

CHURCH AND MONASTERY-BUILDING. EARLY ISLAMIC DYNAMISM OF CHRISTIANITY

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This book gathers the works authored by historians, archaeologists, and art-historians, Byzantinists, and Islamicists, specialising in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, in the Western Mediterranean and Middle East. The volume delves into the continuation of Late Antique structures and practices into the early Medieval period. The primary objective of the fourteen chapters is to explore the use, reuse, development, extension, and transformation of Christian buildings from the seventh to the tenth century. We aim to examine diverse approaches, methodologies, and hypotheses regarding the necessary changes and potential continuities in Christian building practices during early Islam. The spatial framework spans the central and western regions of the “abode of Islam (*dār al-Islām*),” from post-Sasanian Iraq and Armenia to post-Visigothic Spain, through post-Byzantine Syria-Palestine, Egypt, and Africa. This volume represents the continuation of a series of academic that explores the transitional period between Late Antiquity and Early Islam in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. These events include *La Syrie de Byzance à l’Islam* [...] by Pierre Canivet and Jean-Paul Rey-Coquais (1992), the proceedings of a congress held in Lyon in September 1990; a conference on changing settlement patterns in the Bilād al-Shām that was convened in Damascus in November 2006 and edited by Karin Bartl and ‘Abd al-Razzaq Moaz (2009); and a colloquium on the dynamics of occupation and settlement in the Diocese of the East and the Bilād al-Shām, *Le Proche-Orient de Justinien aux Abbassides*, which took place in Paris in October 2007 and was subsequently published in 2011 by Antoine Borrut, Muriel Debié, Dominique Pieri, Arietta Papaconstantinou, and Jean-Pierre Sodini.

The aim of this study is to examine the religious and communal aspects of the construction, use, and abandonment of churches and other Christian buildings from a comparative analysis perspective that considers both the archaeological and the textual evidence. In this regard, the 2012 workshop on *Les églises syriaques*,

organised by the *Société d’études syriaques* in Paris and published the following year under the direction of Françoise Briquel-Chatonnet (2013), is a significant point of reference for those who work on Syria and Iraq. More recently, the conference *Christianity in Iraq at the Turn of Islam*, held in Erbil in 2019 by Narmin Ali Amin, Julie Bonnéric, and Barbara Couturaud has been published in Beirut (2023), resulting in an increased knowledge of west-Sasanian churches from an architectural as well as an institutional perspective. The present work seeks to expand the scope of previous research by advocating for interdisciplinary cooperation, with particular focus on the first three centuries of the Hijra, and a geographical span that covers most of the territories in the Mediterranean and the Middle East that came under caliphal rule.

Islam, which commenced with the Arab conquests (*circa* 630-717 CE), is commonly regarded as a major break from the preceding cultures, regardless of their proto-Byzantine, Persian, or Germanic substrate. The Sasanian Empire collapsed in two short decades and the Eastern Roman Empire gradually withdrew from four of its most important dioceses (East, Egypt, Africa, and Hispania) in less than a century. Although Christianity did not hold an official or dominant status in the provinces of the Sasanian East (such as Iraq, Azerbaijan, Fārs, the Gulf, etc.), it became increasingly prevalent during its latest decades (late sixth and early seventh centuries; see Carter 2008; Robin and Tayran 2012; Payne 2015; Brelaud 2018; Bonneric 2021).

Yet, after the “conquests (*futūḥ*),” the new Medina-based authority had embraced a religion, later called *islām*, and rapidly placed Christian cities and ecclesiastical hierarchies under a “protected” status known as *dhimma*. Among other things, this status imposed strict limitation

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on the public expression of Christian worship, especially the construction of new churches and monasteries. Nearly all the sources – Arab-Muslim, Greek-Byzantine, Syriac, Latin, or Coptic – agree on this. However, most were written during the Abbasid period, which coincides with the conquest of Sicily, but not with those of early Islam. In both late Islamic legal-historical literature and Orientalist historiography, the timeline is commonly based on the so-called *shurūt* (“clauses”) established by the second caliph ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (r. 634-644). Concerning the issue at hand, all the preserved versions of the text formally prohibit Christians from building any “new” church or monastery, either urban or rural, anywhere in the Caliphate, while also strictly regulating their restoration and reconstruction, as in Abū Bakr al-Turtūshī’s (d. 1126) work on al-Andalus:

You and us have settled that we shall not “make new” (*ḥ.d.th*) monastery (*dayr*), church (*kanīsa*), cell (*qallya*) and tower (*ṣawma‘a*) for monks, either in our cities or their surroundings. We shall only restore (*j.d.d.*) what has fallen into ruin (*kh.r.b*) or is located in a plot (*khittā*) owned by Muslims, by day or by night (1872, 135).

The *shurūt* are regarded as a positive and normative text restricting the construction rights of the *ahl al-dhimma* to the restoration of buildings, only those located outside “Muslim neighbourhoods (*amṣār al-Muslimūn*)”. Moreover, the *shurūt* associate church ban with a list of prohibitions including restrictions on clothing and behavior, ringing the *simandron*, or being disloyal to the rule of Islam.

However, this generalising and universal text not only contradicts the rapidly growing archaeological evidence, from the Bilād al-Shām to the Emirate of al-Andalus, including Fustāt and Ifriqyā (as demonstrated by Michel, Gilento, Piraud-Fournet, Amin and Brelaud, Kayaalp, Abdouli and Leone, Utrero, Villa del Castillo, and Kazaryan in this volume), but it is also at odds with numerous textual references to post-conquest church foundations across the former Roman and Sasanian territories (as indicated by Amin and Brelaud, Wood, Dridi, Pierre, Abdouli and Leone, Lorenzo, Arcifa and Messina, in this volume). Indeed, there is no indication of church bans and destruction before the time of al-Mahdī (r. 775-785) or even Hārūn al-Rashīd (d. 809), as already shown by Jean-Maurice Fiey (1980), and this purportedly consistent and ancient document is barely attested before the tenth century. Indeed, Milka Levy-Rubin has

demonstrated that there is no evidence for such a fixed and comprehensive list of religious and communal prescriptions before the end of this century (2004; 2011). This might indicate that the *shurūt* were compiled and forged, or at least (according to Noth 2004, and more recently to Yarbrough 2022) that they began to circulate widely only after the end of the early Islamic period. Fiey even suggests that the “covenant” may have been written during the reign of caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 847-861).²

Events between the Arab-Medinese conquests and the third/ninth century remain unclear owing to the paucity of textual sources between the late sixth and early ninth centuries CE, a problem that affects the study of Early Islam across the board. This lack of information reinforces the impression of a strict separation between Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. It is worth recalling that this phenomenon is not unique to the territories of the *Dār al-Islām*; it is also attested in the Frankish or Anglo-Saxon West, as well as in what remained of what we call “Byzantium”, whose culture and institutions changed rapidly during this dark seventh century (Haldon 1990). Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that the extensive literature preserved for the ninth-tenth century will differ significantly in terms of themes and styles from that which dominated three centuries earlier (Robinson 2003). This is true not only for Arab-Muslim textual sources, but also for all the books of the subaltern churches. However, some hagiographic material and the increasing number of archaeological finds partially bridge this gap, highlighting continuity in the processes and basic trends that span the “long seventh century” (Gnasso, Intagliata and MacMaster 2015). This period stretches from the disastrous Sasanian invasion led by Khosro II son of Hormizd (r. 602-628) to the failed siege of Constantinople by Maslama son of ‘Abd al-Malik in 716-718. It appears that sources contemporary to the final written version of the *shurūt* attempt to retrospectively apply a rule they suppose to have been enforced since the 640s. Yet, the construction of churches and monasteries continued at a brisk pace under Islamic rule, at least until the mid-eighth century. Although the evidence suggests a gradual decline thereafter, serious restrictions began to be implemented only during the ninth century, when new *modi vivendi* between the Christian majority and the Muslim authorities began to crystallise.

Furthermore, some preliminary lists of prohibitions feature in the relatively early *Kitāb al-Kharāj* by Great Qāḍī Abū Yūsuf (d. 798), but few relate these lists to the

² The most recent studies on the “covenant” are Cohen (1999), Noth (2004), Levy-Rubin (2005; 2011, foremost 60-68, 70-75, 79-84 and 100-03), Fierro and Tolan (2013) and Sanjuán (2013).

forementioned caliph, pointing to other lawmakers instead. Early Abbasid literature not only ignores the “covenant” but also limits the implementation of these bans to Arab-Muslim city-camps (*miṣr*) such as Madīna, Kūfa, Fustāt, and Kairouan. Finally, these earliest Arab-Muslim legal testimonies from this initial phase of writing are consistent with the earliest Christian accounts for acts of destruction in this period. Thus, it can be argued that all of this evidence, put together, marks a relevant *terminus post quem* for a shift in policy during the late eighth and early ninth century. In reality, both the Arab-Muslim and the Christian “narratives about the conquests (*futūḥāt*)” primarily rely on the contrasting, diverse, and often contradictory recollection of capitulation treaties (*ṣulḥ-s*). These texts topically stipulated the protection of existing churches, while also implying – more or less explicitly – that building new ones was out of the question. Nonetheless, as pointed out by Robinson (2000, 12), “in prescribing conquest arrangements, conquest history thus describes post-conquest history”. Therefore, the primary concern is to outline the process which, during the two or three centuries before these stories of conquest were written, led to this ban on church building. To protect their rights, and in light of the ideology that became dominant during the ninth century, many Christian authors and officials tended to anticipate and back-project ecclesiological and architectural foundation of monasteries, bishoprics, and urban churches to before the conquests. Thus, since at that time many indigenous settlements and ecclesiastical institutions were likely non-existent or at best in their infancy, many *futūḥāt* narratives and *ṣulḥ* accounts must be reconsidered.

Understanding the consequences of this problematic paradigm is essential for the issues addressed in this volume. Historians and archaeologists have long presumed that no Christian cult building activity could have existed after the conquest, between 630 and 645 in the East, and 645 and 717 in the West. However, as we shall see, this prohibition was initially not thought to apply to existing, predominantly Christian cities, let alone isolated monasteries, which were actually expanded and branched out significantly. Archaeological and architectural remains, as well as ecclesiastical chronicles and monastic histories from the Abbasid period, provide numerous examples of such acts of foundation. It is now impossible to conceive that all the episcopal centres in the Middle East were built circa 637, by the time claimed by the authors of ‘Umar’s Pseudo-Covenant, and in the Mediterranean until the 700s-720s, just to remain frozen until the late Middle Ages. These consistent clues suggest that the ancient paradigm, while useful for Abbasid-period scholars in both Christian and Muslim communities, is no longer relevant for modern research.

The early Islamic and Marwānid periods were actually open to the expansion of Christianity among – at least – the non-Arab populations of the former Roman and Sasanian empires. Anti- or non-Chalcedonian currents which had been persecuted from the death of Justinian (565 CE), took advantage of the relative neutrality of the new rulers to emerge as independent, competing, and often preponderant churches in the Middle East. The building fervour of Melkite monastic communities is plainly expressed in some of the remains found in the ancient provinces of the Diocese of the East, as highlighted by Michele Piccirillo in the 1990s, particularly at the famous site of Kastron Mefaa (Umm Raṣās) in the Province of Arabia (1991; 1998). The caliphate promoted the development of ancient Christian centres while settling its palaces where great festivals and panegyrics were held, such as Mu’ta (Binggeli 2006), Dayr Ayyūb in the Ḥawrān, Ruṣāfa in Euphratesia (for example, Chrysostomides 2021). The survey and excavation of pre-Islamic Christian environments reveal a consistent pattern of post-Hijra resilience, or even *ex-nihilo* foundations and new developments. On the one hand, it is interesting that neither the Persian nor the Arab invasion of Egypt and the Levant left clear traces in the stratigraphy and Peter Pentz even spoke of an *Invisible Conquest* (1992). On the other hand, in Syria, cities such as Apamea, Palmyra, Baysān, and Gerasa continued flourishing and perhaps even underwent significant expansion during the Umayyad period while the government invested heavily on urban and commercial development (Walmsley 2007; Van Staavel 2016 – Irbimma presentation).

Similar research conducted in the western Mediterranean has also shown that some churches built before the Umayyad conquest were either remodelled and reused and others were even built *ex-nihilo*. Furthermore, Islamic construction techniques were also adopted by Christian workshops of craftsmen in cult buildings located outside the *dār al-islām* (Utrero 2017). Although exploring eighth- and ninth-century cities can be challenging owing to modern occupation, archaeological studies have identified the existence of churches and monastic complexes. While both the textual and archaeological records yield evidence of church-building in Cordoba until the ninth century, the same phenomenon is now being attested in other regions in the Iberian Peninsula (Utrero and Villa 2023). In Sicily, archaeologists are also studying structures from the early Fatimid period, although identifying Christian buildings can be difficult. Apart from urban centres, a number of Byzantine rural monasteries are known to have been founded in al-Andalus, Ifriqyā and Sicily in the eighth and ninth centuries. The re-dating of Late Antique sites has exposed new uses, substantial modifications, and

replacements dated to the Islamic period that were invisible to traditional archaeological methodologies (Arcifa, Bagnera and Nef 2012; Arce 2014).

This book aims to confront the dynamics of Christian expansion, conversion and community structuring as various paradoxical forms and attempts of adaptation to an Islamic confessional order whose development was itself gradual.³

The first part of this volume focuses on a region rich in remains of rural monasteries as well as urban churches which are usually associated with the Proto-Byzantine Period. Anne Michel addresses the gradual disuse of churches during the early Islamic period in Transjordan, which accelerated under the Marwanids (680s-740s), despite these churches being renovated and endowed with significant new decorations. While she confirms that the Arab-Medinese conquests did not cause any breakdown, she stresses the importance of placing this abandonment process within the broader economic, social, and historical developments undergone in the region. To illustrate it, Piero Gilento focuses on a small district in Southern Ḥawrān (Umm as-Surab, Umm al-Jimal and Umm al-Quṭṭayn), using stratigraphy and construction analysis. Despite the need for more precise absolute chronologies, there is no evidence of de-Christianisation or Islamisation, although these sites were generally abandoned, while the known instances of Arab-Islamic reuse appear to be unrelated and much later in time, during the Central to Late Middle Ages. In the same *Provincia Arabia*, Pauline Piraud Fournet compares the so-called “Palace of Trajan” in Bosra and a hypothetical hospice at Umm al-Surab. The archaeological evidence suggests that both buildings were probably owned by the church, although not strictly places of worship. This situation probably continued until the very end of the Umayyad period, indicating the continuity and even development of monastic and episcopal institutions during early Islam.

In the second part, the focus shifts from southern to northern Shām and Iraq, which witnesses a clearer perspective of continuity and even increase in Christian building activity. Narmin Ali Amin and Simon Brelaud discuss recent discoveries and their updated chronology in Iraqi Kurdistan and south-eastern Turkey, particularly Bāzyān and Qal‘at Shīla. This evidence partially bridges the gap between the lack of details in literary sources on the one hand, and material evidence for the continuity of church-building during the seventh century CE on the other hand. Philip Wood argues that the construction of churches and charitable institutions is

well-documented in hagiography and Christian chronicles from Northern Mesopotamia until the eighth century CE. This dynamism is a sign of Christian wealth and communal reproduction, as well as competition between lay elites and clerics. Finally, attitudinal changes towards church-building seems to postdate the Abbasid revolution. Indeed, Elif Keser-Kayaalp grants that, while archaeological evidence of such activity is scarce in cities, at least 30 churches and monasteries built in the small mountainous district of Tūr ‘Abdīn, in the border region between ex-Roman Jazīra and ex-Sasanian Mosul, can be attested. Her survey of church decorations reveals a range of approaches towards decorative details within a consistent style, confirming competition between elites, holy men, and also between rival confessions.

In the third part, the confrontation of material and textual evidence from Syriac to Roman/Moorish-Africa demonstrates that the construction of ecclesiastical and cult buildings was not prohibited before the end of the eighth century. Simon Pierre analyses the abundant textual evidence that attests the foundation of churches and monasteries during the seventh and eighth centuries, and a significant increase in investment under the Marwanids, possibly for Christian elites to protect their private wealth from taxation. Initially, construction was forbidden only in the Islamic capitals (*amṣār*). However, during the early Abbasid period, Christian public visibility gradually declined, with an inflexion point during the Byzantine invasion in 777, which triggered a pro-*sunna* reform and the crystallisation of new ideological and legal paradigm. Audrey Dridi shows that Egyptians then began as well to regard the churches in Fuṣṭāṭ (especially Qaṣr al-Sham‘) as pre-Islamic, although they had actually been constructed during the second half of the first century H. This only became problematic or scandalous during the early Abbasid period, leading to differing opinions and contradictory decisions by various governors, judges and scholars. Beside Syriac and Coptic worlds, North African Christianity has not survived today. While early textual sources post-date the Abbasid turnover, colonial archaeology either ignored or misdated the post-conquest evidence. This explains why Late Antique and Early Islamic churches are only beginning to be comprehensively addressed, thanks to Hafed Abdouli and Anna Leone.

In the fourth part, the focus shifts again to the development and adaptation of the Church of *Hispania* during the eighth and even the early ninth century, after the fall of the Visigoths. Jesús Lorenzo Jiménez examines the survival of episcopal sees in al-Andalus using late Latin and early Mozarabic ecclesiastical texts, as well as the works of Arab-Muslim geographers. Most of these bishoprics continued to exist and only a few

moved to new growing cities when their traditional towns and cities declined. Some were even created on the initiative of emirs or caliphs. Mirroring the textual data, the archaeological study of María de los Ángeles Utrero Agudo also reveals different processes of renewal and/or abandonment of earlier churches, while arguing that, initially, no churches were converted into, or were built upon by, mosques. On the contrary, the construction of new churches continued until the ninth century. Art history also confirms this trend, provided that not every piece is authoritatively dated as Visigothic. Alejandro Villa del Castillo contextualises the production and chronology of Iberian sculptures within their buildings, revealing resilience and innovations during the eighth and ninth centuries in Mérida, Cáceres, Toledo, and Palencia.

The final part comprises two chapters that explore “frontier (*thaghr*)” regions after the turning point of the mid-ninth century: Late-Byzantine Sicily, facing the Muslim Aghlabids and Fatimids, and Armenia under the Christian Bagratids and Artsrunids, and between the Abbasids, the Buyids, and the Macedonians. Lucia Arcifa and Michelangelo Messina challenge previous approaches that focused solely on hagiographic and propagandistic texts, which have limited our understanding of the interconnected reality of the period. Actually, Byzantine-style monasticism remained the main landmark of Christian Sicilians, especially in the rural communities of the centre and the East, astride changing political-administrative references. Thus, they played a pivotal role in the hierarchy of settlements and productive strategies.

Armen Kazaryan, in turn, highlights the rise in construction of Christian buildings between Eastern Anatolia and Azerbaijan during the crisis of the Abbasid central administration as a – possibly conscious – revival of the classical “Armenian architecture” that spread during the Late Sasanian period and also during the first decades of Arab domination in the seventh century. He also compares it to the contemporaneous development of church architecture in the nearby Byzantine territories.

From Mesopotamia to the Western Mediterranean, architectural developments under early Islam show both continuity with the past and influences from the Byzantine and non-Byzantine Latin worlds. Christian buildings also bear witness of the dynamism of their respective institutional churches during the period in which *islām* as a religion emerged. Early Muslim scholars then began to address the development of churches and other places of worship in a world that was not yet hostile to Christianity, although it was ruled by Islam. Latin, Greek and Syriac sources illustrate that monks and their Arab neighbours and rulers experienced ambivalent reciprocal perception. The fact remains that settlements in all the regions that came under the political domination of the caliphate present signs of resilience, if not a culmination, of Church activity during the first three centuries of Islam.

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