): 95.

⁵⁹ Donner, 114.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁶¹ Sharon, “The Birth of Islam in the Holy Land,” 234.

meant the Deputy of God.⁶² Since (unlike *amīr al-mu'minīn*) this term is Qur'ānic, Donner suggests that in adopting it 'Abd al-Malik was consciously employing the Qur'ān as a source of legitimacy.⁶³ Volker Popp sees the term as “an answer to the Byzantine imperial protocols of the time, which had begun to refer to the emperor as *servus Dei*.”⁶⁴ Interestingly, *kalīfat allāh* does not reappear on coins or inscriptions until 817 CE during the reign of the 'Abbāsīd ruler al-Ma'mūn.⁶⁵ Al-Ma'mūn had also replaced 'Abd al-Malik's name with his own on the Dome of the Rock.⁶⁶ It seems likely, then, that al-Ma'mūn took this term directly from 'Abd al-Malik and was the first to use it in its familiar sense. As Popp notes, the “the historicizing literature of the 'Abbāsīd period” retrospectively applied the term all the way back to a “mythical Meccan early period.”⁶⁷

It is interesting to contrast the Mu'āwiyah inscription, discussed above, with another from the time of 'Abd al-Malik:

In the name of Allah the Compassionate, the Merciful; there is no God but Allah alone, He has no *šarik* [associate]. Muḥammad [is the] messenger of Allāh. 'Abd Allah [Servant of God] 'Abd al-Malik, Amīr al-Mu'minīn [= Commander of the Faithful] ordered the straightening of this mountain road. It was made by Yaḥya b. al-___ in the month of Muḥarram of the year three___ [and seventy or eighty].⁶⁸

It is uncertain in which year this inscription was dedicated because part of the date is missing, leaving only the word “three”. This indicates two possible *anno hegirae* (“in the year of the hijra”, or AH) dates during 'Abd al-Malik's reign, either 73 or 83, corresponding to 692-93 CE or 702-703 CE, respectively. It is worth remarking here that neither inscription actually mentions the “hijra” (which is supposed to refer to Muḥammad's migration from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE) when specifying the date. The Mu'āwiyah inscription merely contains the phrase “according to the Arabs [*kata Arabas*] the 42nd year,” while the 'Abd al-Malik inscription provides only the month and the year. Lest it be thought that this is because the rest of the inscription is missing, it should be pointed out that a similar inscription found in the Golan also mentions only the month and the year, before going on to provide the distance to

⁶² Donner, 209.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 209-11.

⁶⁴ V. Popp, “The Early History of Islam, Following Inscriptional and Numismatic Testimony,” in *The Hidden Origins of Islam*, 102.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 101-02.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 59. See also Robinson, 2-3.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 94-95.

⁶⁸ Nevo and Koren, p. 287. Adapted slightly.

Damascus (the Umayyad capital).⁶⁹ According to Popp, there is no evidence of a *hijra*-based dating system until the time of al-Ma'mūn.⁷⁰

In contrast to the Mu'āwiyah inscription, the 'Abd al-Malik inscription contains the religious formula: *muḥammad rasūl allāh*, the same as that found on the latter's coins. In addition to this, there are other interesting formulae not seen before 'Abd al-Malik's time, which subsequently become commonplace: God's attributes of "compassion" and "mercy", the clear statement of strict monotheism ("there is no God but Allah alone") and the apparent repudiation of the doctrine of the Trinity ("He has no *šarik*"). The 'Abd al-Malik inscription does however have two formulae in common with the Mu'āwiyah one: the epithet *'abd allāh* before the leader's name and title of *amīr al-mu'minīn* thereafter.

The evidence of the inscriptions thus points to the same conclusion as that of the coins: until 'Abd al-Malik's time, *muḥammad* (whatever this term might then have meant) was not central to the Arab rulers' religious beliefs, whilst Christianity was understood as being fully compatible with these. Moreover, this evidence demonstrates that certain features long considered fundamental to Islam were lacking in this period. Even in 'Abd al-Malik's time and later, there was no notion of a caliphate (Arabic: *ḵulāfa*) or of an explicitly *hijra*-based calendar.

IV. Religious Sites

In this section, I discuss various religious sites from the seventh and eighth century in order to determine what these reveal about the beliefs of the *mu'minūn* during this period. In so doing, I consider mainly their architectural features and the inscriptions that accompany them in some cases.

i. Early masājid and the mystery of Mecca

I shall refer to the earliest places of worship used by the *mu'minūn* as *masājid*, the plural of the Arabic (and Aramaic) word *masjid*, meaning literally a "place of prostration". Following Nevo

⁶⁹ Robinson, 115.

⁷⁰ Popp, 121.

and Koren, I do not use the term mosque, “a term which begs too many questions regarding the religion practiced [sic] there.”⁷¹

Dan Gibson has observed that none of the earliest *masājīd*, those built between 1 AH (622 CE) to 107 AH (725 CE), faces Mecca. Instead, as far as he could tell, these *masājīd* face the ancient Nabatean religious center of Petra in present day Jordan. Furthermore, between 107 AH (725 CE) and 207 AH (822 CE), there appears to be what Gibson calls a “time of confusion”: 50% of the *masājīd* built during this period face Mecca, 12% face Petra and 38% (especially those of Spain and North Africa) face nearly south, parallel to an imaginary line between Mecca and Petra. Only after 207 AH, during the reign of al-Maʿmūn, do all mosques begin to face Mecca.⁷² Gibson believes the *qiblah* was officially changed towards the end of ‘Abd al-Malik’s reign, but that this is only reflected in the archaeological record about 20 years after his death.⁷³

These findings are clearly at odds with Muslim tradition, according to which the *qiblah* was changed from Jerusalem to Mecca in 2 AH (624 CE) during Muḥammad’s lifetime.⁷⁴ Gibson proposes the following explanation for this tradition. The *Masjid al-Qiblatayn* (“Mosque of the Two Qiblahs”) in Medina is believed to be the site at which Muḥammad received a revelation concerning the change of *qiblah*, after which he and his entire congregation turned around to face Mecca instead of Jerusalem.⁷⁵ When the mosque was renovated in 1987, the foundation stones of the original structure confirmed that it had faced approximately northwards towards Jerusalem. As Gibson points out, however, Petra and Jerusalem are in almost exactly the same direction from Medina.⁷⁶ It is usually possible to determine the *qiblah* of a *masjid* from the position of its *miḥrāb* (prayer niche in the wall of the building). According to Gibson, however, *masājīd* built before 89 AH (707-708 CE) did not have a *miḥrāb*.⁷⁷ In order to determine the *qiblah* of these structures, one needs to take into account their general alignment and other features.⁷⁸

Interestingly, although the Qurʾān mentions the change in *qiblah* (2:142-45), it does not specify either the original or the new one.⁷⁹ It merely contains the instruction to turn towards

⁷¹ Nevo and Koren, 293.

⁷² D. Gibson, *Qurʾānic Geography: A survey of the geographical references in the Qurʾān* (Independent Scholars Press, 2011), 274.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 300.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 244-45.

⁷⁵ W.M. Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman* (Oxford University Press, 1974), 112-113.

⁷⁶ Gibson, 252-53.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 300.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 251, 266 and 268-69.

⁷⁹ Gibson (p. 301), however, points out that the earliest Qurʾānic manuscripts did not contain these verses.

al-masjid al-ḥarām (2:144), “the Sacred *Masjid*.” Indeed, the Qur’ān only mentions the city of Mecca (*Makkah*) once by name (48:24), unless one accepts the traditional Muslim view that *Bakkah*—which also occurs only once (3:96)—is another name for the same city.⁸⁰ *Al-masjid al-ḥarām* occurs much more frequently and has obviously been interpreted by Muslim scholars as being in Mecca. Similarly, *al-masjid al-aqsa* (“the Furthest *Masjid*”) has been interpreted as being in Jerusalem (17:1), a city not mentioned by name at all. As Gibson points out, the earliest sources stating unambiguously that the *qiblah* was changed from Jerusalem to Mecca date from well into the ‘Abbāsīd period, over three hundred years after Muḥammad is said to have died.⁸¹

One early *masjid* discovered in the Negev region, near a town called Be’er Ora, serves as an interesting “test case” for Gibson’s essential thesis. Radiocarbon analysis of charcoal samples dated the site to 640-740 CE. The remnants of the *masjid* reveal that it had two *maḥārīb* (pl. *miḥrāb*), the original one pointing slightly north of east and another, clearly added to the structure later, pointing roughly southeast.⁸²

This *masjid* would seem to constitute archaeological proof that the *mu’minūn* of the region originally observed an eastern *qiblah*, which they later changed to face Mecca. Gideon Avni, however, doubts this: “The fragmentary nature of the structure and the fact that it was constructed in a remote desert site should restrict any far-reaching conclusions based on this single find.”⁸³ It is hardly a “single find,” however. The example of the *Masjid al-Qiblatayn* has already been discussed. Gibson also provides the example of the Fustaṭ Mosque in Cairo, built in 641, whose original ground plans reveal that the structure there had faced eastwards. The literary evidence, both Muslim and Christian, confirms this.⁸⁴ Moreover, Crone and Cook point to two Umayyad *masājīd* in Iraq facing significantly further north than Mecca.⁸⁵ This too is borne out by Muslim and Christian literary sources stating that the *qiblah* in Iraq was towards the west.⁸⁶ So far, all the evidence seems consistent with Gibson’s thesis that the original Sacred *Masjid* was in Petra. However, as seen in Fig. 7 below, Moshe Sharon, Uzi Avner and Dov Nahlieli estimate the original *qiblah* of the Be’er Ora *masjid* at 81°. Even allowing for a

⁸⁰ See Holland, *In the Shadow of the Sword*, 328-29. According to Philip Hitti, the letters “b” and “m” were interchangeable in the South Arabian language in use at the time of Muḥammad. See *Capital cities of Arab Islam*, Illustrated ed., (University of Minnesota Press, 1973), 6.

⁸¹ Gibson, 244.

⁸² M. Sharon, U. Avner and D. Nahlieli, “An early Islamic mosque near Be’er Ora in the southern Negev: possible evidence for an early eastern *qiblah*?” *Atiqot* 30 (1996), 107. See also Sharon, “The Birth of Islam in the Holy Land,” 232.

⁸³ G. Avni, *The Byzantine-Islamic Transition in Palestine* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 284.

⁸⁴ Crone and Cook, 24. See also Sharon, “The Birth of Islam in the Holy Land,” 229-230.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁸⁶ Holland, *In the Shadow of the Sword*, 373-74.

fairly wide margin of error, say 20°, the eastern *mihrāb* is still far from pointing towards Petra, (32.5° from Be'er Ora). It is even more obviously not pointing towards Jerusalem (virtually north, 5° from Be'er Ora).

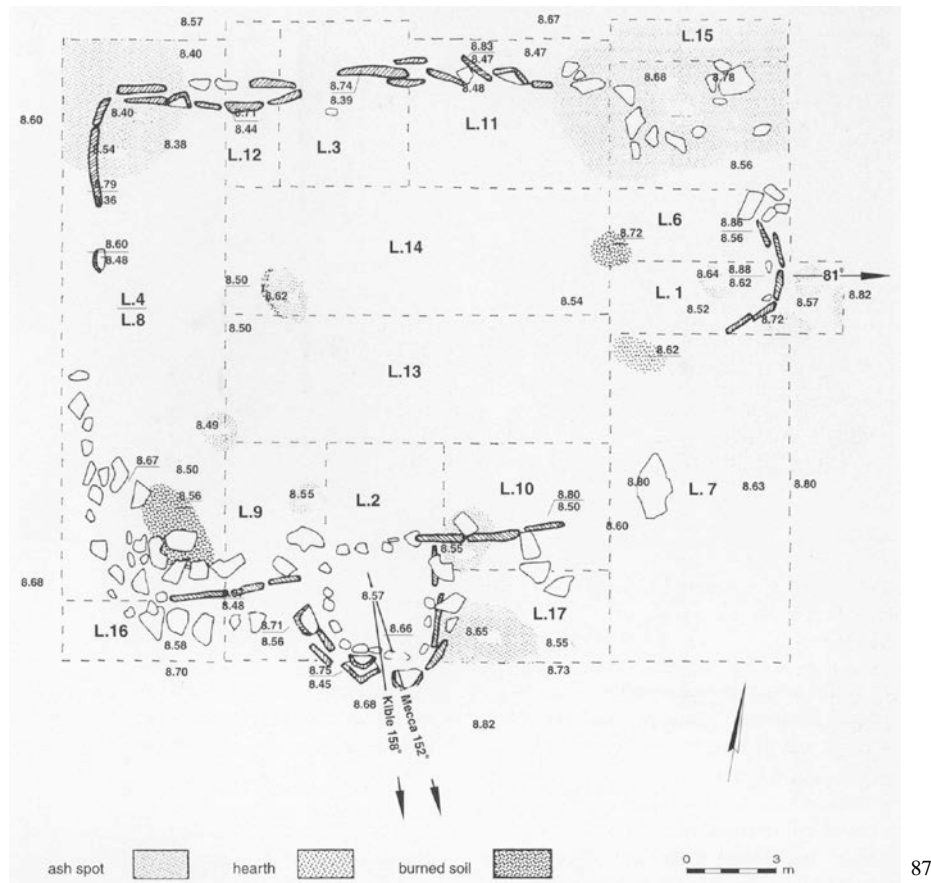


Fig. 7. Remnants of an early masjid (7th-8th c. CE) at Be'er Ora

If the eastern *qiblah* of the Be'er Ora *masjid* is facing neither Jerusalem nor Petra, how else might it be explained? One possibility, suggested by Uzzi Avner, is that the building was originally a church and later converted into a mosque.⁸⁸ Although Sharon favors the view that it is a mosque with an eastern *qiblah*, he mentions a Muslim tradition according to which Christians at the time of Muḥammad's companions had an eastern *qiblah*.⁸⁹ "[T]he *mu'minūn* in the Christian-dominated territories [sic] mosques," he adds, "could not have been different from the churches that had their apses facing east."⁹⁰ It is therefore possible that the Be'er Ora

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁸⁸ U. Avner, "Ancient Cult Sites in the Negev and Sinai Deserts," *Tel Aviv* (1984) 11: 121-135.

⁸⁹ Sharon, "The Birth of Islam in the Holy Land," 230.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

masjid was originally a church with an eastern *qiblah* or apse. Even so, Gibson may be correct that the *qiblah* of the *mu'minūn* prior to 'Abd al-Malik's time or later was Petra.

According to one Muslim tradition, 'Amr bin al-'Āṣ, the companion of Muḥammad who oversaw the construction of the Fuṣṭaṭ *masjid*, told the builders to “turn the *qiblah* to the east and you will be facing the sanctuary [*al-ḥaram*].” As Sharon points out, this *ḥarām* cannot have been Mecca. The tradition concludes by quoting an eyewitness who claimed to have seen 'Amr “entering a church... he prayed therein and he did not turn away from their (namely, the Christians') *qiblah* but very little.”⁹¹ Sharon believes that this final qualifier – “but very little” (*illā qalīlan*) – may have been added by a later author seeking to distance such an important Muslim personality from Christian practice.⁹² Another possibility, however, is that in turning slightly away from the east, he was turning towards the *ḥarām* in Petra. As Crone and Cook put it, “The combination of the archaeological evidence from Iraq with the literary evidence from Egypt points unambiguously to a sanctuary in north-west Arabia, and with this it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the location of the... sanctuary in Mecca was secondary.”⁹³

There are however several reasons to think that the original “Mecca” was in fact Petra. Firstly, there is little archaeological evidence that the Ḥijāz region was extensively inhabited in the seventh century CE.⁹⁴ Hoyland points to four inscriptions from Ṭā'if and elsewhere, the earliest of which is dated 40 AH. It is unclear, however, how this constitutes evidence that Mecca was of “significance to the early Muslims,” as he claims.⁹⁵ The earliest inscription from Mecca itself apparently dates from as late as 98 AH (or 717 CE) and contains some verses of Arabic poetry variously attributed to a bishop of Najrān in southwest Arabia and a pre-Islamic king of Yemen.⁹⁶ None of this seems to shine very much light upon Mecca—or the question of its significance to the *mu'minūn*—in the seventh century.

Secondly, as Gibson points out, there is some archaeological evidence from Petra that better fits the traditional Muslim account of Mecca. According to this account, during the civil war between Ibn al-Zubayr and 'Abd al-Malik, the former sought refuge in Mecca. 'Abd al-Malik then besieged the holy city, badly damaging the inner part of it with catapults.⁹⁷ Gibson notes that hundreds of catapult stones have been found in central Petra near the Temple of the

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Crone and Cook, 24.

⁹⁴ Nevo and Koren, 13.

⁹⁵ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 565.

⁹⁶ Hoyland, “Epigraphy and the Linguistic Background to the Qur'ān,” in *The Qur'ān in its Historical Context*, ed. G. Said Reynolds (Routledge, 2008), 64-65.

⁹⁷ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 648-49.

Nabatean god Dushara (see Fig. 8 below). In Mecca, meanwhile, there is no such evidence of a siege or even of city walls that would have necessitated the use of catapults.⁹⁸



99



100

Fig. 8. Catapult stones found at Petra

Fig. 9. A lesser known ka'bah at Petra

Thirdly, as Gibson shows, the earliest descriptions of Mecca are more consistent with the geography of Petra. For example, the city is described as being in a valley, with a high side and a low side.¹⁰¹ The term *Bakkah*, if we understand it to refer to the same place as the “Valley of Bakka” (Hebrew: *‘Emeq ha-Baka*) mentioned in Psalm 84, also makes sense in this light.¹⁰² Although the text of the Qur’ān provides few other geographical clues as to the general area in which it originated, it does mention that God

sendeth down water from the sky, and therewith We bring forth buds of every kind; We bring forth the green blade from which We bring forth the thick-clustered grain; and from the date-palm... (We bring forth) gardens of grapes, and the olive and the pomegranate... Lo! herein verily are portents for a people who believe (6:99).¹⁰³

Such crops, Tom Holland argues, were they “to be found in seventh-century Arabia at all, would have been confined to oases, or else to Nabataea and the Negev, where... by the

⁹⁸ Gibson, 331-32.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 332. These stones were discovered by M. Sharp Joukowsky of the Brown University Excavation.

¹⁰⁰ Holland, *In the Shadow of the Sword*, Illustrations.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 9, citing Gibson.

¹⁰² Gibson notes (pp. 276-77) that “Baka” means “weeping” or “tears” and that there are a number of such valleys the Middle East, each associated with a tragedy that once occurred there.

¹⁰³ Pickthall translation.

lifetime of the Prophet... agriculture was flourishing as never before...”¹⁰⁴ Even at Medina, an oasis settlement where grapes and pomegranates might have grown, olives would not have been cultivated at that time.¹⁰⁵

Fourthly, the Syrian bishop Jacob of Edessa, writing in the 680s CE, specifically mentions that the *mahgraye* of Egypt prayed towards the *ka 'bah*,¹⁰⁶ east of Egypt and west of Iraq.¹⁰⁷ *Mahgraye* is a Syriac form of the Arabic word *muhajirūn*, another early term by which the Arab *mu'minūn* sometimes referred to themselves.¹⁰⁸ It is generally understood to derive from *hijra* (“migration” or “exodus”) and thus to mean something akin to “emigrants”. Another Syriac source from 682-83 CE, however, appears to connect the term’s etymology to *Hājar* or Hagar – the mother of Ishmael, through whom Arabs claim descent from Abraham.¹⁰⁹

Abraham and Ishmael, according to the Qur’ān (2:127), built the *Ka 'bah*, understood to be the referent of *bayt* (“House”) in 2:125-127, 3:96 and 22:26, of *al-bayt al- 'atīq* (“The Ancient House”) in 22:29 and 22:33, and of *baytika al-muḥarram* (“Thy [i.e. God’s] Sacred House”) in 14:37. The Muslim tradition contains a number of glosses on these Qur’ānic verses, which, as Reuven Firestone observes, are based on the Hebrew Bible. For example, according to Genesis 21:21, Ishmael dwelt *be-midbar Paran* (“in the desert of Paran”).¹¹⁰ The Muslim scholar Ibn Kathīr (c.1300-1373) recounts that “Abraham went to visit his son and his son’s mother at all times in the land of Farān.”¹¹¹ According to the Muslim geographer Yāqūt (1179-1229), the name Farān is “an Arabicised Hebrew word. One of the names of Mecca mentioned in the Torah.”¹¹² Abraham’s connection to Mecca is established thus. Equating Paran with Mecca also allowed mediaeval Muslim authors to claim that the advent of Muḥammad was foretold in Deuteronomy 33:2. In this verse, God appears on three different mountains, Sinai, Seir and Paran, purportedly corresponding to the three successive revelations of Moses, Jesus and Muḥammad.¹¹³ Outside of the Muslim tradition, however, Paran has only ever referred to

¹⁰⁴ Holland, *In the Shadow of the Sword*, 327.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ The Arabic word *ka 'bah* means “cube” or “cubic structure.” Other such structures have been found in the Arabian peninsula, suggesting to Holland that this shape has long been “held in reverence by the Arabs” (Illustrations). The pagan Arabs, like various other pagan groups, also revered *massebot* or “standing stones”. See Avni, *The Byzantine-Islamic Transition in Palestine*, 283-85.

¹⁰⁷ Crone and Cook, 24. See also p. 173.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 8. See also Donner, 203.

¹⁰⁹ Crone and Cook, 9.

¹¹⁰ R. Firestone, *Title Journeys in holy lands: the evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael legends in Islamic exegesis* (SUNY Press, 1990), 65.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 65.

¹¹³ M. Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton University Press, 1994), 150-51.

a region in the north-eastern Sinai far from Mecca, but which does include Petra.¹¹⁴ This gives a whole new meaning to the proverb, “If the mountain will not come to Muhammad, Muḥammad will have to go to the mountain!”

ii. *Churches-cum-masājīd*

As discussed above, it is not always possible to distinguish between churches and early *masājīd*. In part, I would suggest, this is because even at the time the distinction between the two was not always so clear. As Sharon notes, there is nothing unusual about the tradition of ‘Amr bin al-‘Āṣ praying in a church, since “the early *mu`minūn* shared the churches with the Christians.”¹¹⁵ Here I shall discuss two examples of such shared places of worship, the Kathisma and Northern Church at Shivta.

The Kathisma was an octagonal church that once stood near the Jerusalem-Bethlehem road. It was built in 456 CE around a rock where early Christians believed the pregnant Virgin Mary sat down to rest on her way to Bethlehem, hence its name, which means “the Seat” in Greek.¹¹⁶ Rina Avner notes a similar story in the apocryphal Christian book of Pseudo-Matthew, according to which Joseph and Mary make their way to Egypt with the infant Jesus in order to escape King Herod. Tired, hungry and thirsty, they rested under a date palm. Mary despaired that the tree was too tall for them to reach its fruit, but the infant Jesus ordered the tree to bend downwards. After she had gathered some dates, he ordered it to stand up again, and water began to flow from its roots. In the Qur’ān, the two stories appear to have coalesced:

And the pangs of childbirth drove her unto the trunk of the palm-tree. She said: Oh, would that I had died ere this and had become a thing of naught, forgotten! Then (one) cried unto her from below her, saying: Grieve not! Thy Lord hath placed a rivulet beneath thee, And shake the trunk of the palm-tree toward thee, thou wilt cause ripe dates to fall upon thee. So eat and drink and be consoled (19:23-26).¹¹⁷

This would explain how the site of the Kathisma also came to be seen as holy by the *mu`minūn*. The archaeological excavations at the site reveal that the church underwent three renovation phases after its initial construction.¹¹⁸ The second of these occurred during the latter

¹¹⁴ Firestone, 65.

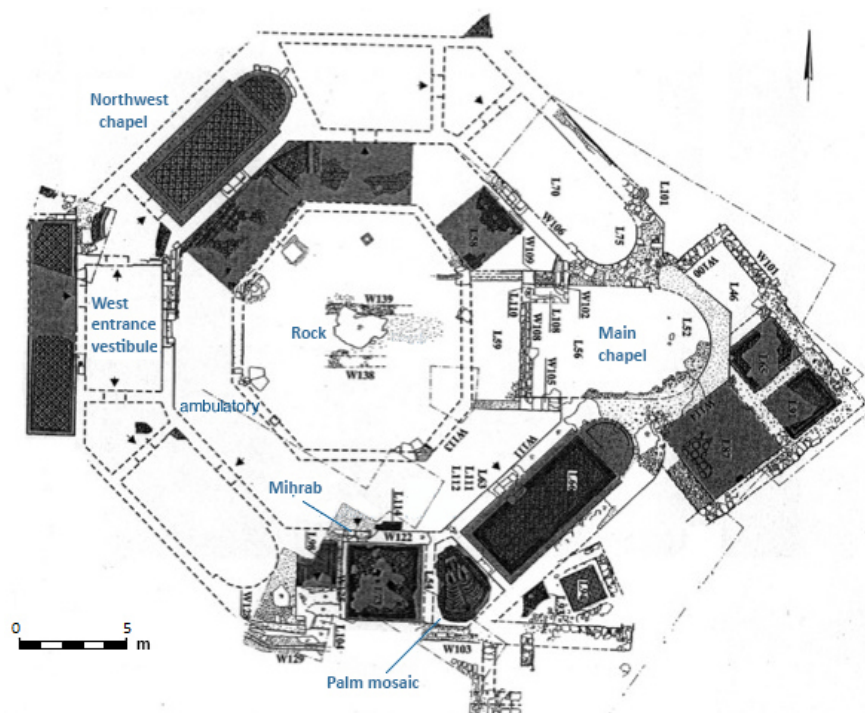
¹¹⁵ Sharon, “The Birth of Islam in the Holy Land,” 230.

¹¹⁶ R. Avner, “The Kathisma: A Christian and Muslim Pilgrimage Site,” *ARAM* 18-19 (2006-7): 541-43.

¹¹⁷ Pickthall translation.

¹¹⁸ R. Avner, 554.

half of the Umayyad period and allowed the church to function simultaneously as a *masjid*. A rounded niche was installed on a threshold stone at the southern side of the church, obscuring the entrance from the vestibule to the ambulatory (see Fig. 10 below). Mosaic floors were also laid to the north and south of the niche. In the foundation of the southern mosaic, a post-Reform Umayyad coin (i.e. one minted between 697-750 CE) was found. This evidence taken together leaves little doubt that the niche was indeed a *mihrāb*.¹¹⁹ Another mosaic floor was found in a small room in the outer part of the church, southeast of the *mihrāb*. It depicts a large palm tree in between two smaller ones, all of which are bearing fruit. This was also added during the Umayyad phase of the building, further suggesting that the site was associated with the Qur'ānic story cited above.¹²⁰



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Fig. 10. The Kathisma Church

Shivta is a town in the Negev established in the first century BCE (during the “Early Roman” or “Middle Nabatean” period). It flourished in Byzantines times, during which three churches

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 550.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 550-51.

¹²¹ Adapted from the Israel Antiquities Authority plan. Available at: <http://israel-tourguide.info/2011/12/15/kathisma-church/> (accessed February 28, 2015).

were built there.¹²² In one of these—the North Church built in the fourth century—Arabic inscriptions were discovered.¹²³ Arabic inscriptions, mainly Qur’ānic verses, were also found at the *masjid* built after the Arab conquest – probably in the 8th century.¹²⁴ These inscriptions, as Bilha Moor shows, help to elucidate religious attitudes and practice in Shivta after the conquest. Based on a paleographic analysis of the letters, Moor dates the inscriptions in the *masjid* to the late Umayyad or early ‘Abbāsīd period (c. 700-760 CE). They “address several fundamental issues in Islamic belief, namely, God as the creator, Muḥammad as the messenger of God, and the opposition to *shirk*, as if to declare the dogma of the new Muslim sovereigns.” She goes on to note, however, that the longest of them “concerns the acceptance of other messengers in general” and might have been intended for the towns’ Christians in order “to bring them closer to the new growing Islamic faith.”¹²⁵ I reproduce Moor’s translated text of the full inscription below, numbered according to line (square brackets mine):

1. In the name of Allāh the Merciful the Compassionate
2. Oh Allāh, bless Muḥammad, thy servant,
3. and thy Messenger. [**beginning of Qur’ānic verse 2:285**] The Messenger believes
4. in what was sent down to him from his Lord, and the believers; each one
5. believes in God and His angels, and Books and His Messengers; we make no
6. division between any one of His Messengers. They say ‘We hear and o-
7. bey. Our Lord, grant us Thy forgiveness; unto Thee is the homecoming.
8. [**beginning of Qur’ānic verse 2:286**] God charges no soul save to its capacity; standing to its
- account is what it has earned,
9. and against its account what it has merited. Our Lord, take us not to task
10. if we forget, or make mistakes. Our Lord do Thou not burden us beyond what
11. we have the strength to bear. And pardon us, and have mercy on us;
12. Thou art our Protector. And help us against the people of the unbelievers. [**end of Qur’ānic quotation**]
13. And Naṣr ibn Maṣṣūr wrote (this inscription).¹²⁶

The Arabic inscriptions at the North Church date from the same period,¹²⁷ but have been painted rather than incised.¹²⁸ They were originally found in the northern side room of

¹²² B. Moor, “Mosque and church: Arabic inscriptions at Shivta in the early Islamic period,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 40 (2013): 73-74.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 104

the narthex, on its western wall. Opposite them is a medallion engraved with a cross and other Christian symbols, none of which shows any signs of having been defaced.¹²⁹ Unfortunately, these inscriptions are in a worse condition than those at the *masjid* and hence not very legible, but from them Moor was able to make out the *basmalah* formula (twice) and the term *muḥammad*.¹³⁰ Although there was no evidence of a *miḥrab*, Moor surmises that “that a part of the North Church was allocated to the Muslims, perhaps for prayer.” She points to churches with similar Arabic inscriptions at Nessana, Mamshit and Rehovot-in-the-Negev and to evidence of other churches shared by “Christians and Muslims.”¹³¹



Fig. 11. Arabic inscription at Shivta's North Church

Moor suggests that Shivta was “a town of coexistence, where the Muslim conquerors, who most probably consisted a minority at least until a certain period, continued to live side by side with the Christian inhabitants, and seem to have respected their places of worship...”¹³³ It is far from obvious, however, that there was any real distinction in the eyes of the *mu'minūn* between churches and *masājid* at this time. To be sure, as the *masjid* built after the conquest shows, the Arab *mu'minūn* built their own places of worship that differed from churches built

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 107-09.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 136. Brightness and contrast adjusted to make the text clearer.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 110.

prior to the conquest. The notion, however, that churches were only for Christians and *masājid* only for *mu`minūn* might have been absent at that time. Moor mentions another inscription from the *masjid* at Shivta containing the Qur`ānic verse 72:18. She translates this as “The mosques belong to Allah; so call not, along with Allāh, upon anyone.”¹³⁴ However, if one considers the original meaning of *masjid* as simply a place of worship, this verse would mean that places of worship in general belong to God whether they are churches, or *masājid* built by the *mu`minūn*.

iii. *The Dome of the Rock*

The Dome of the Rock (Arabic: *qubbat aṣ-ṣakrah*), although it is sometimes called the Mosque of `Umar, has always functioned as a shrine rather than as a *masjid*.¹³⁵ It is of especial interest because it is the oldest extant “Islamic” building in the world.¹³⁶ Like the Kathisma, it is octagonal and built around a rock of religious significance. Sharon notes that this “architectural shape was quite common, especially in buildings of a commemorative nature.”¹³⁷ `Abd al-Malik also commissioned Byzantine architects who might naturally have adopted an octagonal plan similar to that of the Kathisma when instructed to build a structure around the rock.¹³⁸ Sharon wonders, however, whether “the builders discovered at the place – on the Temple Mount – foundations ready for the building... what if the foundations and parts of the walls of a polygonal building already existed in place and `Abd al-Malik’s architects and builders only continued the building following an existing ground plan?”¹³⁹ The rock was after all already of significance to Jews and Christians, some of whom came to believe that it was where Abraham nearly sacrificed his son Isaac.¹⁴⁰ The same story is found in the Qur`ān; although the name of the son whom Abraham was ready to sacrifice is not mentioned, Muslim tradition for the most part holds that it was Ishmael.¹⁴¹

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹³⁵ Sharon, “Shape of the Holy,” *Studia Orientalia* 107 (2009), 293.

¹³⁶ Robinson, 3.

¹³⁷ Sharon, “Shape of the Holy,” 293.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 301.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ O. Grabar, “The Haram al-Sharif: An Essay in Interpretation,” *Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies* 2 (2000), 1.

¹⁴¹ R. Paret, “Ismā`īl.” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., eds. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs (Brill Online, 2015). http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/isma-i-l-SIM_3644 (accessed March 3, 2015)

According to an inscription on the inside of the building, its construction was completed in 691-692 CE during the reign of ‘Abd al-Malik. Literary sources claim that it took around three years to complete, which has led some to suggest that ‘Abd al-Malik’s original purpose in building it was to provide an alternative pilgrimage site to the *ḥarām* at Mecca, controlled by Ibn al-Zubayr and his forces until their defeat in 692.¹⁴² The part of Jerusalem’s old city where it stands is indeed known by Muslims today as *al-ḥarām aš-šarīf* (“the noble sanctuary”), although this term does not seem to have been used prior to Ottoman times.¹⁴³ It is more widely believed that the Dome of the Rock was intended to symbolize the permanent supremacy of Islam over its rival monotheistic religions, Judaism and Christianity, in the holy city of Jerusalem.¹⁴⁴ It is after all located on what Jews call the “Temple Mount,” and eclipses the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.¹⁴⁵

The interior of the Dome of the Rock contains many inscriptions dating from the time of its construction, which are of great value as they offer a glimpse into the religious milieu of late seventh century Jerusalem. As Nevo and Koren note, one finds in these inscriptions several words that become “key terms in Muslim theology: the *tawḥīd*, *šarik*, *šamad*, and indeed *islām*,”¹⁴⁶ which is found here for the first time.¹⁴⁷ They argue that these terms make most sense when understood within the context of Christian sectarian disputes at the time. Pauline Christians held that Jesus was the son of God and part of the Holy Trinity. This was the position of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, the state religion of the Byzantine Empire. Heterodox “Judaeo-Christians,” on the other hand, rejected Jesus’ divine nature and the Trinity, but accepted him as the Messiah (God’s “anointed one”). The theological content of the Dome of the Rock inscriptions, they point out, concurs with the “Judaeo-Christian” position. The term *Tawḥīd* (“oneness”) is equivalent to the Hebrew term *yihūd* and refers to the nature of God. The term *šarik* corresponds to the Greek term *synthetos*, which in a theological context means combining or associating God with another. The meaning of *šamad* (which also occurs in the Qur’ān) is unclear, but the Semitic root of the term suggests that it could mean something like “tightly bound together” or indivisible.¹⁴⁸

Nevo’s and Koren’s interpretation of *islām* is perhaps the most interesting. This term appears in an inscription on the outer face of the octagonal arcade along with another familiar

¹⁴² Robinson, 6.

¹⁴³ Grabar, “The Haram al-Sharif: An Essay in Interpretation,” 1.

¹⁴⁴ Robinson, 7.

¹⁴⁵ Sharon, “Shape of the Holy,” 293.

¹⁴⁶ Nevo and Koren, 276.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 234.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 277.

term *dīn*, usually understood in Arabic to mean “religion”. Part of this inscription corresponds to verse 3:19 of the Qur’ān:

Lo! *dīn* with Allāh is *islām*. Those who received the Book differed only after knowledge came to them, through envy/their own willfulness. Whoever denies the signs of Allāh, behold, Allāh is swift at reckoning.¹⁴⁹

They note that the term *dīn* has a less abstract sense and can also mean “the correct behavior” (i.e. of the community). The Hebrew root *s.l.m.*, meanwhile, conveys the meaning of “complete,” “perfect” or “whole.” Taken together, then, the initial sentence might have been intended to mean, “The correct behavior of the community in God’s eyes is wholeness.” God’s religious community, in other words, should not be divided, suggesting that *islām* at this early stage might have meant something like “unity” or “concord.” If one understands the term this way, the remainder of the verse appears less of a non-sequitur as it suggests that *disunity* only came about because of later distortions of God’s original revelations.¹⁵⁰

Another inscription, on the inner face of the octagonal arcade, contains fewer Qur’ānic verses, though the formula *muḥammad rasūl allāh*—which appears once in the Qur’ān (48:29)—occurs twice therein. *Muḥammad ‘abd allāh* (“*muḥammad* is the servant of God”), which is not found in the Qur’ān, also appears once at the end of the inscription. Interestingly, the term *muḥammad* only appears in the Qur’ān a total of four times. By contrast, *rasūl* (in the sense of God’s “messenger”) occurs over 300 times, *nabī* (prophet) 43 times, Mūsā (Moses) 136 times, Fir‘awn (Pharaoh) 74 times, Ibrāhīm (Abraham) 69 times, Isra‘īl 58 times, Nuḥ (Noah) 43 times, Maryam (Mary or Miriam) 34 times, ‘Īsā (Jesus) 25 times, Yūsuf (Joseph) 28 times, Ādam 28 times, Harūn (Aaron) 20 times, Ishāq (Isaac) 17 times, Sulaymān (Solomon) 17 times, Ya‘qūb (Jacob) 16 times and Ismā‘īl (Ishmael) 12 times.¹⁵¹

Where *muḥammad* does occur, either in the Dome of the Rock inscriptions or in the Qur’ān, the word is not accompanied by any biographical information (e.g. *Muḥammad ibn ‘Abdallāh*, “Muḥammad, son of ‘Abdallāh). It differs in this respect from the other aforementioned prophets (e.g. ‘Īsā ibn Maryam, “Jesus son of Mary”). Nevo and Koren conclude from this that there is no reason to read the word as a proper name.¹⁵² This was the

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 278.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 265. I have extended this list and made some corrections to it with the help of the following website: “The Quranic Arabic Corpus,” <http://corpus.quran.com/> (accessed: March 4, 2015).

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 265.

same conclusion reached by Luxenberg, although while he reads *muḥammad* as a gerundival participle (“Praised be...”), Nevo and Koren read it as an epithet meaning something like: “he who is chosen/desired” by God. They arrive at this different meaning once again by examining its Semitic root, *ḥ.m.d.*¹⁵³ Both interpretations are compatible with Luxenberg’s argument that the term *muḥammad* is referring to Jesus. In my view, however, Luxenberg offers more persuasive considerations in favor of his own. He notes that the copula *huwa* (“he is”) does not appear in either formula on the Dome of the Rock, which is unsurprising if *muḥammad* is a verbal form. He also compares his translation with other uses of the gerundival participle in Arabic: *mubārak al-’atī bismi r-rabb*, which occurs within the Arabic Christian liturgy and means, “Blessed be he who comes in the name of the Lord.”¹⁵⁴

Luxenberg’s argument that *muḥammad* refers to Jesus is based on his view, shared by Sharon,¹⁵⁵ that the text on the inner and outer face of the octagonal arcade should be read as one continuous inscription. When one reads the references to *muḥammad* in the context of a section not found in the Qur’ān, one notices the identical way in which Muḥammad and Jesus are described: *allāhum ṣallī ‘alā rasūlika wa-’abdika ‘Īsā ibni Maryam* (“O God bless your messenger and servant Jesus, son of Mary!”).¹⁵⁶ The early Christian sources that mention *muḥammad* as a “prophet of the Arabs” can be explained, according to Luxenberg, by the fact that most Greek- and Aramaic-speaking Christians would not have been aware that this term referred to Jesus.¹⁵⁷

Based on the Dome of the Rock inscription(s), Luxenberg argues that it would be most accurate to identify ‘Abd al-Malik’s creed not merely as “Judaean-Christianity,” but specifically as “Syrian-Arabian Christianity.”¹⁵⁸ It should of course be borne in mind that prior to the Arab conquests, whole tribes of Arabs already belonged to this branch of Christianity that had rejected the Trinitarian doctrines of the First Council of Nicea in 325 CE.¹⁵⁹ If one looks at the inscriptions in this light, there is nothing unusual or novel about their contents. The novelty was that under ‘Abd al-Malik, this creed had become the official religion of a state and was no longer a persecuted heretical sect within (or at the fringes of) the Byzantine Empire.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 262-63.

¹⁵⁴ Luxenberg, 130.

¹⁵⁵ Sharon, “Shape of the Holy,” 291.

¹⁵⁶ Luxenberg, 131.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 141-42.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹⁵⁹ Sharon, “The Birth of Islam in the Holy Land,” 228.

The evidence of religious sites is consistent with that of the coins and inscriptions in that it suggests that the early *mu'minūn* were either pre-Nicene Christians or had very similar beliefs to them. Their beliefs were in any case sufficiently similar that they were able to share places of worship with Christians. The evidence of religious sites is even more intriguing, however. Not only does it point overwhelmingly towards the conclusion that the original *qiblah* of the Arab *mu'minūn* did not face Mecca; Muslim tradition itself was unable to suppress this fact entirely. One can only speculate as to the reasons behind the change in *qiblah* and the relocation of *al-masjid al-harām* from somewhere else (very likely Petra) to Mecca. Tom Holland has suggested that the remote and isolated site of “Mecca gave Islam what it most needed: a blank sheet, where Muslims could put their prophet.”¹⁶⁰ Nevo and Koren also point to the late seventh century Hijazi leader, Muḥammad ibn Ḥanafīyyah, whom many early *mu'minūn* recognized as the *Mahdī* (the Islamic equivalent of the “messiah”, but one cannot be certain what this term meant at the time).¹⁶¹ Suliman Bashear has noted many parallels in the biographies of Ibn Ḥanafīyyah and Muḥammad the prophet of Islam.¹⁶² If Ibn Ḥanafīyyah did provide much of the inspiration for the prophet when the biography of the latter was written in the 'Abbāsīd period, this may explain why it was necessary to establish a religious center at his birthplace.

V. Other Archaeological Evidence

i. Arab Conquest or Arab Takeover?

Gideon Avni has shown that the Byzantine-Islamic transition in Palestine was smooth and gradual in nature.¹⁶³ The archaeological evidence from the major urban centers at the time of the Arab conquest reveals few signs of destruction. Even in Caesarea Maritima, the capital of the Byzantine province of Palaestina Prima, which according to Christian, Muslim and Samaritan sources was under siege between 634 and 640, “no indications for a violent conquest exist in the archaeological record.”¹⁶⁴ The octagonal church, he points out, was not damaged

¹⁶⁰ Holland, *Islam: The Untold Story* (Channel Four, 2011). Television documentary.

¹⁶¹ Nevo and Koren, 280.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 281, citing S. Bashear, *An Introduction to the Other History: Towards a New Reading of Islamic Tradition* (Jerusalem, 1984). In Arabic.

¹⁶³ See especially Avni, *The Byzantine-Islamic Transition in Palestine*.

¹⁶⁴ G. Avni, “‘From Polis to Madina’ Revisited – Urban Change in Byzantine and early Islamic Palestine,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 21 (2011), 317.

after the siege and only destroyed much later, probably by an earthquake in 749.¹⁶⁵ In Tiberias, the capital of the Arab province of Jund al-'Urdun, a number of churches and synagogues continued to function after the conquest, suggesting that Jewish and Christian communities “thrived” there during the early Islamic period.¹⁶⁶ Moreover, in Gerasa (Jerash) and Jerusalem, new churches were being constructed and old ones renovated after conquest.¹⁶⁷ This is especially significant, because whereas one might expect Muslim conquerors to exercise tolerance towards Jews and Christians as *ahl al-kitāb* (“People of the Book”), one would hardly expect the construction of new churches under Muslim rule. The “Pact of ‘Umar” (believed to date back to the second *rashidūn* caliph, ‘Umar ibn al-Ḳaṭṭāb, r. 634-44 CE) explicitly forbids the construction of new churches and even the repair of existing ones.¹⁶⁸

Some have interpreted this archaeological evidence as showing that there was no “Arab conquest” as such. Instead, they suggest, the Byzantine Empire was forced to withdraw from many of its eastern provinces after being weakened by decades of conflict with the Sasanian Empire.¹⁶⁹ Arab nomadic tribes from the periphery of these provinces then migrated inwards and filled the power vacuum, many of whom were *mu'minūn* (the others would have been pagan). This may have been the *hijra* from which the term *muhajirūn* is derived, at which point the Arabs began counting their own years. A power struggle then ensued among the Arabs (including the urban ones) out of which the Umayyad dynasty emerged proclaiming the religion of the *mu'minūn* the state religion. Meanwhile, other communities of *mu'minūn* formed states in the Hijaz and Iraq.¹⁷⁰ In Sharon's view,

It is possible that this process began with silent approval from Byzantium, which was later powerless when the Umayyads expanded their authority over all of Syria, running the Byzantine administration without changing either the official language or the coinage. And if the central Byzantine government occasionally flexed its muscle in a show of authority, the Umayyads were not averse to recognizing the higher nominal authority of the emperor, even to the point of paying taxes. Given this picture, there is no need to posit a great Islamic conquest, nor the fierce battles whose confusing descriptions fill large volumes of the traditional history of Islam.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 312.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 314, 322.

¹⁶⁸ See N. Stillman, “Dhimma,” *Mediaeval Islam: An Encyclopedia*, ed. J.W. Meri (Psychology Press, 2005), 205.

¹⁶⁹ Sharon, “Appendix: Arabic Inscriptions from Sede-Boqer–Map 167,” *Archaeological Survey of Israel: Map of Sede Boqer West*, ed. R. Cohen (The Department of Antiquities and Museums, Jerusalem, 1985), 33.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 33-34.

ii. *Inscriptions from Sede Boqer*

Several Arabic inscriptions were discovered at Sede Boqer, which pre-date the proclamation of a state religion under ‘Abd al-Malik. They are not official inscriptions, but rather “popular” inscriptions consisting of entreaties to God. They are of interest in that they shed light on some of the beliefs of the Arabs living in the area at this time. As Sharon notes, there is no “hint of an institutionalized Islam” within them. Some of the formulae appear in the Qur’ān, such as *rabb Mūsā* (“God of Moses”) or *rabb Mūsā wa-Harūn* (“God of Moses and Aaron”). The term *muḥammad* sometimes occurs, but “in a totally neutral context.”¹⁷² That is to say, *muḥammad* is not described as a prophet or a messenger or servant of God. There is no *basmalah* and the attributes of God (mercy, compassion) are not mentioned either.¹⁷³ All one can really tell from these inscriptions is that their authors were aware of the Biblical figures of Moses and Aaron and that they were monotheists (hence *mu’minūn* in some sense, although they may not yet have referred to themselves as such). In Sharon’s estimation, although it is difficult to date these inscriptions, they could be from the first half of the 7th century, even before the Arab conquest or migration.¹⁷⁴

It is worth contrasting these inscriptions with another found at Sede Boqer from a later period. It contains the first part of the familiar *basmalah* formula at the beginning and from its script, Sharon was able to date it to the early eighth century:

In the name of Allah. The Lord of Mūsā and Muḥammad. In the day whereon the crier shall cry from Īlyā; the day whereon he shall call from Īlyā the day... Allah the Lord of ‘Īsā and Mūsā. Until the day whereon the crier shall cry from Īlyā...¹⁷⁵

Īlyā is the earliest Arabic name for Jerusalem and is derived from the Latin *Aelia Capitolina*.¹⁷⁶ The inscription therefore demonstrates that by this stage, Jerusalem had acquired significance for *mu’minūn* living in the Negev.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ Sharon, “Shape of the Holy,” 298.

¹⁷⁶ *Aelia* is the *nomen gentile* of the Roman emperor Hadrian (Publius Aelius Hadrianus Augustus), who built a temple to the Roman god Jupiter upon the ruins of second Jewish temple. *Capitolina* derives from the Capitoline Hill in Rome, where Jupiter’s original temple stood, and indicates Jerusalem’s status as a new city dedicated to Jupiter.

iii. *Ḳirbet al-Mafjar*

A number of *qusūr* (desert palaces) built by the Umayyads have been discovered throughout Palestine. One of these, at Ḳirbet al-Mafjar near Jericho, is especially interesting as excavations there have revealed that it contained classical artwork and sculptures (including semi-nude human forms) in addition to a wine press. Robert Hamilton concluded in the 1940s that Ḳirbet al-Mafjar must have been the palace of Walid II, who reigned briefly as one of the last Umayyad leaders (743-744) and was notorious for his excessive consumption of wine. Hamilton defended this idea with what Donald Whitcomb has described as a “weak linguistic argument”: Mafjar has the same root as the Arabic word *fujūr* (debauchery).¹⁷⁷ According to Whitcomb, one cannot really know when or by whom the palace was founded. Two pieces of marble are however inscribed with the name Hishām, who reigned from 727-743, suggesting that he lived there, but not necessarily that he built the palace.¹⁷⁸

It does indeed seem unlikely that a whole palace with such elaborate features could have been built during the brief reign of one hedonistic caliph. A more plausible conclusion is that the Umayyads in general inherited the classical Hellenistic culture that already existed in the territory over which they came to rule. If one accepts that the Umayyads were nevertheless Muslims, one might explain the representation of human forms by the fact that a prohibition against this had not yet developed in Islam. The wine press, on the other hand, would be more difficult to explain. As is well known, the consumption of wine (and indeed of all alcoholic beverages) is prohibited in the Qur’ān (5:90-91). Other parts of the Qur’ān that discuss the subject are more equivocal, however. In 2:219, it is acknowledged that there is both *iṭm* (sin) and *manāfi* (benefits) in drinking, but that the former outweigh the latter. In 16:67, God is praised for creating the fruits of the date palm and the vine, “whence ye derive strong drink [*sakaran*, lit. “intoxication”] and (also) good nourishment. Lo! therein is indeed a portent for people who have sense.”¹⁷⁹ Karl-Heinz Ohlig notes that this tension in Qur’ān reflects disputes among seventh century Syrian-Arabian Christians.¹⁸⁰ In other words, one need not interpret the Qur’ānic verses as an absolute prohibition on the consumption of alcohol; this standard Islamic interpretation may only have appeared later.

¹⁷⁷ D. Whitcomb and H. Tana, “Ḳirbat al-Mafjar and its place in the archaeological heritage of Palestine,” *Journal of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology and Heritage Studies* 1 (2013), 55.

¹⁷⁸ D. Whitcomb, “Jericho Mafjar Project and Islamic Archaeology,” *The Oriental Institute: 2010-2011 Annual Report* (University of Chicago, 2011), 65-66.

¹⁷⁹ Pickthall translation.

¹⁸⁰ K. Ohlig, “Syrian-Arabian Christianity and the Qur’ān,” in *The Hidden Origins of Islam*, 386.

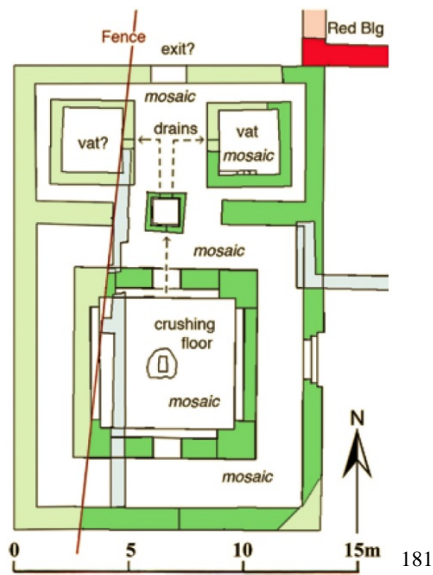


Fig. 12. The wine press at Mafjar palace

Fig. 13. Sculpture of a woman at Mafjar palace

Another conclusion one might draw is that the Umayyads were simply “bad Muslims,” to use Sharon’s expression.¹⁸³ This was how the ‘Abbāsids saw the Umayyads, although for many other reasons as well.¹⁸⁴ When one considers, however, the many new elements that the ‘Abbāsids introduced into the religion of the Arab *mu’minūn*, it would hardly be surprising if the prohibition on alcohol were just one more of these. One might then see the situation the other way around. The ‘Abbāsids, who had taken power from the Umayyads, needed to portray them as illegitimate rulers. In order to do, they retrospectively applied their religious strictures to the Umayyads and found that the latter fell short of these.

VI. Conclusion

I have considered here a wide range of archaeological evidence from seventh and eighth century Palestine and elsewhere. I have also tried to show how some of the literary evidence might be reconciled with this. Such a methodology might lead to a number of different (not always mutually compatible) conclusions. It has been my purpose here to raise as many of

¹⁸¹ D. Whitcomb, “Jericho Mafjar Project and Islamic Archaeology,” *The Oriental Institute: 2011-2012 Annual Report* (University of Chicago, 2011), 88.

¹⁸² Holland, *In the Shadow of the Sword*, Illustrations.

¹⁸³ Sharon, “The Birth of Islam in the Holy Land,” 227.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 227-28. See also Luxenberg, 145.

these as possible without unduly favoring some over others. I do, however, contend that whatever particular conclusions others may reach, a few general ones are inescapable.

Firstly, it is an open question whether Muḥammad ever existed as a historical figure. Secondly, an event of some significance must have occurred in 622 CE, since the Arabs began counting from that year, but it is unclear what this was or even whether it was religious in nature. Thirdly, there is no compelling reason to think that Arab conquerors of Palestine were “Muslims” in the usual sense of the term. One cannot even know that they referred to themselves as such. At least as early as Mu‘āwiyah’s time (661 CE), they referred to themselves as *mu‘minūn* (believers). From the time of ‘Abd al-Malik, the Umayyad Arab state was hostile to Trinitarian Christianity, but there is no evidence that it was hostile to Christianity *per se*. There is indeed no discernible difference between ‘Abd al-Malik’s theology as proclaimed in the Dome of the Rock and that of Syrian Arabian Christianity. Fourthly, with the exception of ‘Abd al-Malik, the Umayyad leaders did not refer to themselves as caliphs. Although ‘Abd al-Malik briefly adopted this title, all the evidence suggests that he meant something entirely different by it. Fifthly, the *mu‘minūn* of Palestine did not originally pray towards Mecca. They prayed facing eastwards, either towards a different sanctuary (most likely Petra) or because this was the direction in which Christians at the time prayed. Finally, there is every indication that Islam emerged in its recognizable form only in the ‘Abbāsīd period (mainly during the reign of al-Ma‘mūn): as a religion distinct from Christianity, with a biography of its own prophet named Muḥammad, a calendar based on his *hijra* from Mecca to Medina, a political institution called the caliphate and a universal Mecca-facing *qiblah*.

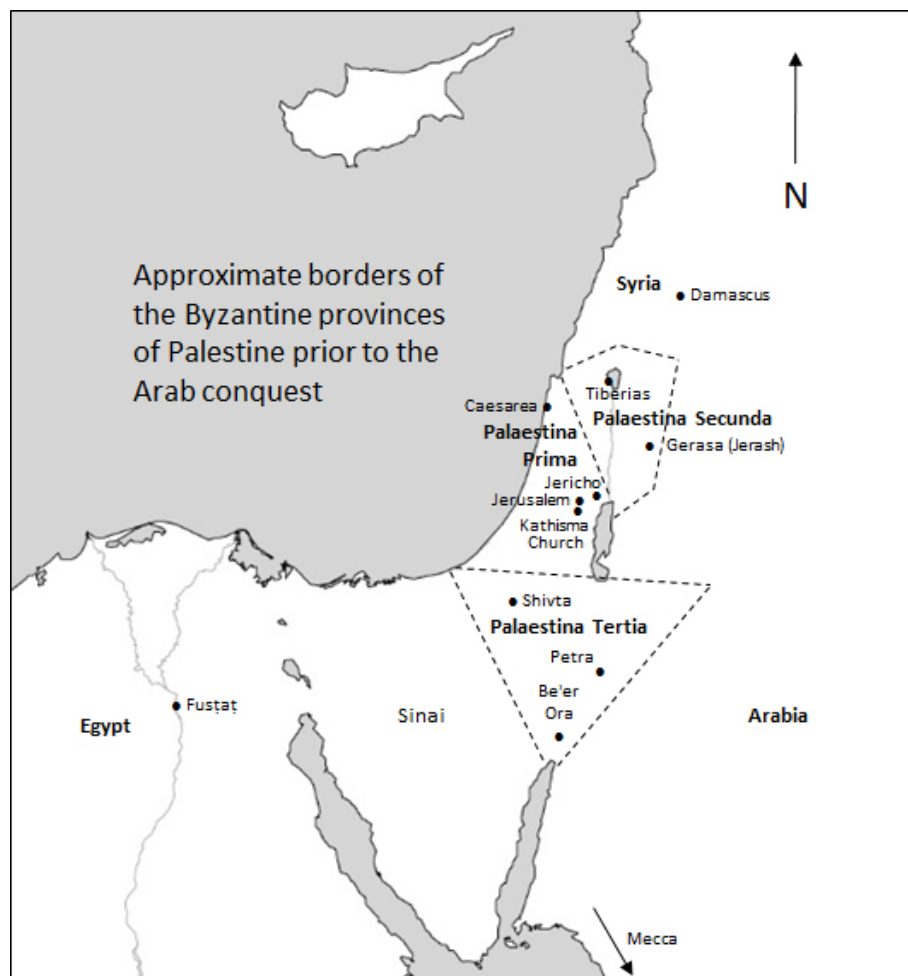
Timeline

(Adapted from Holland, *In the Shadow of the Sword*)

- 570 CE. The birth of Muḥammad, according to Muslim tradition
- 610 Muḥammad receives his first divine revelation, according to Muslim tradition
- 614 The Persians under the Sasanian Shah K̄osrau II conquer Jerusalem
- 622 The emigration, or *hijra*, of Muḥammad from Mecca to Medina, according to Muslim tradition
- 630 Byzantines regain control of Jerusalem
- 632 The death of Muḥammad, according to Muslim tradition
- 634 The Arabs invade Palestine; death of Abu Bakr, Muḥammad's first successor, according to Muslim tradition
- 636 The Byzantines are defeated at Yarmuk, and withdraw from Syria, according to Muslim tradition
- 638 The Arabs capture Jerusalem
- 644 The assassination of 'Umar, Muḥammad's second successor, according to Muslim tradition
- 651 The murder of Yazdegerd III, the last Sasanian shah
- 661 Mu'awiya becomes *amīr al-mu'minīn* ("Commander of the Believers")
- 685 Abd al-Malik becomes *amīr al-mu'minīn*; his claim is contested by Ibn al-Zubayr

- 686 The first mention of *muḥammad* on an Arab coin
- 692 The defeat and death of Ibn al-Zubayr; completion of the Dome of the Rock
- 705 Abd al-Malik is succeeded by his son Walid I as *amīr al-mu'minīn*
- 711 The Arabs invade Spain
- 740 Anti-'Umayyad uprising in Iraq
- 750 The 'Abbāsids defeat and overthrow Marwan II, the last Umayyad leader

Map



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