

## CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

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The nature of Christian-Muslim Relations is commonly investigated through the examination of historical and literary sources such as 'Umar's Assurance of Safety to the people of Aelia. But physical evidence can provide valuable information as well. Hundreds of early churches, monasteries and other Christian sites have been excavated in modern-day Israel/Palestine and Jordan, revealing much about their histories after the Muslim conquest. This article will examine the contribution that study of the physical remains of Christian sites can make to understanding how the Christian communities who worshipped in them fared in practice under Muslim rule. The article will concentrate on the two questions of Muslims taking over church buildings, and prohibiting new church construction or rebuilding.

The territory covered corresponds to the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, which consisted of the Byzantine provinces of Palaestina Prima, Secunda, and Tertia (all modern-day Israel-Palestine except for the northwest portion around Haifa, southern Jordan and most of the Sinai Peninsula) along with the province of Arabia (modern-day northern Jordan and extreme southern Syria) within the Patriarchate of Antioch. Under early Muslim rule, this territory roughly matched the *junds* (province) of Filastin and al-Urdunn and the southern part of the jund of Dimashq. The time period covered will concentrate on the 7th and 8th centuries, covering the Muslim conquest, the Umayyad period and the beginning of the Abbasid period, a time when the Christian communities continued to flourish. This article is in part a reworking and updating of my

earlier study (1995). The recent study by Ribak (2007) is of not very good quality.

## Muslims Taking Over Churches

The various versions of 'Umar's Assurance of Safety include a statement that churches will not be taken over or destroyed by Muslims. Such, by and large, was the case. It is clear that nothing untoward happened to many churches, perhaps even a majority of those in use at the time of the Muslim Conquest of the 630s, within the first couple of hundred years of Muslim rule (*see* Schick 1995). Christians still formed a large portion, if not the majority, of the population of the area when the Crusaders arrived in 1099 (*see* Ellenblum 1998). It is the post-Crusader period that marks the large-scale decline of the Christian communities to the small percentage of modern times.

One thing that did not happen to church buildings early on is their conversion into mosques. The early Muslims chose to build separate buildings for their mosques rather than take over churches and adapt them to the needs of Muslim worship. The takeover of a church within the compound of the main Friday mosque in Damascus by al-Walid in the early 8th century is the best known counter example, but as the principal Friday mosque in the imperial capital, the Umayyad mosque in Damascus is an exception. In the area under discussion there is only one possible case of early conversion of a church into a mosque: the Numerianos Church at Umm al-Jimāl in northern Jordan.

The Numerianos Church (Schick 1995:470-471 and plate 24; a final excavation report is forthcoming) warrants detailed examination, because the evidence is ambiguous. Major changes to the church within the Umayyad period involved the removal of the altar, pulpit, chancel screen and mosaic pavement in the nave and aisles and the construction of a wall blocking off access to the apse. The mosaic floor was carefully removed, leaving the impressions of the mosaic cubes clearly visible in the bedding layer, while the space where the bases for the chancel screen panels

had once been was filled with cobbles. A plaster floor has then been laid above the mosaic bedding layer and the cobble-filled chancel screen area. No traces of occupation and only a very few sherds were found above this plaster floor. A few centimetres of wind-blown soil lay between the plaster floor and the lowest rock tumble, some of which was aligned.

The plaster floor belongs to a post-church phase, because the church could hardly have continued as a church once the chancel screen had been removed. The surface of the plaster floor was kept clean, suggesting some sort of public rather than domestic use. Along the mid-point of the south wall a couple of blocks on the inner course of the wall were missing and suggested the presence of a *mibrāb* (prayer niche), but excavations produced no positive evidence for one.

While the phasing of the post-church use of the nave and aisles is straightforward, the sequence of events in the apse is more complex. Here also the mosaic floor had been removed and replaced by a plaster floor. A wall was built across the apse chord, completely blocking off access to the apse except for a circular hole formed by two carved blocks reused in the centre of the blocking wall. The construction of the blocking wall occurred after the removal of the mosaic floor and the laying of the plaster floor in the apse. Directly on top of the plaster floor there were a few centimetres of wind-blown soil, and then a thick deposit of wind-blown soil and rock tumble with hundreds of Late Byzantine and Umayyad sherds. The presence of so many sherds here compared with the absence of sherds in the nave and aisles suggests that the apse was used as a garbage dump after the blocking wall had been constructed.

The southeast sacristy room had only wind-blown soil and rock tumble above its plaster floor. Only a handful of Late Byzantine sherds were found along with a couple of Umayyad sherds, and a few marble fragments from the chancel screen. No evidence for occupation was found there either. The cluster of rooms on the north side of the church continued to be inhabited in the Umayyad

period, but there is no positive evidence to indicate whether those Umayyad period occupants were Christians or not. In any event occupation of the church building seems not to have continued beyond the 8th century.

Thus the church went out of use within the 8th century, when it was converted into some sort of non-Christian building, seemingly for public rather than domestic use. The nature of this is not fully clear, but conversion into a mosque is a real possibility. If the Numerianos Church at Umm al-Jimāl was in fact converted into a mosque, it can only be speculation whether the Muslims making the conversion were new converts themselves, local former Christians who needed a mosque building rather than a church, or whether they were newly settled immigrants who could either have taken over the already abandoned church or expropriated it.

The south church at Shivta in the Negev is another interesting although poorly published case (for references *see* Ovadiah 1970: 170-173, no. 169). A mosque, vaguely dated to the 9th century, was built adjacent to its baptistery. The miḥrāb of the mosque was carefully inserted into the north wall of the baptistery, which might still have been in use. However, it is not possible to determine from the available information whether the mosque and church were ever in use simultaneously, or whether the church had already been abandoned by the time the mosque was built.

The situation changed in the Fatimid period, when Muslims encroached on some of the major Christian holy places. In the Monastery of St Catherine at Mount Sinai, the conversion of the monastery's guesthouse into a mosque and the addition of an adjoining minaret in the 11th century shows that the monks were living in a Muslim environment by the Fatimid period, although the church itself remained unharmed and the monastery continued to function (Forsyth and Weitzmann 1973).

Muslims also encroached in the 10th century on the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, as Eutychius reported around 935 (1985: 140-141), although there is no surviving physical trace of the

encroachment. Fatimid interest in the birth of Jesus was later focused on the underground vaults at the south end of the al-Aqsa Mosque compound in Jerusalem, where Muslim tradition located the Qur'anic Mihrāb Maryam and Mahd 'Isa (Kaplony 1997). Muslim interest in the underground vaults as the location of Mihrāb Maryam and Mahd 'Isa is first demonstrated by an inscription now in the Islamic Museum on the Haram (Schick and Salameh 2004: 15-16 no. 2 fig. 2). The inscription refers to a renewal, which presumably would have been after the earthquake of 10 Safar 425/4 January 1034. Whether the Muslim use of the vaults reflects a withdrawal of the Muslims from the Church of the Nativity is speculative.

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem had been the object of Muslim rioting in the Abbasid period, and in the Fatimid period Muslims took over the atrium on the east side as a mosque, as attested by an inscription (van Berchem 1922: 53-67, no. 24). The Fatimid encroachment is what led Eutychius, writing around 935 (1985: 139, 141) to report the story of 'Umar's solicitousness in not praying within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre itself, but only on its steps. The church was then destroyed at least partially by order of the Fatimid Caliph al-Ḥākim in 1009, but it was soon rebuilt.

The Tomb of the Virgin Mary in Jerusalem is another building in which Muslims also had an interest, as attested in historical sources down the centuries. But the dates when the two mihrābs were inserted into the south wall of the tomb of Mary and into the south wall south of the tomb are not known (Bagatti, Piccirillo and Prodomo 1975).

There are more cases of churches being turned into mosques in the Ayyubid-Mamluk period at a time when the Christian population had dropped to a small percentage, especially in what is now modern-day Jordan. Two examples of Byzantine churches that were converted then into mosques are Samah and Umm al-Surab in northern Jordan (King 1983), although without excavation it is not known whether the churches were still in use at

the time, or had already gone out of use. A Byzantine church building at al-Khattabiyah near Madaba, among many other examples, was converted into a mosque in the Mamluk period (al-Turshan 159-166), although it seems that the church had gone out of use centuries earlier. There are also a number of Crusader buildings that later Muslims took over and turned into mosques, such as the main Friday mosques in Gaza, Nablus and al-Ramlah (Pringle 1993; 1998), and such as the Patriarchate residence and the Church of St Anne in Jerusalem that Ṣalāh al-Dīn turned into al-Khānqāh al-Ṣalāḥīyah and al-Madrasah al-Ṣalāḥīyah (Hawari 2007).

In addition to direct take-over of churches, many churches that went out of use were subject to stone-robbing. It has been standard practise over the centuries to reuse sound building material, such as stone building blocks, wooden roof beams or marble panels, in later constructions, and so it is hardly remarkable that stone-robbing of churches happened under Muslim rule. But a few cases of Muslim recycling of material from churches are worth mentioning here.

The Dome of the Rock is one especially interesting case where marble panels from a church were reused. ‘Abd al-Malik inserted two such marble panels into the exterior northeast wall, after the crosses on them had been chiselled away (Williams 1913). The Umayyad palaces south of the Haram also have some recycled Christian architectural elements (Ben-Dov 1989: 233-241), as does the Umayyad palace at Khirbat al-Mafjar in Jericho (Hamilton 1959). The Ayyubid buildings in Jerusalem also made extensive use of architectural elements from dismantled Crusader buildings (Hawari 2007).

## **New Construction and Rebuilding of Churches**

Starting in the Abbasid period, Islamic legal scholars such as Ya‘qub Ibn Ibrahim Abu Yusuf developed the legal theory that Christians should be prohibited from building new churches or undertaking major rebuilding, although repairs were permitted

(Abu Yusuf 1934: 148-61; Ward 1984). But it is clear that no prohibition on building new churches or carrying out major rebuilding was in force in the Early Islamic period. In addition to cases attested in historical sources, there are numerous such cases of new construction, clearly dated from inscriptions or archaeological remains.

Based on dated inscriptions, the church of St. George at el-Kafr was dedicated in 652 (Ewing 1895: 277, no. 153), and the church at Deir el-'Adas, in southern Syria, was built in 722 (Balty 1989: 156, 159). In other cases, archaeological evidence, such as pottery, indicates construction in the early Islamic period. For example, the Umm el-'Amad church at Abila was built in the 7th century, based on the pottery from sealed layers under the floors (Fuller 1987: 165-169), while the Nestorian monastery at Tell Masos was built prior to around 700, when the first burial there took place (Fritz and Kempinski 1983). The Area I basilica at Umm Qais, in northern Jordan was apparently constructed in the Umayyad period (Wagner-Lux et al 1993).

There are numerous cases of major rebuilding of churches, especially after earthquakes, which could fall under the category of prohibited rebuilding of ruined churches, rather than permitted repairs. One such case is the isolated monastery of Khirbat en-Nitla, near Jericho, which was extensively rebuilt on several occasions in the first few centuries of Muslim rule (Kelso and Baramki 1941-1951). The anchor church at Mt. Berenice overlooking Tiberias was destroyed in the 749 earthquake, but was rebuilt in the second half of the 9th century (Hirschfeld 2004).

There are also cases of repairs or rebuildings dated by inscriptions such as: the renewal of the mosaic in the church of the Virgin at Madaba in 662 (Piccirillo 1989: 41-66); the renewal of the church at Rujm 'Uthman, on the west side of Amman, in 687 (Najjar and Sa'id 1994); the repavement of the church of St. Lot at Deir Ain Abata at the southeast end of the Dead Sea in 691 (Politis 1990); and the renewal of the apse mosaic in the church of St. Stephen at Umm al-Raṣāṣ in 756 (Piccirillo and Alliata 1994).

A cluster of repairs or rebuildings date around 717-720, seemingly due to the earthquake of 717-718 (Russell 1985): the restoration of the lower church at el-Quweisma in 717-718 (Schick and Suleiman 1991); the laying of the nave mosaic in the Church of St. Stephen at Umm al-Raṣāṣ (Piccirillo and Alliata 1994; for the date of 718 see Schick 1995: 472-473, plates 12 and 13); and the restoration of the acropolis church at Ma`in in 719-20.

Other inscriptions date the laying of mosaic floors to the Abbasid period. Ramot, a monastic farm on the outskirts of Jerusalem, has a mosaic dated to 761 (Arav, di Segni and Kloner 1990), Ayn al-Kanisah, near Mount Nebo, has a mosaic dated to 762 (Piccirillo 1994; 1995), and the Church of the Virgin in Madaba has a mosaic dated to 767 (Di Segni 1992). All three are dated according to an era of creation, rather than the Byzantine indiction cycle or provincial eras, as had continued to be the case in the Umayyad period. That these three inscriptions documenting a shift away from a dating era that shows continued loyalties to the Byzantine empire to a neutral dating era date to the first years after the Abbasid revolution seems not to be a coincidence. It may be the case that the Abbasid revolution brought in its wake a hardening of Muslim attitudes towards the Christians.

That Muslim attitudes were lax earlier in the formative period is shown by one of the very first Muslim inscriptions in the area: the dedicatory inscription of Mu'awiyah for his renovation of the baths at the hot springs of Hammat Gader in 42/662 (Green and Tsafirir 1982). The inscription is written in Greek and identifies Mu'awiyah as the Amīr al-Mu'minīn (transliterated into Greek) and 'Abd Allah Ibn Abī Hāshim as the governor of Syria and is dated by the Era of the Arabs. The inscription ends with a cross.

The number of churches newly constructed or rebuilt after the Islamic conquest represents a level of activity much lower than the level before the Islamic conquest, but it is high enough to show that the early Muslims did not strictly prohibit the construction of new churches or the rebuilding of ruined ones.



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