

***Byzantium in Early Islamic Syria:  
Umayyad period (640-750) and Byzantine reconquest period (969-1084)***

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**University of Balamand and American University of Beirut, 18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> June, 2007**

Following recent historical conferences hosted at the University of Balamand – on the Ottoman Near East, held in 2004 in partnership with the Université St. Joseph; and on the Mamluks, held in 2005 in partnership with Orient-Institut Beirut – the University proposes to host a third conference in partnership with IFPO (Institut Français du Proche-Orient) and the American University of Beirut. The conference is scheduled 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> December, 2006, to coincide with the feast of St John of Damascus on 4<sup>th</sup> December.

Examination of the early historical encounter between Christianity and Islam remains imperative. The general direction of the new conference will emphasize the continuity of Byzantine or Chalcedonian Christian society, churches, and culture within early Islamic Syria. A double and comparative focus upon the widely separated Umayyad period (640-750) and the period of Byzantine reconquest (969-1084) may help to throw fresh light on the subject. For this reason, where geographical distinction is appropriate, as in archaeological work, the conference will focus on northern Syria (modern Syria, Lebanon) rather than southern Syria (modern Jordan, Israel).

The conference aims to summarize and appraise recent positive research in various fields including, for example, hagiographical and apocalyptic literature, the transmission and mutual influence of texts, and the important archaeological work undertaken in the Near East over the last decade. In this respect, it continues in the tradition of previous conferences in this field, notably the series of Bilād al-Shām conferences held at Yarmuk University, Jordan in the late 1980s, *La Syrie de Byzance à l'Islam* (Lyon, Damascus, 1992), and *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East* (Princeton, 1992-5).

However, the conference also aims at a fresh approach to the subject. It is a commonplace that problems arising from the sources and their interpretation make the seventh century Near East exceptionally difficult ground for research. Yet this inherent obstacle suggests the fruitfulness of stepping back from positive fields of study in order to gain a 'negative' perspective – considering areas that remain unexplored or ignored, questions still to be raised whether or not answers are forthcoming, and methodological bases. The extensive revaluation of the Islamic literary-historical tradition undertaken since the late 1970s is an example of how useful such work can be.

The conference will be broadly organized according to three separate but largely interrelated perspectives. They include, but are by no means limited to, the following aspects:

### **1. Aspects of Chalcedonian Syrian society: extinction, survival, and adaptation**

To what extent did Chalcedonian Syrian communities persist during this period and to what extent were they influenced by their changed environment? These general questions initially require consideration of the Arab-Muslim conquest and the society that developed in Umayyad Syria. Broad controversial topics include the reliability of *futūh*-material and Christian sources, conquest chronology, treaties with conquered communities, administrative and fiscal changes, new settlement patterns, and the impact of the continuing Arab-Byzantine war. Material evidence datable to the Umayyad period is extremely valuable in the attempt to answer the questions raised above, yet it also raises many new problems of classification and interpretation. Numismatics (the transition from Arab-Byzantine to Islamic epigraphic coinage) and pottery (dating criteria for Late Roman, Umayyad, and Abbasid pottery) offer well-known examples of such problems.

The Byzantine reconquest period, 969-1084, brought new opportunities and challenges to Chalcedonian Syrians. Notable aspects of this period are the Byzantine offensive in northern Syria and subsequent relations between Byzantium and the other major power in Syria, the Fatimids; the rise of nomad-based states and autonomous urban administrations; population movements and new settlement patterns; the growth of Syrian seaborne commerce; and the new socio-political role of Antioch.

### **2. Aspects of the Chalcedonian Syrian churches: theology and identity**

The impact of the Monothelete crisis in Syria throughout the seventh century raises several issues still largely unexplored, such as the complex relationship between Dyothelete and Monothelete parties, the patriarchate of Jerusalem during the Umayyad period, and the extent of the Roman Church's involvement in Syria. The origin of the Maronite church, connected with all these issues, remains enigmatic.

Byzantine Christian theology was affected by the encounter with Islam, resulting in a more emphatic defense of the essential doctrines of the Trinity, Incarnation, and Passion. The influence exerted by St. John Damascene and Theodore Abu Qurrah on the formation of Islamic *kalām* remains controversial, as is the reaction of Melkite Syrians towards Byzantine Iconoclasm – whether, for example, it includes an implicit criticism of Islam.

An important issue in the Byzantine reconquest period is the ambivalent formation of Syrian Christian identity, placed between the rival cultural worlds of Islam and Byzantium, and exemplified by figures such as Abdallah Ibn al-Fadl, Patriarch Balsamon of Antioch, and Nikon of the Black Mountain.

### **3. Aspects of Islamic and Christian culture: art, language, and literary texts**

Byzantine Christian influences upon Umayyad art are attested in historical literature and apparent in the architecture and mosaics of Umayyad Syrian monuments. Yet similarities are only the visible side of the question: the style of Umayyad constructions also constantly points to hybrid influences and unique aspects.

Evidence of Christian art in Syria during the early Islamic period is limited to a handful of examples of disputed date. Yet, literary sources of the period describe Christian frescoes and mosaics in Syria, possibly reflecting the continuation of a

Christian artistic tradition. The reconquest-period evidence of Byzantine works in Qal'at Sem'an and other places in northern Syria deserves consideration.

Other controversial cultural issues are the survival of Aramaic, Syriac, and Greek on the one hand, and the advance of Arabic on the other, as spoken and literary languages of Chalcedonian Christians in Syria. Of particular interest here is the relationship of these languages with the separate Syrian Christian communities. Finally, important recent advances have been made in understanding the transmission and interrelationship of Christian texts during this period; the corresponding likelihood of mutual influence between Islamic and Christian historical source-material raises again the question of their reliability.