

Romanness and Islam

Collective Roman Identity in Byzantium from the Seventh to the Tenth Century



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Abstract

Romanness and Islam: Collective Roman Identity in Byzantium from the Seventh to the Tenth Century

This thesis adopts a critical approach to the question of the existence of a collective Roman identity amongst groups within the Byzantine empire, broadly from the reign of Heraclius (608-641) to that of Nikephoros II Phokas (963-9), with a specific focus on the impact that the rise of Islam in the seventh century. It attempts to demonstrate the practical implications of the study of ethnic identities in past societies by showing how Romanness in Byzantium, by the end of the period, was constructed in relation to an image of an Islamic 'Other' and the effect this had on groups and individuals within Byzantine society that had connections or engaged with the Islamic world.

The thesis can be divided into two general sections, distinguished by their approach towards the passage of time: one being synchronic, the other diachronic. The first engages with the question of what constituted Romanness in Byzantium prior to Islam, who were considered Romans, and, more importantly, who considered themselves to be Roman. The second section adopts a diachronic approach and examines how the rise of Islam and the associated loss of large parts of the empire's eastern territories was received and understood by literate Romans and how an idea of Islam, influenced by the experiences of Christians in the Islamic caliphate, took shape within Roman society by the ninth century and altered how Romanness was understood in the empire.

The introductory chapter evaluates the current state of scholarship on Roman identity in Byzantium, particularly the different interpretations adopted by Anthony Kaldellis and Yannis Stouraitis in the last decade: the former arguing for a vision of Byzantium as a pre-modern nation state, with Roman identity as a national identity for all Greek-speaking Christians who exhibited definable cultural hallmarks; the latter, that Romanness was an elite construct of the imperial centre in Constantinople and that the idea of 'being Roman' had little relevance outside of the governing classes. The thesis seeks to adopt a middle-ground between these approaches by emphasising the theoretical approach developed by Fredrik Barth, expanded by Rogers Brubaker and others, which focuses on the importance of an 'other' group for the creation and maintenance of collective identities, as well as the fluid and contingent nature of these identities. That is, who was considered Roman fluctuated depending on specific circumstances, such as when and of whom the question was asked, and who considered themselves to be Roman depended equally on the same conditions. Furthermore, the characteristics of what constituted Romanness also mutated: it is only when a clearly 'other' identity is presented that the *sine qua non* of what it meant to be a Roman come to the fore and are expressed in the source base.

The second chapter examines a range of sources in the sixth and seventh centuries written within what can be considered a 'normative' discourse on Romanness (Greek-speaking adherents of the imperially endorsed, Chalcedonian creed), in order to identify the key qualities associated with Roman group identity in the empire in the time immediately prior to emergence of Islam and the Arab conquests. The chapter concludes that the most fundamental qualities of Roman identity were a combination of Christian faith and an acceptance of the legitimacy of Roman imperial rule. The absence of either of these would render it impossible for an individual or group to be accepted as Roman, even if they may have seen themselves otherwise.

The third chapter applies these findings to those groups and areas of the empire in the sixth and seventh centuries that have, and often continue to be, perceived within scholarship as 'less Roman'. These generally constitute the empire's eastern territories in Syria-Palestine and Egypt, where significant parts of the population were either non-Chalcedonian or non-Greek speaking, or both — a fact that has been used to depict them as being at odds with the prevailing Roman imperial project and, thus, somehow welcoming of the arrival of first Persian and then Arab invaders in the first half of the seventh century. The thesis seeks to demonstrate that this image is largely false and that the fluid nature of Romanness meant that, whilst it was certainly possible for these groups to be portrayed by the 'normative' discourse as 'less Roman', this was neither a perspective that was shared by the people on the ground, nor one that was immutable. They, for the most part, continued to see themselves as Roman; when the religious attitudes of the imperial government conflicted with their own, they did not reject the legitimacy of the empire, but instead expected that the emperor would eventually recognise the true, orthodox doctrine (their own).

The fourth chapter marks the beginning of the diachronic section examining the rise of Islam and its implications for Romanness. It examines Roman attitudes towards 'non-Roman' groups in the seventh century, looking first at how the Sasanian Persians were depicted in the empire during the last Roman-Sasanian war (602-629) and then at the initial impressions of the Arab invasions from the 630s until the 690s. It is shown that the first Roman reaction to the Arabs was to retreat into solipsistic reflection that depicted them in much the same way as earlier 'barbarian' aggressors: as an obstacle and punishment sent from God for the sins of the Roman people. Little to no intellectual effort was spent on trying to engage with the ideological motivations of the invaders — their success, much like an earthquake or volcanic eruption, was a symptom of divine displeasure, the cure for which was to be found within the empire's own society. This attitude would eventually lead to the hubris of the first reign of Justinian II, whose deposition in 695 marked the end of the Heraclian dynasty and the start of a two-decade period of internal anarchy.

In chapter five, attention shifts to the nascent Islamic caliphate. It is shown that, although the failure of Romans within the empire's remaining territories to gain any sense of Islam as a competing ideology and religion to their own was partly due to the nature of Byzantine society, this is not the whole picture. This chapter focuses on the long process by which Islam itself evolved into a religious and cultural system distinct from Christianity and Judaism by the end of the seventh century, as well as the equally long time it took for Christian writers living under Muslim domination to recognise this. Using a variety of sources written in Greek, Syriac, Coptic, and Arabic, it shows how a precondition for the development of an image of Islam in Byzantium was that Christian writers in the caliphate recognise that the new religion was both different and posed a direct challenge to Christian belief. Furthermore, that it was the nature of the contact between the empire and these Christian communities, which was most intensive with Greek-speaking monastic communities in Palestine, that informed what information about Islam reached Byzantium and, consequently, the negative quality of the image that developed.

The sixth chapter analyses the image of Islam that developed within the Byzantine empire by the ninth century and the ways in which this was artificially constructed as an 'Other' against which Romanness was defined — everything that being Roman meant was reflected back in a warped form and designated 'Islamic', 'Arab', or 'Saracen-minded'. This is expressed most clearly by the way in which the latter term, from the mid-eighth century, was used by writers engaged in the debate over Iconoclasm to delegitimise their opponents' doctrinal positions, as well as the fossilised nature of the debate about Islam in the empire; detached from the reality of the living religion, this image was constructed in such a way as to emphasise its otherness.

The seventh chapter discusses the ways in which this image of an Islamic 'Other' had a practical impact on the empire's society, politics, and identity by examining two broad categories of people: Romans who went to the Islamic world who were still considered Roman upon their return and those who crossed (physically or conceptually) the boundary between the Roman and the Islamic, either by becoming Roman, or by being seen to have rejected it.

This thesis uses critical sociological approaches on the study of collective identities to reassess the debate about the nature of Roman identity in Byzantium that has developed over the last decade, arguing that the inherent fluidity and dynamism of identity allows for an assessment of Romanness that can act as a middle ground between theses that consider it either a national or an elite identity. After establishing a methodological approach for understanding Romanness, it then analyses the ways in which the rise of Islam in the seventh century impacted on Roman identity in the following three centuries. First, by outlining the process by which an image of Islam developed amongst Romans and how that image was constructed as an 'Other' against which Romanness could be measured; then, by providing case studies in two analytical

categories that demonstrate the influence that Islam had on Roman identity and the practical implications this held for the empire's society and politics.

Short Abstract

Romanness and Islam: Collective Roman Identity in Byzantium from the Seventh to the Tenth Century

The thesis seeks to engage with ongoing historiographical debates over the nature of Roman identity in the Byzantine Empire. It aims to circumvent debates over the ethnic or national character of Romanness in Byzantium by focusing on the fluid nature of the boundaries of collective identities to isolate the core qualities that defined the group at its most expansive — which generally occurs in relation to an external 'other'.

To that end, the thesis is divided into two broad sections. The first examines the underpinnings of Romanness in Byzantium in the late sixth and early seventh centuries, immediately prior to the emergence of Islam and the Arab conquests. It concludes that the defining features of Roman group identity, *sine qua non*, were adherence to Christianity and an acceptance of the legitimacy of Roman imperial power, vested in the person of the reigning emperor in Constantinople. In this regard, whilst there existed a normative discourse of Romanness in the form of the Chalcedonian Hellenophones that made up the majority of the empire's elite group, this did not preclude non-Chalcedonians or non-Greek-speakers from considering themselves Roman or being considered as such by others.

The second section takes a diachronic view of how Romanness interacted with the rise of Islam from the middle of the seventh century to the middle of the tenth. Knowledge of Islamic theology spread to the empire gradually over the span of two centuries, resulting in the formation of a particular image of Islam and its practitioners within the empire's discourse that served a particular socio-cultural function. In short, Islam in Byzantium was constructed in such a way to act as a mirror to Romanness to express the collective identity of the people in the empire and define those who were perceived as 'non-Roman'.

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The road to completion for this DPhil thesis has been a long and eventful one, stretching all the way back to the final year of my undergraduate degree back in the autumn of 2017. It was then, as part of the still-running special subject course, 'Byzantium in the Age of Constantine Porphyrogenitus'. I went on to write my extended essay on the topic (long since lost to the aether) and used it as the springboard for my dissertation as part of the MPhil programme in Late Antique and Byzantine Studies. It was part of that programme that Islam and the Islamic world first entered the equation, as well as a desire to contribute to the growing impetus towards transregional history that is one of the defining attributes of contemporary Byzantine scholarship, at least in the UK.

The defining feature of my experience as a doctoral student has been the COVID-19 pandemic. Beginning in March 2020 and continuing until January 2022, my research was progressively impacted by restrictions on access to resources, access to debate and dialogue with friends and colleagues, and generally access to all of the things that one might expect to get from life as a graduate student, particularly one at Oxford. There is no way of knowing how different the content of this thesis may have been had the fates not decided to intervene, but I am certain that the experience creating it would have been a great deal richer and rewarding: as the past year and a half post-pandemic has amply demonstrated that.

All has not been doom and gloom, however, if only thanks to the many people who have supported me along this journey, in ways great and small. First, it is incumbent upon me to thank Trinity College and particularly the two senior tutors who have shepherded me since I first joined the college all the way back in 2014: Valerie Worth and Rebecca Bullard. Without the support, both financial and emotional, of the College and its community, this thesis simply would not exist. Trinity has been my home for almost a decade and the location of some of my happiest memories. Although I had to leave sooner or later, this fact makes it no less bittersweet.

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Callan James Meynell

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List of Abbreviations

<i>ACO</i>	Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum
<i>An.Boll.</i>	Analecta Bollandiana
<i>BF</i>	Byzantinische Forschungen
<i>BMGS</i>	Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies
<i>BSOAS</i>	Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies
<i>BZ</i>	Byzantinische Zeitschrift
<i>CHRC</i>	Church History and Religious Culture
<i>DOP</i>	Dumbarton Oaks Papers
<i>EHR</i>	English Historical Review
<i>JECS</i>	Journal of Early Christian Studies
<i>JEH</i>	Journal of Ecclesiastical History
<i>JHS</i>	Journal of Hellenic Studies
<i>JJP</i>	Journal of Juristic Papyrology
<i>JLA</i>	Journal of Late Antiquity
<i>JÖB</i>	Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik
<i>JRAS</i>	Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society
<i>JTS</i>	Journal of Theological Studies
Mansi	Gian Domenico Mansi, <i>Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio</i>
<i>MGH</i>	Monumenta Germaniae Historica
<i>PG</i>	Jacques Paul Migne, <i>Patrologia Cursus Completus, Series Graeca</i>
<i>PL</i>	Jacques Paul Migne, <i>Patrologia Cursus Completus, Series Latina</i>
<i>TM</i>	Travaux et Mémoires
<i>RÉB</i>	Revue des Études Byzantines
<i>RÉI</i>	Revue des Études Islamiques
<i>ROC</i>	Revue de l'Orient Chrétien
<i>ZDMG</i>	Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft

1. Introducing Roman Groupness

Discussing the subject of collective and individual identity within any society, contemporary or otherwise, is a fraught business; liable to produce assessments that are simultaneously valid and contradictory, reflecting the great complexity involved at all levels in negotiating one's place in the world. Attempting to assess the significance of shades of identity within a society that has not only been defunct for the past five-and-a-half centuries, but itself has a history spanning a period of over a millennium serves only to heighten the difficulties involved. The historian of Byzantium is faced with having to grapple with the inevitable issues involved when dealing with identity, backed by a voluminous and competing theoretical and methodological debate from outside the discipline, in addition to the all too familiar problems of unconscious source bias, deliberate manipulation or omission of information, or a lack of available materials, amongst many others. It should thus come as no surprise, amid a revival of interest in the issues surrounding construction and maintenance of the notion of 'Romanness' in Byzantium, that competing assessments of both the form and function of medieval Roman identity abound in the scholarly corpus. This revival has taken the form of a notable surge in publications dealing with the various aspects of Roman identity within the last decade, following on from a similar reassessment in the world of sociological and anthropological studies earlier in the century, and has resolved itself into an ongoing debate between two distinct flavours of Roman identity — one national, and the other ethnic.¹

¹ The most important works in this current debate are as follows: Averil Cameron, *Byzantine Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); John Haldon, 'Res publica Byzantina? State formation and issues of identity in medieval east Rome', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 40:1 (2016): 4-16; Anthony Kaldellis, 'From Rome to New Rome, from Empire to Nation State: Reopening the Question of Byzantium's

It is the intention here to examine the inherent tension between these two visions of what medieval Roman identity meant for those living in the Byzantine world, paying close attention to the methodological and theoretical developments which have taken place over the past few decades in the way that ethnographers and anthropologists understand collective and individual identity, but which have only recently been applied to the study of Byzantium. A topic of such scope cannot be encompassed in its entirety in so little space, and so it will be necessary to limit our discussion to, first, developing a framework for understanding what constituted 'Romanness' and how it functioned as a collective identity, and, second, seeing how this then interacted with the most persistent, definitively 'non-Roman' identity with which the empire had prolonged exposure to — Islam and its practitioners.

Our study will also be limited, chronologically, to roughly a four-century period, stretching from around 550 to 950. Whilst it is impossible to treat any historical process as having a definitive, fixed 'start point', the period at the end of the sixth century represents the last point at which we can examine the foundational principles of Romanness before the tremendous social upheavals that characterise much of the

Roman Identity', in *Two Romes: Rome and Constantinople in Late Antiquity*, ed. Lucy Grig (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 387-404; Anthony Kaldellis, *The Byzantine Republic: people and power in New Rome* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015); Anthony Kaldellis, 'The Social Scope of Roman Identity in Byzantium: An Evidence-Based Approach', *Byzantina Symmeikta* 21 (2017): 173-210; Anthony Kaldellis, *Romanland: ethnicity and empire in Byzantium* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2019); Johannes Koder, 'Byzantium as Seen by Itself — Images and Mechanisms at Work', in *Proceedings of the 22nd International Congress of Byzantine Studies*, ed. Iliya Iliev (Sofia: Bulgarian Historical Heritage Foundation, 2011), 69-82; Gill Page, *Being Byzantine: Greek identity before the Ottomans* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Claudia Rapp, 'Hellenic Identity, Romanitas, and Christianity in Byzantium', in *Hellenisms: Culture, Identity, and Ethnicity from Antiquity to Modernity*, ed. Katerina Zacharia (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 127-47; Yannis Stouraitis, 'Roman identity in Byzantium: a critical approach', *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 107:1 (2014): 175-220; Yannis Stouraitis, 'Reinventing Roman Ethnicity in High and Late Medieval Byzantium', *Medieval Worlds* 5 (2017): 70-94; Yannis Stouraitis, 'Byzantine Romanness: From geopolitical to ethnic conceptions', in *Transformations of Romanness: early medieval regions and identities*, ed. Walter Pohl (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 123-149; Douglas Whalin, *Roman Identity from the Arab Conquests to the Triumph of Orthodoxy*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). The most recent major addition to the field, Yannis Stouraitis (ed.), *Identities and Ideologies in the Medieval East Roman World*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), was published too late to be accessible to the present author.

seventh century. Likewise, the tenth century represents another period of relative stability in Roman identity and its relationship with Islam, the calm before the storms that would batter the empire once more from the eleventh century onwards. In between these two points, the Roman sense of self was repeatedly challenged, first by the final conflict between the empire and Sasanian Persia and then by the rise of a competing monotheist religion and imperial power in the shape of Islam and the Islamic caliphate. To a degree, ideas of Romanness were reshaped by these traumas; but, as we shall see, it is the way that Roman identity in the empire acted as a lens through which these events were rationalised. The fundamentals of Romanness may have been challenged by the Persians and the Islamic conquests, but the response to them was to reinforce prevailing ideas of Roman identity. Indeed, the discourse that developed in literate Roman society constructed a response that depicted them in terms that were specifically in opposition to Romanness.

1.1: *Romanness as a National Identity?*

The notion that medieval Roman identity ought to be considered a kind of pre-modern national identity is not a new concept, and may be seen in relation to the tendency in older works of scholarship to attempt to assimilate 'Roman' identity in Byzantium — as a placeholder name for an imagined medieval 'Greek' identity — with the modern Greek nation state.² This is the so-called 'primordialist' approach to national identities, which traces their origins back through precursor 'nations' that share common characteristics and whose histories lead in a more-or-less linear progression to a present-day incarnation.

² Cameron, *Byzantine Matters*, 46-57.

In opposition to this, the later ‘modernist’ approach to nationalism recognises pre-modern societies as being qualitatively different to their modern, national, successors. It emphasises the importance of horizontal elite common identity cutting across political boundaries in the pre-modern period; rather than the socially vertical structuring of national identity, in which the common political identification of the nation state overrides that between social groups that extend beyond the declared boundaries of the state system.³

A ‘third way’ emerged in the 1980s with the work of scholars such as Anthony Smith and John Armstrong.⁴ This new approach towards understanding nations, nationalism, and national identity, termed ‘ethno-symbolism’, has sought to shift the focus in the prevailing scholarly discourse away from the teleological nature of the modernist approach, with its assumption that the institutions necessary for the creation of the nation state could only exist in the modern period. It instead sees the nation as a development from ethnic identities: characterised by an articulation and institutionalisation of the sets of values and beliefs that are taken to constitute the foundations of an ethnic identity.⁵ The nation is, in its simplest guise, thus “a named human population occupying an historic territory, and sharing myths, memories, a single public culture and common rights and duties for all members”.⁶

When applied to Byzantium and to Roman identity, this theoretical approach has produced an assessment that has sought to demonstrate that the Byzantine empire

³ Smith, ‘Dating the nation’, 57-8.

⁴ John Armstrong, *Nations before Nationalism*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982); Baster Haar Romeny, ‘Ethnicity, Ethnogenesis and Identity of Syriac Orthodox Christians’, in Walter Pohl and Clemens Gantner (eds), *Visions of Community in the Post-Roman World: the West, Byzantium, and Islamic world, 300-1100*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 191-3; Anthony Smith, ‘Dating the nation’, in Daniele Conversi (ed.), *Ethnonationalism in the Contemporary World*, (London: Routledge, 2002), 53-71.

⁵ Siniša Malešević, “‘Divine Ethnes’ and “Sacred Nations”: Anthony D. Smith and the Neo-Durkheimian theory of nationalism’, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 10:4 (2004): 572.

⁶ Smith, ‘Dating the nation’, 65.

functioned in the manner of a nation state. This is fundamentally the position that was set out by Anthony Kaldellis in a series of works.⁷ Kaldellis' basic proposition was that the political ideology of the Byzantine state found expression through the existence of a secular political arena between the emperor and his subjects that authorised a bottom-up conception of politics that vested sovereignty in the people of the empire — as opposed to the supposed 'theological' approach that privileges the status of imperial power as derived from God.⁸ The Roman state (*politeia*) derived its existence and relevance from the subject peoples of the empire, constituted by their collective values and choices; *a priori* rendering Roman identity national in its character, in the ethno-symbolist sense.⁹ Since the character of the political state derived from its relationship with the population it controlled, it in turn governed the identity characteristics of those who engaged and identified with it — generating a set of 'national Roman standards' governing who could and could not be considered 'Roman' and thus legitimately engage with the political system.

The difficulties in maintaining this stance in the face of the evidence presented by the sources has been dealt with *in extenso* by Haldon, as well as in numerous reviews, and it is not the purpose of this paper to join them in providing a comprehensive review of Kaldellis' position point-by-point.¹⁰ Indeed, Kaldellis himself softened his position in his most recent work on the topic, *Romanland*, by referring to Roman national identity

⁷ Kaldellis, 'From Rome to New Rome'; Kaldellis, *Byzantine Republic*.

⁸ Kaldellis, *Byzantine Republic*, 8.

⁹ Anthony Kaldellis, *Ethnography after Antiquity: foreign lands and peoples in Byzantine literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 127; Kaldellis, *Byzantine Republic*, 12; Smith, 'Dating the nation', 61-7.

¹⁰ Haldon, 'Res publica Byzantina?'; Leonora Neville, 'Review of Anthony Kaldellis: The Byzantine Republic: People and Power in New Rome', *Speculum* 91:2 (2016): 511-3; Yannis Stouraitis, 'Review of KALDELLIS, A., The Byzantine Republic: people and power in New Rome, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 136 (2016): 296-7; Warren Treadgold, 'The Byzantine Republic: People and Power in New Rome by Anthony Kaldellis (review)', *Journal of Late Antiquity* 6:2 (2015): 447-50.

in terms of an “ethnic nation”, rather than a “civic nation”: placing the emphasis on aspects of ethnicity and minimising the role of political structures.¹¹ This shift, in effect, removed the ‘national’ element of the ‘national identity’ — by Kaldellis’ own admission — but his fundamental assumption of the importance of the political structure of the state as an integrative element was retained in *Romanland*, with the promise of a separate (as yet unpublished) monograph devoted to the putative Roman nation state.¹² As such, it is necessary to deal with some key elements of Kaldellis’ thesis regarding the applicability of a national narrative to Byzantium in order to develop our own framework for understanding the basis of Roman identity.

The keystone of the argument for a national Roman identity in Byzantium is the notion that it was interaction with the political system of the imperial state that regulated the identity of the population at large. This is the so-called ‘republican’ element of Kaldellis’ formulation. By virtue of engagement in a cultural dialogue inherited from the classical world, which emphasised the popular basis of imperial power, subjects of the empire aligned their identity with that of the imperial state over the Christian faith: this concept of popular sovereignty finds expression in the many revolts and depositions that feature throughout Byzantine history, each without impacting the basic mechanisms of the imperial state or its overall legitimacy as a form of government.¹³ The problem with this stance is that it is not fully borne out by our sources for the eighth through tenth centuries that give examples of ‘popular sovereignty’, and indeed this period is entirely absent from Kaldellis’ enumeration of

¹¹ Anthony Kaldellis, *Romanland: Ethnicity and Empire in Byzantium*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019), 47-9. On the distinction between these two forms of national identity, see: Azar Gat and Alexander Yakobson, *Nations: The Long History and Deep Roots of Political Ethnicity and Nationalism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 7-8.

¹² Kaldellis, *Romanland*, 49.

¹³ Kaldellis, *Byzantine Republic*, 89.

practical demonstrations of the ‘sovereignty of the people’ — which passes from Justinian II in 695 to Constantine IX in 1044.¹⁴ Yet it is precisely this idea of popular sovereignty and political engagement with the state, as well as the creation of institutions to perpetuate these, that is generally accepted as the distinguishing feature between pre-modern ethnic identities and the nation state.¹⁵ If Romanness as a properly ‘national’ identity is a questionable proposition, what about its status as an ethnic identity?

1.2: *Ethnic Roman Identity — some formulations and problems*

The idea that Romanness can even be qualified as an ethnic identity is neither universally accepted, nor has any agreement been reached regarding its content and nature.¹⁶ Even assessing what is meant when one speaks of an ‘ethnic’ identity throws up several problems — attempting to define an ideal type of category of analysis to apply to ‘ethnicity’ has been the subject of numerous sociological and anthropological debates over recent decades.¹⁷ The development of ethno-symbolist approaches to national identity in opposition to the modernist approach that made a clear distinction

¹⁴ *ibid.* 122-3.

¹⁵ Richard Jenkins, *Rethinking Ethnicity* (2nd ed., London: Sage, 2008), 147; Siniša Malešević, *Nation-States and Nationalisms: Organization, ideology and solidarity*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 8-13 and 20-43; Siniša Malešević, ‘Nationalism and the Longue Durée’, *Nations and Nationalism* 24:2 (2018): 293-4; Smith, ‘Dating the nation’, 65-7; Lyn Spillman and Russell Faeges, ‘Nations’, in Julia Adams, Elisabeth Clemens, and Ann Shola Orloff (eds), *Remaking Modernity: Politics, History, and Sociology*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 434-6.

More recent developments in ethno-symbolism have sought to break even this distinction down, however: Anthony Smith, ‘The genealogy of nations: An ethno-symbolist approach’, in Atsuko Ichijo and Gordana Uzelac (eds), *When is the Nation? Towards an understanding of theories of nationalism*, (London: Routledge, 2005), 94-8.

¹⁶ See the discussion and vituperations in: Kaldellis, *Romanland*, 42-52.

¹⁷ George De Vos, ‘Ethnic Pluralism: Conflict and Accommodation’, in *Ethnic Identity: Creation, Conflict, and Accommodation*, eds. Lola Romanucci-Ross and George De Vos (London: AltaMira Press, 1995), 18.

between 'modern' national identities and 'pre-modern' ethnic ones has inevitably provoked a reaction amongst both sociologists and historians.

Traditional primordialist views of ethnicity tended to dominate the academic landscape until the decades following the Second World War: an interpretation of ethnic identity that saw it as fixed, based upon heritable biological and cultural characteristics, meaning the ethnic identity of the individual and group are immutable.¹⁸ Such an approach denies the possibility that certain individuals or groups may choose to redefine their ethnic identity over time, since the boundaries between ethnic groups are permanent and impermeable to outsiders.¹⁹ This approach, which complemented the older view of modern nations and national identity as stretching back into time immemorial, was subject to significant review and redefinition post-war. This reassessment resulted in the development of a 'constructivist' view of ethnicity, which sees it instead as the product of negotiation between members of a particular group concerning the recognition of common features. These common features are often determined in relation to those outside of the group and based upon certain culturally constructed characteristics: in short, it is the product of a social process that acts to bind individuals in the group together and provide a measure for the integration of outsiders.²⁰

Exactly what those characteristics entail is a subject of serious contention. The most common epistemological definition was developed in the 1970s and identifies them as some combination of: a belief in common mythical genealogy, common historical memory, some elements of a common culture, a claim to some form of

¹⁸ Romeny, 'Ethnicity', 190.

¹⁹ Romeny, 'Ethnicity', 191.

²⁰ *ibid.* 190.

homeland, and a sense of group solidarity based upon these.²¹ Which of these markers takes precedence over the others in defining the ethnic identity depends upon the group in question, as well as the scholar analysing them. Indeed, the very plasticity of ethnic identity is understood has come under sustained criticism from certain sociological circles, questioning the validity of the concept as an analytical tool so long as no ideal type-definition can be agreed upon for scholars to use when referring to an 'ethnic' identity.²² The argument goes that, unlike 'national' identity, which has clear state-centred boundaries, 'ethnic' identity is too 'fuzzy' a concept to be useful. To circumvent this problem, some have sought to redefine ethnic identity to be more in line with an anthropological approach first pioneered by Fredrik Barth in the 1960s, reducing ethnic identity to the product of a dichotomisation between groups that distinguishes members from non-members, and by which members can both self-identify and are in turn identified.²³ This is perhaps the most general definition of ethnic identity and leaves open the exact methods of identification to the particular circumstances of the individual and the group.

With regard to Byzantium, the prevailing view has been to understand it in terms of ethnic pluralism within the empire itself, representing the diversity of the various peoples which made up the population of the empire at various points in its long history (Romans, Slavs, Armenians, Turks, Bulgars, Arabs, amongst others) unified by an

²¹ Audrey Becker, 'Ethnicité, identité ethnique. Quelques remarques pour l'Antiquité tardive', *Géronte* 32 (2014): 291.

²² Becker, 'Ethnicité', 291; Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 11; Bob Carter and Steve Fenton, 'Not Thinking Ethnicity: A Critique of the Ethnicity Paradigm in an Over-Ethnicised Sociology', *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 40:1 (2010): 1-18; De Vos, 'Ethnic Pluralism', 18.

²³ Fredrik Barth, ed., *Ethnic groups and boundaries: the social organization of culture difference* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1969); Becker, 'Ethnicité', 291; Andre Gingrich, 'Envisioning Medieval Communities in Asia: Remarks on Ethnicity, Tribalism, and Faith', in *Visions of Community in the Post-Roman World: The West, Byzantium and the Islamic World, 300-1100*, eds. Walter Pohl, Clemens Gantner, and Richard Payne (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 33.

overarching common Christian, usually Chalcedonian (and later Greek Rite), religious identity and a political identity connected to the emperor and court at Constantinople.²⁴ This typically brackets off the Christian religious and imperial political elements of the empire's general character as separate forms of identity that can overlap with the more diverse ethnic identities of the empire, but are otherwise distinct in their character and function.²⁵

Such approaches tend to fall into something of an essentialist trap set up by the source base, by identifying and categorising the ethnic identities of certain groups in the empire as being reified, transhistorical phenomena to which individuals subscribe themselves to and are thus cordoned off as being part of one ethnic group or another: a Slav, a Rus', an Armenian, a Roman. Effectively, since the source base itself presents these identities in primordialist terms (unchanging and with essential inherent characteristics), historians run the risk of accepting these categories at face value rather than seeing them as part of an ethnicising discourse on the part of the author of the text.²⁶ It is not only Byzantinists who have been guilty of this, but it has been identified as part of a wider trend in studies that deal with the question of ethnic identity; seeing ethnic groups in a relatively common-sense way as being persistent entities with a sense of agency, a homogenous membership (to a certain extent), and common goals.²⁷ In the analogy used by Rogers Brubaker and others, this is a polychrome mosaic picture

²⁴ Barbara Crostini, 'Introduction: Exploring Byzantine *Convivencia*', in *Negotiating Co-Existence: Communities, Cultures and Convivencia in Byzantine Society*, eds. Barbara Crostini and Sergio La Porta (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2013), 11; Kaldellis, *Ethnography*, 127; Koder, 'Byzantium as Seen by Itself', 75-6.

²⁵ Koder, 'Byzantium as Seen by Itself', 71; Dimitri Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe 500-1453* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), 272-4; Page, 'Being Byzantine', 47-49; Rapp, 'Hellenic Identity', 144.

²⁶ For a discussion of the issues this can cause, see: Francisco Gil-White, 'How thick is blood? The plot thickens...: if ethnic actors are primordialists, what remains of the circumstantialist / primordialist controversy?', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22:5 (1999): 789-820.

²⁷ Carter and Fenton, 'Not Thinking Ethnicity', 1; Virginia Yans, 'On "Groupness"', *Journal of American Ethnic History* 25:4 (2006): 119.

of the lived world, made up of discretely bounded ethnic, national, or racial groups that are otherwise internally coherent and have their own distinct labels — denying the inherent complexities and contradictions involved with the process of individual self-identification and the negotiation of group identity.²⁸

Steps have been taken in recent years to address this fundamental weakness of the methodology used to interpret the form and function of Roman identity. Two general approaches to this reassessment of Roman ethnic identity can be discerned, adopted by two different scholars. The one, proposed by Kaldellis as a continuation of his thesis of a 'national' Roman identity, sees Roman ethnic identity as part of a totalising political framework that encompassed most, if not all, subjects of the empire; in opposition to the dominant scholarly position of the empire as a multi-ethnic conglomerate underpinned by a universalist Christian ideology.²⁹ The other, forwarded by Yannis Stouraitis, largely rejects the idea that a Roman ethnic identity could be applied to the majority of the population of the empire, instead seeing it as a function of a dominant élite discourse constructed and reproduced by the Constantinopolitan monarchy, which promoted a vision of the wider body politic that accommodated various subaltern ethnic and religious communities that did not necessarily see themselves as Roman.³⁰ This rejects a totalising Roman political identity in favour of maintaining the older view of religious identity being the primary marker of membership of the Roman *politeia*: the empire was indeed multi-ethnic in its character, but with an overlay of the aforementioned élite Roman political discourse masking that fact. This is something hinted at in an earlier study on the concept of a Byzantine

²⁸ Brubaker, *Ethnicity*, 11; Rogers Brubaker, Mara Loveman, and Peter Stamatov, 'Ethnicity as Cognition', *Theory and Society* 33:1 (2004): 45.

²⁹ Kaldellis, *Ethnography*, 127; Kaldellis, *Romanland*, 52-8; Kaldellis, 'Social Scope of Roman Identity', 174.

³⁰ Stouraitis, 'Reinventing Roman Ethnicity', 75.

‘convivencia’ — a multi-ethnic, multilingual, and multicultural society united politically.³¹ In effect, it is a stance aimed against the push to re-categorise Roman identity in national terms. Instead limiting the pool of people who considered themselves Romans in a political sense to the elite, with a multiplicity of ethnic identifications amongst the wider population.³²

Both approaches have their merits, and both have enhanced the current debate over the nature of Roman identity in Byzantium; but, as Kaldellis’ and Stouraitis’ critiques of the other’s arguments demonstrate, they both suffer from weaknesses in how they perceive those who were able to call themselves ‘Roman’ in Byzantium. One is too expansive and the other too restrictive. Kaldellis’ view that Roman political identification extended down throughout the social strata of the empire, far beyond the elites in Constantinople, is difficult, although not impossible, to maintain considering the general silence offered by our source base on the question of how non-elite groups in the empire perceived themselves. Furthermore, the flattening of social and cultural differences in favour of a politicised Romanness runs the risk of ignoring the very real methods in which identity could be assigned or denied based upon such things as class distinctions — a danger common to much modern discussion of ethnicity.³³ The identification of a whole range of ‘ethnicised’ qualities that delineated Romanness that stretched across time, from the sixth to the fourteenth century, is both too imprecise to be useful as an analytical tool and fails to take into account historical processes that may have had an impact on how Roman identity was conceived.³⁴

³¹ Crostini, ‘Introduction’, 11; Stouraitis, ‘Reinventing Roman Ethnicity’, 75-8.

³² Stouraitis, ‘Byzantine Romanness’, 128.

³³ Carter and Fenton, ‘Not Thinking Ethnicity’, 1-2.

³⁴ See: Kaldellis, *Romanland*, 81-3. He also (paradoxically, given his overall thesis) ignores political affiliation as one of the markers of Romanness.

On the other hand, Stouraitis' circumscribing of Roman identity to the elite group in Constantinople, a product of their engagement with the ideology of the imperial monarchy, ignores the inconvenient fact that those elites in the capital needed to come from somewhere, did not stay at court perpetually, and were unlikely to either suddenly adopt or abandon their 'Romanness' as a consequence: Romanness was not a *traditionskern* held dear by any group, elite or otherwise.³⁵ This approach also has a tendency to produce a kind of 'two-speed' Romanness that existed both as a form of 'living' elite discourse and an ethnic label on the same level as 'Armenian' or 'Slav'. In effect, creating a group of ethnic Romans comparable to other ethnic groups in the empire, who themselves could be designated 'Roman' by the elite group, but which may not necessarily have accepted that identifier themselves.³⁶

1.3: *Romanness and 'Groupness': Constructing an ethnic identity*

We consequently appear to be at something of an impasse, with two competing visions of Roman identity in Byzantium that both suffer from flaws; seeking either to find Romanness throughout the population of the empire, or to deny an expansive scope for Romanness and instead see it as a product of elite political culture. Neither of which, for all their respective merits, are fully able to express the variety and contradictory nature of Romanness in Byzantium. To do this, we must work backwards to reassess our assumptions concerning what constitutes a group identity in the first instance. It is necessary to view both self-identification and group identity as a contingent process

³⁵ Kaldellis, 'Social Scope of Roman Identity', 178; Romeny, 'Ethnicity', 193.

³⁶ Stouraitis, 'Reinventing Roman Ethnicity', 79-80.

based upon particular historical circumstances which obligated those involved to recognise commonalities between themselves and others.

This view is based in the work pioneered by Rogers Brubaker and taken up by others, such as Richard Jenkins: jettisoning the position that holds group identity as a 'thing-in-the-world' that people ascribe themselves and others to based upon intrinsic values attached to an 'eternal' group, it instead focuses on the notion of 'groupness', in which the group identity crystallises at particular historically contingent moments.³⁷ The boundaries of group identity are thus fluid and dynamic, the result of a constant process of negotiation and re-negotiation between individual actors, and its boundaries can expand to encompass others based upon what the most basic criteria for defining membership is, as well as upon the particular circumstances promoting the widening of the scope for identification. Such group identities are not necessarily predicated on cultural attributes in and of themselves, they are instead defined arbitrarily at the individual and collective level through constant social dialogue to encompass certain cultural elements that need not be mutually exclusive with other groups.³⁸ As a result, there existed at any one moment multiple competing definitions of what constituted Roman group identity.

This definition of collective identity recognises the existence of multiple modes of collective identification, of which ethnic (or national) identity was but one and not necessarily the most relevant mode of identification. Roman group identity can thus be seen as functioning as a 'super-*ethnie*' that could promote itself above and beyond other ethnic identities by focusing on other aspects of identity common in the empire, but which could, depending on the circumstances, also act on the same level of identification

³⁷ Brubaker, *Ethnicity*, 11-2; Jenkins, *Rethinking*, 11.

³⁸ Jenkins, *Rethinking*, 111.

as other ethnic categories. In short, an individual could be identified as an ‘Armenian’, ‘Syrian’, or ‘Egyptian’ and still also be considered a Roman from the perspective of the writer; alternatively, they could be portrayed as any one of those ethnicised categories in distinction to the author’s own sense of Romanness. Whether one or the other distinction applied depended on circumstances, the former occurring more often when faced with an external force considered in opposition to Romanness.

Delving too deeply into Romanness as an essentialised ethnic identity leads one to face the problem of the inherent ‘fuzziness’ of ethnicity as an analytical category. Its fluidity ensured that there were as many definitions of what constituted a ‘real Roman’ as there are sources. Looking for Romanness in terms of language, food, dress, and other cultural characteristics will inevitably throw up a mass of contradictions: one person’s definition of these will not fit with another’s, raising the question of which view to take as representing ‘ideal type’ Romanness? Such an approach to Roman identity has its uses, most obviously in cases where a writer is seeking to use ethnicised language to ‘other’ an opponent. It cannot, however, be used when discussing the Romans as a collective, lest one end up in a ‘pick-and-mix’ situation — where anyone can be Roman given the right cultural traits, yet very few (if any) meet all the relevant criteria.³⁹ Instead, the most useful way of viewing Romanness, which allows it to be an analytical tool for explaining historical phenomena, is to examine what the most basic foundational principles of it were. In effect: what were the characteristics that allowed it to transcend ethnic discourse and serve as a ‘super-*ethnie*’, a group identity that encompassed the greatest number of people irrespective of their other distinguishing features? What were considered the elements *sine qua non* of Romanness by all those

³⁹ For example: Kaldellis, *Romanland*, 81-3. The ‘shopping list’ of Roman cultural traits listed are also divorced from any historical development, which raises its own set of issues.

who self-identified as Roman? Counterintuitively, it is necessary to examine Romanness in its simplest, most basic form in order to fully account for its complexities and contradictions.

The historical circumstances that throw these foundational principles into relief are those in which the core values of Romanness were threatened by an external force, allowing the group identity to transcend the differences between different communities. Such moments act to crystallise and reify latent ideas about Roman groupness, and, in turn, the external force is 'othered' in such a way as to mirror the values inherent in the collective identity. It is also in such moments at which the group identity 'crystallises' that it was able to act as a factor in shaping historical processes, particularly in relation to how those who saw themselves as part of the group interpreted and reacted to the real external force that had reified the group identity.⁴⁰ In the period that this study is concerned with, that external force was initially the Sasanian Persian empire, but was quickly supplanted by an entirely new group: Islam. The ways in which discourse within Byzantium formulated a response to the Persian threat reveals the basic principles of Roman groupness. In turn, the gradual response to Islam and the construction of an image of it in opposition to Romanness shows both the persistence of these values down to the tenth centuries and some of the ways in which an awareness of Romanness can enrich our interpretation of historical events.

⁴⁰ Stouraitis' most recent intervention on the subject concedes the need to move away from seeing Romanness in ethnicised terms, adopting a more pragmatic and less essentialising approach, but still maintains the assertion that Romanness was predominantly a product of the imperial centre and existed in service to the centralised Constantinopolitan monarchy. Thus, there was no 'ground-up' aspect to Roman group identity and it was not the factor that maintained the unitary nature of the empire up to 1204: Yannis Stouraitis, 'War and Peoplehood in the Middle Ages: An Introduction', in Yannis Stouraitis (ed.), *War and Peoplehood in the Middle Ages: East, West, and Beyond*, (York: Arc Humanities Press, forthcoming).

In the following chapter, we will examine the foundational principles of Roman group identity in the late sixth and seventh centuries, stripping Romanness back to its core elements — Christian faith and identification with the empire and its rulers. The chapter after acts as an appendix to this discussion, focusing on groups in the empire who have, on occasion, been excluded from the normative 'Roman' ideal on the basis of their particular sect of Christianity or their primary language, intending to demonstrate that Roman group identity was expansive enough in its most basic form to encompass these groups. It is only once the identity is reified that divisions begin to appear, in which one group self-identifying as Romans portrays another as different for varying social, cultural, political, or other reasons.

Once a fully developed picture of Roman identity has been presented, the study adopts a more diachronic aspect, focusing instead on the rise and evolution of Islam from the mid-seventh through to the mid-tenth century. As we progress over the centuries, the focus of each chapter shifts from the empire to the caliphate and then back. Initially we shall follow the thread of how people within the empire responded to the initial rise of Islam and the impact that this had upon their sense of collective identity up to the beginning of the eighth century. It will then be necessary to look at the development of Islam itself within the nascent caliphate over its first century of existence and the processes by which Christians living under it created an image of the new faith that allowed them to define themselves in relation to it. Only once this had occurred could a sense of Islam as a distinctive religious tradition begin to permeate through to Romans in the empire, which we see happening from the beginning of the eighth century.

The final two chapters will return to the empire and bring the story up to the tenth century, first examining the process by which Roman discourse initially began to

adopt the image of Islam presented by Christians in the caliphate. That image taken from those with first-hand experience of Muslims would eventually mutate in Roman discourse into a version of Islam only loosely connected to its historical form, but which fulfilled the social function of the 'Other' against which Romanness could be defined. The final chapter examines some of the practical implications for this in the way that Romans understood their compatriots and those deemed to be external to them, by taking a closer look at examples from across the ninth and tenth centuries of Romans crossing both the mental and geographical barrier separating them from the Islamic world: some returned with a greater sense of belonging to a Roman cultural sphere, others came to the empire and became Romans themselves, others still found that their time spent living with Islam was an albatross around their neck — a black stain on their own claims to be Roman that could be used to delegitimise them by their critics. First, however, we must wind the clock back to the seventh century.

2. Towards a Framework for Pre-Islamic Romanness

When we consider Romanness as a group identity, whose bounds were contingent on peculiar historical circumstances and defined on a person-by-person basis, expanding and contracting depending on who one asks and at what time, it is necessary to identify and analyse what the foundational principles of that group were in its most expansive. This chapter will seek to refine our model for understanding Roman identity in the seventh century: focusing on the period prior to and immediately in the aftermath of the Islamic conquests in the 630s. It will identify the key features which seem to offer us the most useful definition of who could and could not be generally understood as 'Roman' both to those within the empire and those without. The inherently fluid nature of group identity inevitably results in a multiplicity of different, often contradictory, criteria for membership of the group — any attempt to offer a comprehensive view of each value judgement which went into each individual assessment of what constituted Romanness is thus a Sisyphean, task. It consequently falls to us to seek out the defining elements which serve to unite these varied assessments of what it meant to be a Roman, to unpick and clarify the snapshots offered by the sources to reach the 'bedrock' of the identity: the qualities which *sine qua non* determined Romanness.

A close examination of a wide range of sources in this period demonstrates that Romanness operated with two basic principles: an identification with the political framework of the empire itself, focused primarily on the personage of the emperor, and adherence to the Christian faith. These twin principles are to be found to a greater or lesser extent in practically all expressions of Roman group identity from this period; from the emperor himself and the imperial court in Constantinople, to lowly monks on

the fringes of the Byzantine world. Amidst all the other elements which could be used to exclude individuals or groups from Romanness, only these remain constant. To demonstrate the validity of this assessment, we shall begin in the imperial centre of Constantinople with imperial proclamations, the discussions of imperial officials, and the writings of elites closely associated with the capital. We shall then gradually expand the scope of our enquiry both geographically and socially to bring in disparate elements from all corners of the empire.

2.1: *Voices from the Centre*

The idea that the political authority of the Roman emperor and the empire he ruled was intrinsically connected to the Christian faith and its God predates the start of our period by a considerable margin. Christian theological thought had already begun to take a more sympathetic view of the empire in the third century, but the clear turning point came with the deathbed 'conversion' of Constantine I and the gradual assumption of Christianity as the imperial religion. This promoted a synthesis of existing classical Roman archetypes with Christian theology, resulting in a conceptual fusion of church and empire which finds its clearest expression in the works of Eusebius of Caesarea, whose *Vita Constantini* and *Historia Ecclesiastica* were both immensely influential as templates for later writers.¹

¹ Gilbert Dagron, *Emperor and Priest: the imperial office in Byzantium*, trans. Jean Birrell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 131-5; John Haldon, *The Empire that Would Not Die: The Paradox of Eastern Roman Survival, 640-740* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 95-7; David Olster, *Roman Defeat, Christian Response, and the Literary Construction of the Jews* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 32; Stephen Shoemaker, *The Apocalypse of Empire: Imperial Eschatology in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 39-40.

The Christianisation of not just the empire's population but of its institutions and semiotics had, by this time, created an intricate set of associations and assumptions that in many ways eliminated any distinction which may have once existed between the terms 'Roman' and 'Christian'. As will soon become apparent, these terms, for most writers within the empire, most of the time, were functionally identical and referred to Roman group identity. It is effectively impossible to parse out any distinctive 'secular', political aspect to Romanness or any 'religious', Christian aspect since the two invariably work in tandem. This becomes abundantly clear when examining the works produced in the context of the imperial centre of Constantinople, either by officials connected to the court, writers living in the city, or the emperor himself.

Given the importance of differentiating self from 'other' in the creation and maintenance of identity, it should come as little surprise that it is in the discourse surrounding the last Roman-Sasanian war that we find the clearest expressions of what being a Roman meant. This war lasted from the coup d'état undertaken by Phokas that deposed and murdered the emperor Maurice and his family in 602 until the signing of a peace agreement in 629, after the defeat of the Sasanian forces by Heraclius and the death of the Persian shahanshah, Khusrow II, the previous year. This conflict, dubbed the last 'great war' of antiquity, almost brought the empire to its extinction and required an enormous mobilisation of resources that, in turn, depended upon the ability of the imperial state to count upon the continued loyalty of the Roman people. The following texts were all written by authors closely connected to the imperial court and produced either during or in the years after the war. As a result, they reflect the political, social, and cultural pressure placed on the imperial government to reify latent Roman

groupness throughout the empire's territories and the methods undertaken by it to translate that into support against the Persian 'other'.

One of the more striking examples this is preserved among the notices of the so-called 'Paschal Chronicle', an anonymous work written sometime around 630 in Constantinople and with a view largely restricted to events relating to the city. This chronicle preserves what would appear to be the text of the imperial dispatch sent by the emperor Heraclius to the capital announcing his victory over Khusrow II in 628.² The dispatch provides us with a useful template for how the synthesis of the political and religious aspects of Romanness functioned. The entire work is suffused with the language of Christian triumph intermingling with aspects of imperial rule. The people ("all we Christians") are exhorted to give thanks to God for having brought about the downfall of Khusrow, given the epithet "opponent of God". There is a free association between the people to whom this dispatch is addressed and Christians, one could easily substitute "all we Christians" for "all we Romans" and achieve practically the same result.³ This is a Roman emperor exalting the victory of the empire over a rival power calling the armies of the empire "our Christ-loving contingents" and their opponent "God-abhorred and execrated", "ingrate, arrogant, and blaspheming opponent of God", and ascribing victory to the collaboration of "God and our Lady Mother of God".⁴ The fact that this victory message from the emperor was read out to the populace "from the ambo in the most holy great church [Hagia Sophia]" encapsulates the idea that the empire and the intendant Romans who constituted were indistinguishable from the

² James Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis: historians and histories of the Middle East in the seventh century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 48-9; *Chronicon Paschale*, 727-729.628.

³ *Chronicon Paschale*, 728.628

⁴ *Chronicon Paschale* 729-731.628.

Christian religious community, the figureheads of both merged in the personage of the emperor, the soldiers of the one fighting for the other.⁵

A similar message comes through from other wartime texts. The poems of George of Pisidia show the same hallmarks of close association between Christian faith and empire found in the military dispatch. Indeed, these poems are perhaps even more revealing of a wider understanding amongst, at the very least, the educated population of the city, given that most were composed with the emperor absent from the city, thus without his direct input, and intended to be performed publicly as a means of strengthening resolve and support for him and his campaign.⁶ If anything, the poems draw an even more explicit connection between the empire and Christianity. The Persians are once more the “enemies of God” who have insulted him, while the Roman troops are addressed by the emperor in the following manner in George’s mind: “Let us stand bravely against the enemy who have inflicted many terrible things on the Christians. Let us respect the sovereign state of the Romans and oppose the enemy who are armed with impiety”.⁷ These chiasmic hortatory phrases draw a direct comparison between the Christian populace and the Roman imperial state; distinguishing the twin aspects of Romanness whilst continuing to have them work in tandem.

From what little we know about George, the fact that ostensibly Christian elements routinely appear in his work should come as no surprise, given that he was firmly entrenched in the political-ecclesiastical networks of the capital, being both a deacon of Hagia Sophia and the patriarchal *referendarius* in charge of communications

⁵ *Chronicon Paschale*, 727.628.

⁶ Anthony Kaldellis, ‘The Discontinuous History of Imperial Panegyric in Byzantium and its Reinvention by Michel Psellos’, *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 59 (2019): 698; Mary Whitby, ‘Defender of the Cross: George of Pisidia on the Emperor Heraclius and his deputies’, in Mary Whitby (ed.), *The Propaganda of Power: The Role of Panegyric in Late Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 251.

⁷ George Pisides, *Expeditio Persica*, I.132-II.110 and *Heraclius*, III frag.3 [= Theophanes, *Chronographia*, AM 6113.302-6114.307].

with the emperor.⁸ Indeed, as Mary Whitby rightly pointed out, contrary to the position of the original editor of much of George's oeuvre, Agostino Pertusi, there can be no meaningful distinction made between 'religious' and 'secular' poems.⁹ Nevertheless, as much as the free blending of 'classical' and 'biblical' allusions that distinguishes George's works from earlier panegyrists can be put down to his own position as a cleric, it must also be recognised that these features stem from much more socially widespread attitudes within the imperial elite in both Constantinople and elsewhere.¹⁰ In short, George's poems were not produced in a vacuum, nor were they performed in front of unthinking automata; they are both a reflection of contemporary sensibilities on the part of their composer and intended to play into and reinforce pre-existing lines of thought among their audience. If that were not the case, then the poems would not have been successful, it is likely that George would not have been commissioned or encouraged to write more of them, and likewise we would not have so many of them largely extant today, let alone find them reproduced as historical material in works like Theophanes' *Chronographia*.

As to who this audience was, the jury is still out. The assumption seems to be that, if the poems were performed at all, then it was most likely at the court, probably in one of the many assembly halls that constituted the imperial palace, meaning that the audience was likely restricted to members of the Constantinopolitan elite.¹¹ The poems themselves offer few clues as to how and where they were delivered, but it does seem likely that the longer poems and those directed at specific individuals or objects would

⁸ Whitby, 'Defender of the Cross', 247.

⁹ Whitby, 'Defender of the Cross', 251.

¹⁰ Mary Whitby, 'George of Pisidia's Presentation of the Emperor Heraclius and his Campaigns: Variety and Development', in Gerrit Reinink and Bernard Stolte (eds.), *The Reign of Heraclius (610-641): Crisis and Confrontation* (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 172-3.

¹¹ Kaldellis, 'Discontinuous History', 698.

have been reserved for more formal occasions in the palace.¹² However, it is equally plausible that the shorter poems could have been declaimed in a more public environment, either just outside or in the ambo of Hagia Sophia, as with Heraclius' military dispatch.¹³ In fact, George's own poem celebrating the restoration of the True Cross in spring 629 illustrates just such an event, noting that, when the news of the Cross' restoration was read out in Constantinople:

ὄλη συνῆλθεν εἰς ἑαυτὴν ἡ Πόλις ὡς ψάμμος, ὡς ῥοῦς, ὡς ἄμετρα κύματα
 ποιῶντα πολλὰς σωματώδεις ἐκχύσεις ἰσχυρὰν γὰρ εἶχον, οἷα δορκὰς ἐν θέρει
 διψῶσα καὶ σφύζουσα, συντόμως φθάσαι τῶν σῶν, κράτιστε, συλλαβῶν τὰς
 ἰκμάδας.¹⁴

In any case, a comparison between George's work and that of a contemporary which was almost certainly given a public reading, Theodore Synkellos' *Homily on the Siege of Constantinople*, written shortly after an Avar-Persian assault in 626, it reveals strikingly similar attitudes to how the emperor, the people of the empire, and Christianity are presented and interlinked.¹⁵ Two especially salient aspects of the discourse are represented in both canons. The first of these is the way in which both writers act to present the emperor as somehow acting in God's will, or otherwise inherently pious and good, in contrast to the savage and impious enemies both he and

¹² Whitby, 'Defender of the Cross', 251.

¹³ *Chronicon Paschale*, 727.628.

¹⁴ George Pisides, *Restitutio sanctae crucis*, 110-16 ["The entire City gathered together, like grains of sand, like streams, like boundless waves consisting of many bodies pouring forth; since they possessed a zeal to swiftly reach the dew of your words, O ruler, like an antelope in summer, thirsting and eager."]. On the date of this event, see: Constantin Zuckerman, 'Heraclius and the return of the Holy Cross', *TM* 17 (2013): 197-218.

¹⁵ Even less is known about Theodore than about George, other than his rank as a senior official (*synkellos*) in the patriarchate: Brian Croke, 'Theodore Syncellus', in Oliver Nicholson (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses*, 146-7. A *terminus post quem* of 628 for the homily can be inferred from its hostile treatment of the Persian general Shahrbaraz, who not long after the siege had made a pact with Heraclius: Theodore Synkellos, *Homily on the Siege of Constantinople*, 37. For events between Shahrbaraz, Khusrow, and Heraclius in the immediate aftermath, see: Agapius, *Kitab al-'Unwan*, 2.2.461-2, and *Anonymous Chronicle to 1234*, 98.

the population of Constantinople were fighting against. According to both George and Theodore, the emperor is installed by God and defeats his enemies as a consequence of his manifold piety; either as a result of his own stratagems coming to fruition as a result of God's favour, or because he is able to call upon God or the Virgin to intervene.¹⁶ This close identification between Heraclius' faith and the ability of the empire to count on divine protection is not just a way for these writers to serve as imperial mouthpieces, emphasising the personal role of the (usurper) emperor in protecting the city and its people while on campaign, it hints at a general acceptance and recognition of the position of the emperor as a quasi-sacred figure as the ruler of the Romans. Or, to put it another way, ruler of the Christians.¹⁷

Another common feature is both writers' use of biblical allegory to set up a comparison between the success of the Romans in this struggle and the failure of the Israelites, or otherwise the Jews in general, to prevent similar catastrophes from happening. George, in the *Restitutio sanctae crucis*, makes reference to "false Israelites", exhorting them to abandon their faith since Heraclius and the Cross have been demonstrated to be so powerful and efficacious: the obvious implication being that the Romans are the 'true' Israelites, God's 'Chosen People'.¹⁸ This fact becomes clear later in the poem, when George set up another contrast between the powerlessness of the 'old'

¹⁶ See, for instance: George Pisides, *In Heraclium ex Africa redeuntem*, 8-13, and *Restitutio sanctae crucis*, 15-22; Theodore Synkellos, *Homily on the Siege of Constantinople*, 3, and 11-12.

¹⁷ The need for these writers to, occasionally, over-emphasise the importance of the emperor himself to the empire's success in order to shore up support for him personally in the capital is laid bare in the way in which Theodore in particular goes to great lengths to point out that it was in fact Heraclius guiding preparations in Constantinople via letter (despite the city being under siege by land and sea) and he who called upon the Virgin to save them all, see: Theodore Synkellos, *Homily*, 12 and, especially, 14 ["[Bonus] was urged on by fear of the powerful emperor and by his letters, which arrived ceaselessly from afar containing instructions; since even in his absence the struggle was conducted by the servant of God, the emperor, instructing his preparation and spurring on his most loyal watchman."].

¹⁸ George Pisides, *Restitutio sanctae crucis*, 15-24 ["παύσασθε λοιπὸν Ἰσραηλιταὶ νόθοι ἐκ τῆς παρ' ὑμῶν πατρικῆς ἀπιστίας."].

Ark of the Covenant and the 'new', Christian, one: the Cross that had not only returned from Persian captivity intact but had now set its enemies against each other.¹⁹

Theodore goes further, explicitly comparing Constantinople to Jerusalem and its people to the Jews, always pointing out the former's superiority over the latter by overcoming adversity thanks to God's favour and the piety of their ruler. Given these things, he asks, with full confidence: "How could our city not obtain divine help and a divine force greater than the other Jerusalem"?²⁰ Likewise, in a long excursus, he goes to great lengths to point out a cosmic alignment between the date of when the Avar-Persian siege was lifted and that of both Jerusalem's biblical destruction by Nebuchadnezzar II and its second destruction by Titus, recorded by Josephus.²¹ The critical point being that, while Jerusalem and the Jewish 'Chosen People' were destroyed and expelled, when the same time came for Constantinople and the Christians, they were rescued from by God and the Virgin, thereby demonstrating that they were unequivocally God's true 'Chosen People'. That this narrative encompassed a sense of Romanness and of belonging to a unified body politic, not just a common religious group, can be glimpsed both from it being the Roman emperor who takes such an outsized role in both writers' outlooks (the ostensible religious figurehead, Patriarch Sergios, does make brief appearances but is accorded nowhere near the same level of prominence as Heraclius) and from the looseness with which the terms 'Christian' and 'Roman' are bandied about and used interchangeably.

We have already seen how George achieved a link between these terms, but this also occurs in the *Homily*.²² For instance, while describing the circumstances in the lead

¹⁹ George Pisides, *Restitutio sanctae crucis*, 73-81.

²⁰ Theodore Synkellos, *Homily*, 3.

²¹ Theodore Synkellos, *Homily*, 28-31.

²² See n.6.

up to the siege, Theodore makes it clear that it is the eastern parts of the Roman empire that have been devastated by Khusrow, but that the Persian shahanshah owed his life to the mercy of the Christian emperor.²³ It is the Romans who took in the refugee ancestor of the Avar khagan and their folly results in great danger for the Roman empire. Both he and the Avars are presented as archetypal anti-Christians, in a manner which demonstrates the association between the two concepts of Roman political identity and Christianity in the minds of the Constantinopolitan populace.²⁴ The khagan is an abomination, Devil-spawn, “ὡσπερ τις ἀντίθεος” who sought “τὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ λαὸν ἄραι” and his people are said by the patriarch to have brought a horde of demons along with them.²⁵ The Avars are depicted as some kind of devouring swarm that had already converted land that was “once Roman” into “enemy territory” and was now seeking to destroy the capital of the Romans, ‘Jerusalem’, the inhabitants of which are the “people of God”.²⁶ This intermingling and interchanging of terms like ‘Roman’ and ‘Christian’ is perhaps not quite as explicit as George’s chiasmus, but the meaning is still clear, and would have been perfectly comprehensible to the homily’s audience: Roman and Christian together, inseparable and, to the daily lives of most, indistinguishable.

It is important to recognise that these two authors, although working in different media, must be viewed in relation to each other. Both were high-ranking officials in the imperial and ecclesiastical hierarchy of the capital, and both produced works that were delivered to audiences (either in the palace or in public), and those works were either directly commissioned by or dedicated to individuals closely associated with the emperor’s wartime regime, if not Heraclius himself.²⁷ A distinctive quality of the

²³ Theodore Synkellos, *Homily*, 7.

²⁴ Theodore Synkellos, *Homily*, 9.

²⁵ Theodore Synkellos, *Homily*, 8 [“like an anti-God [who sought] to eliminate the people of God”] and 15.

²⁶ Theodore Synkellos, *Homily*, 9-10.

²⁷ On the dedicatees for George Pisides’ poems, see: Whitby, ‘Defender of the Cross’, 251.

rhetoric put out by the regime during the wartime years of 602-28 has long been noted: namely the degree of congruence between elements of ‘secular’ political philosophy and Christian theology, especially regarding the military.²⁸ The emperor’s victories were attributed not so much to good strategy and leadership as to the support of Christ and the moral superiority of the Roman forces because of their Christian faith.²⁹

Whether such a shift in focus at the very apex of the empire resulted in a change in wider attitudes or a response to much broader socio-cultural shifts, or, more plausibly, developing as a natural extension of them is fairly peripheral to our objective — what is significant is the degree to which the close association of imperial political identity and Christian religious identity were seen as synonymous with and the defining quality of Roman group identity. That this view existed beyond the minds of imperial propagandists is borne out by the frequency with which it appears in other texts written in a Constantinopolitan milieu, as well as those far beyond the capital.

Our final purely ‘Constantinopolitan’ text is the *Histories*, written by Theophylact Simocatta sometime between the end of the Persian war in 628 and Heraclius’ death in 641. The work covers the period up to Maurice’s assassination in 602 and gives several insights into the mentalité which may have existed amongst elites in the capital with regards to their sense of Romanness. Our knowledge of Theophylact himself is fairly limited outside of what information he provides in the *Histories*. He appears to have been from a well-connected elite family and received a good education, to judge by the fact that he seems to have held the position of prefect of Constantinople for a time in the

²⁸ John Haldon, *Warfare, State, and Society in the Byzantine World* (London: UCL Press, 1999), 15-7; Yuri Stoyanov, *Defenders and Enemies of the True Cross: The Sasanian Conquest of Jerusalem in 614 and Byzantine Ideology of Anti-Persian Warfare* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2011), 45.

²⁹ Nadine Viermann, ‘Merging Supreme Commander and Holy Man: George of Pisidia’s Poetic Response to Heraclius’ Military Campaigns’, *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 70 (2020): 380-9.

620s and was a high-ranking official in the imperial bureaucracy in the 630s as well as the quality of his writing — which is the last in a tradition of self-consciously ‘classicising’ histories that would be produced in Byzantium for several centuries.³⁰ Importantly, at least for our purposes, he also seems to have originally hailed from outside of the capital, noting in a long aside about an apparition in the Nile that he ought to have an affinity for describing the river since he himself hailed from those parts.³¹ Whilst it is not possible to definitely place Simocatta’s birthplace in Egypt, he would seem to be a member of a cohort of provincial elites who found themselves in Constantinople, (in this case sometime around 610) and ended up becoming part of the metropolitan elite.³²

In this context, Simocatta is illustrative of how the high rhetoric of the imperial court regarding the connection between emperor, empire, and faith could be co-opted in a work not commissioned by the imperial government (so far as we can tell) and directed at an audience of similar elites in the capital and beyond. The best example of this ‘rubbing off’ of imperial rhetoric of group identity comes towards the end of the fourth book of the *Histories*, in the form of a sermon delivered by the bishop of Melitene, Domitianos, to commemorate the recapture of the city of Martyropolis (modern Silvan) from the Sasanians in the reign of Maurice. This sermon, delivered as a direct quotation, has long been recognised as unusual for its form and content and was likely inserted into the narrative by Simocatta to address contemporary concerns.³³ The homily

³⁰ Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses*, 143-4; Michael and Mary Whitby, ‘Introduction’, in Michael and Mary Whitby (eds.), *The History of Theophylact Simocatta: An English Translation with Introduction and Notes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), xxvii-viii.

³¹ Theophylact Simocatta, *Histories*, 7.16.10.

³² Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses*, 143.

³³ Joseph Frendo, ‘Three Authors in Search of a Reader: An approach to the analysis of direct discourse in Procopius, Agathias and Theophylact Simocatta’, in Claudia Sode and Sarolta Takács (eds.), *Novum Millennium: studies on Byzantine history and culture dedicated to Paul Speck*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 130; Michael Whitby and Mary Whitby, *The History of Theophylact Simocatta: an English translation with introduction and notes*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 130.

therefore closely parallels the rhetoric found in imperial propaganda from the 610s and 620s concerning the egregiousness of the Persian enemy, transplanting it several decades in the past. It also adopts the symbology of the Cross and Christ delivering victory to the imperial armies and, moreover, draws an implicit connection between the implicit status of Romans as also Christians in opposition to heathen barbarians: “the triumph is the Cross through which the barbarian is expelled and the Roman admitted.”³⁴ It is a testament, then, to the pervasiveness of the view amongst the imperial elite that Roman and Christian were categories existing in symbiosis with one another that this can be seen in both the ‘official’ propaganda pieces commissioned by the imperial government as well as in works like that of Simocatta; written by and for the same social stratum as the poems of Pisides, reflective of their own world-view and how they understood Roman group identity functioning at its most basic level as the relationship between political loyalty and Christian faith.

2.2: *The Monenergist-Monothelite Crisis*

Remaining in Constantinople and its environs, it shall suffice to outline a few more examples of the attitudes to Romanness, albeit moving slightly further away from the imperial court and its members. Our selection is primarily concerned with the convoluted issue of the so-called Monenergist/Monothelite crisis, which began to develop in earnest sometime after the end of the Persian war in 629 and largely ended (excepting for a brief resurgence under Philippikos, r. 711-13) with the rejection of the doctrine at the Sixth Ecumenical Council in 680/1. The motivation for the

³⁴ Theophylact Simocatta, *Histories*, 4.16.13-22.

Constantinopolitan church and the imperial government to develop the new doctrine was to create a compromise able to heal the schism which had begun following the Council of Chalcedon in 451, buoyed by the confidence borne from victory against the Persians.³⁵ There is voluminous literature on the shifting sands of monothelite doctrine from a theological perspective; more significant to our purposes is the political crisis which this theological dispute caused and the resulting light that this sheds on how contemporaries understood the relationship between the imperial edifice, especially the emperor, and the established church, and consequently on how the collective identity of those involved was impacted.

Central to the controversy's political dimension is the question of where authority resided in questions of doctrine, whether it lay primarily with the emperor or with the Church. This, in a sense, strikes at the heart of the issue of Roman identity, which operated intrinsically on the assumption of a correlation between the empire and the faith that had developed alongside it since Constantine. The assumption that the emperor, as the physical manifestation of the empire, could determine orthodox doctrine was a natural development from the belief that the empire and Christian community were coterminous – as the head of the Christian empire, did he not have the right make pronouncements on religious doctrine, as he has the right to change the empire's laws?³⁶ Questioning the legitimacy of imperial authority to make pronouncements on doctrinal matters therefore ran the risk of being interpreted as a challenge to the relationship between church and state and, if followed to conclusion, of disassociating the Christian faith and church from the empire entirely: a dangerous proposition. It is in this intellectual context that we must approach the charges levied

³⁵ See Phil Booth, *Crisis of Empire: Doctrine and Dissent at the End of Antiquity*, 232-9, as well as the more detailed discussion in the following chapter, 3.2.

³⁶ Shoemaker, *Apocalypse*, 42-3.

against and comments made by perhaps the most well-known (and well-documented) character in this dispute, Maximos the Confessor.

Producing a concise and accurate account of the life and career of Maximos is far from an easy task; not simply because of the number of events he wound up getting involved in, but because of the contradictory versions of his life preserved in the Greek and Syriac traditions. The former rests on a hagiographical account of his origins that dates from the tenth century.³⁷ Much closer in time to Maximos' own day, and nowadays accepted to be the more accurate in its basic facts, is a Syriac biography written by a 'Gregory of Resh'aina' sometime in the later seventh century.³⁸ According to this account, Maximos was born in a village called Hesfin, near Tiberias in Galilee. After being orphaned at the age of ten, Maximos was raised by the monks at the *Palaia Lavra* (St. Chariton, to the south-west of Jerusalem), where he gained the acquaintance and friendship of Sophronios, future patriarch of Jerusalem (634-38/9). Sophronios was the erstwhile disciple and travelling companion to John Moschos, and, as we shall see, an inveterate thorn in the side of those seeking ecclesiastical reconciliation.³⁹ Precisely when all this took place is unclear, although Allen has suggested a birthdate for Maximos around 579/80, placing him as being a monk at the *Palaia Lavra* in the early

³⁷ Pauline Allen, 'Life and Times of Maximus the Confessor', in Pauline Allen and Bronwen Neil (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 11; Christian Boudignon, 'Maxime le Confesseur était-il Constantinopolitain?', in Bart Janssens, Bram Roosen, and Peter van Deun (eds.), *Études de patristique grecque et textes byzantins offerts à Jacques Noret à l'occasion de ses soixante-cinq ans* (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 12.

³⁸ On the date of this *Life*, see: Sebastian Brock, 'An Early Syriac Life of Maximus the Confessor', *An.Boll.* 91 (1973): 300. On its accuracy: Marek Jankowiak and Phil Booth, 'A New Date-List of the Works of Maximus the Confessor', in Pauline Allen and Bronwen Neil (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 19; Stephen Shoemaker, *The Life of the Virgin — Maximus the Confessor* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 11.

³⁹ Gregory of Resh'aina, *Life of Maximos*, 3-7 [= Brock, 'An Early Syriac Life', 314-5]; Shoemaker, *Life of the Virgin*, 10.

600s.⁴⁰ The *Life* then jumps ahead some three decades to the calling of a synod by the bishop of Cyprus, Arkadios, concerning the new doctrine of monenergism/monotheletism.⁴¹

As to what Maximos did during these years, it is uncertain, although it seems likely that he may have spent some time in Alexandria (where Moschos and Sophronios had fled to escape the Persian invasion in c.610), given his extensive contacts in that city.⁴² What is certain is that, by at least 632, Maximos was in the province of Africa, becoming permanently established there in 641 after the Arab conquests of Syria-Palestine and Egypt.⁴³ As a long-time friend and associate of Sophronios, it is not surprising that Maximos himself became closely involved with the theological debate surrounding monothelism as a staunch opponent to the new imperial dispensation. After defeating the disgraced former Constantinopolitan patriarch Pyrrhos in a public debate at Carthage in 645, Maximos went on to be one of the main instigators and organisers of the Lateran Council of 649 — a synod which anathematised Pyrrhos, his predecessor Sergios, the then-patriarch Paul, along with the *Ekthesis* issued by Heraclius in 638 and the *Typos* issued by patriarch Paul and signed by Constans II in 648.⁴⁴ In response to this council, as well as accusations of collusion with a rebellion led by the exarch of Africa, Gregory, the year before (among other charges), Maximos was arrested — likely at around the same time as Pope Martin, who had presided over the Lateran Council, in June 653 — and brought to Constantinople to stand trial in 655.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Allen, 'Life and Times', 14.

⁴¹ Gregory of Resh'aina, *Life of Maximos*, 8 [= Brock, 'An Early Syriac Life', 315].

⁴² Jankowiak and Booth, 'A New Date-List', 20.

⁴³ Jankowiak and Booth, 'A New Date-List', 21.

⁴⁴ Theoph. *Chronographia*, AM6121.330-32; Jankowiak and Booth, 'A New Date-List', 21.

⁴⁵ Booth, *Crisis of Empire*, 280-89.

It is thanks to a text known as the *Relatio Motionis* that we have a reasonably comprehensive account of Maximos' 655 trial. The *Relatio* purports to be an eyewitness account of the trial and was likely compiled not long after its conclusion; although its ultimate trustworthiness to deliver an unfiltered record must inevitably be questioned given the fact that it was produced by a pro-Maximos partisan (perhaps even Maximos himself) and that our earliest version comes in the form of a Latin translation produced by Anastasius Bibliothecarius in the early ninth century.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, it is the best window we possess for examining exactly what was at stake for the participants in the dispute. That the relationship between empire, emperor, and faith was central to the trial is apparent from the very first accusation levied against Maximos, in which the imperial sakellarios asks him outright "Χριστιανὸς εἶ;" , the Maximos' affirmative is followed up with the somewhat rhetorical "Καὶ πῶς [...] εἴπερ Χριστιανὸς εἶ, μισεῖς τὸν βασιλέα;".⁴⁷ Later on it is claimed that one of Maximos' close disciples, Anastasius, had said that the emperor ought not to be considered a priest. Maximos' statement that the emperor was not a priest was met with exclamations by the assembled officials, shouting that he had split the church through such pronouncements and that he should be killed for them.⁴⁸

Even after the conclusion of the first trial and Maximos' exile, the issue remained live. The *patrikios* Troilos opened his discussion with Maximos by asking for his unequivocal acceptance of the emperor's commandment, even without knowing what the command was.⁴⁹ What is particularly noteworthy about Maximos' trial, and which

⁴⁶ Pauline Allen and Bronwen Neil, *Scripta saeculi VII Vitam Maximi Confessoris illustrantia*, (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), xxiv; Allen, 'Life and Times', 12; Jankowiak and Booth, 'A New Date-List', 72.

⁴⁷ *Relatio Motionis*, 1 ["Are you a Christian?" and "And how ... if indeed you are Christian, can you hate the emperor?"].

⁴⁸ *Relatio Motionis*, 4.

⁴⁹ *Disputatio inter Maximum et Theodosium*, 10.

has been commented on elsewhere, is the fact that despite being bundled up amidst the doctrinal controversy of monothelism, theological issues hardly feature among the accusations (a feature shared with the trial of Pope Martin which took place two years earlier). Those that do feature are broadly political in nature, with the question of the limits of imperial authority being one of the most prominent.⁵⁰ Maximos' responses to the questioning of the officials, and the absurdist way in which they and their reactions are characterised in the texts, points to an unbridgeable dissonance in the reasoning of the two parties. For the pro-monothelites, Maximos' intransigence and rejection of imperial doctrine and authority was evidence that he was actively working against the interests of the empire. The fact that the assumption that he 'hated' the emperor led to him *a priori* not being a Christian demonstrates the power of the idea that the empire and the faith were inextricably linked and that a denial of one was a denial of the other.

This attitude is summed up succinctly in a passage from the *Breviarium* of Patriarch Nikephoros I, which, although compiled in the late-eighth century, likely drew here on material from seventh-century koine continuation (or possible continuation of a continuation) of the chronicle of John of Antioch:

After assembling all the members of the Senate and the remaining people of the city together with their bishop, Sergios, Heraclius is reported to have asked them: 'When a man insults an emperor, whom does he offend?' They answered, 'He offends God, who has appointed the emperor.'⁵¹

⁵⁰ Booth, *Crisis*, 304; John Haldon, 'Ideology and the Byzantine State in the Seventh Century. The "Trial" of Maximus the Confessor', in Vladimír Vavřínek (ed.), *From Late Antiquity to Early Byzantium: Proceedings of the Byzantinological Symposium in the 16th International Eirene Conference*, (Prague: Academia, 1985), 89.

⁵¹ Nikephoros, *Breviarium*, 2.32-36. On the sources for this section of Nikephoros, see: Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses*, 248; Cyril Mango, *Nikephoros Patriarch of Constantinople Short History*, (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1990), 12-14.

Maximos and his supporters, on the contrary, evidently saw no difficulty in diminishing the role of the emperor in the Church whilst maintaining their Christian faith, their loyalty to the empire, and to its ruler. It is not so much that the anti-monothelite party actively disassociated the Christian faith from the Roman empire, which is how they appear to have been characterised, but that they did not see themselves as acting in opposition to the empire at all. Rather, they perceived their actions as strengthening the faith and, by extension, the empire by putting control over doctrine in the hands of clerics alone.

The position of Maximos and his followers advocated a return to the pre-monothelite status quo and resistance to current imperial doctrine as a way of strengthening the Christian faith and the empire, but did not disavow imperial authority *per se*. It comes to the fore in the letters of two other prominent figures in the controversy. The earlier of these is the synodical letter written by the newly enthroned patriarch of Jerusalem, Sophronios, and sent to Patriarch Sergios of Constantinople in 634.⁵² The letter was in fact rejected by Sergios for containing an exposition of Sophronios' dyothelite beliefs.⁵³ Despite his obvious doctrinal opposition, Sophronios nevertheless exhorted the patriarch to petition God to support the emperors so that God would grant them long reigns, military victories, and the accession of their children to the imperial office, amongst other things.⁵⁴

Sophronios' ambiguous position concerning the relationship between empire and faith, as well as his aforementioned dyothelite stance, makes his continued wish for

⁵² On Sophronios' chronology and the date of the synodical letter: Booth, *Crisis*, 232; Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 1997).

⁵³ Averil Cameron, 'The Cost of Orthodoxy', *Church History and Religious Culture* 93.3 (2013): 347-8.

⁵⁴ Sophronios, *Synodical Letter*, 2.7.3.

the health and strength of Heraclius and Constantine just a bit questionable as to its sincerity. That these wishes were not simply a *pro forma* inclusion in an official letter is borne out by Sophronios continuing, in typically purple prose, that he hopes the patriarch's prayers would allow the emperors to defeat and humble the Saracens, who "have now unexpectedly risen up against us, and are carrying off everything as booty with cruel and savage intent and impious and godless daring".⁵⁵ He goes on to hope that the intercession of Christ will deliver them "as a footstool to our God-given rulers" so that the people of the empire, "fortified by their puissant authority", "may themselves enjoy good days once more"; displaying all the classic signs of close association between imperial authority and Christian spiritual power.⁵⁶ Given that of Saracen attacks in the region around Jerusalem were an issue of particular personal importance to Sophronios at the time that the letter was composed — mentioned in both his prologue to John Moschos' *Spiritual Meadow*, written immediately prior to taking up the patriarchal seat, and his Nativity sermon in December 634 — it is safe to assume that his desire for God's continued support for the empire, as expressed in the letter, was genuine.⁵⁷

Our second letter is the personal message sent from Pope Martin to the emperor Constans II as part of the encyclicals produced at the conclusion of the anti-monothelite Lateran Council in 649. This letter, written in the context of increasingly strained relations between Rome and Constantinople as a result of the controversy, goes to great lengths to exculpate the emperor from being directly implicated in the monothelite doctrine, arguing that both he and his grandfather, Heraclius, had been duped by

⁵⁵ Sophronios, *Synodical Letter*, 2.7.3.

⁵⁶ Sophronios, *Synodical Letter*, 2.7.3.

⁵⁷ John Moschos, *Pratum Spirituale*, Pr.53-57 ["After he had sailed down to Ascalon and learned that he was unable to go to the holy mountain of Sinai on account of the tyrannical insurrection of those called 'Agarenes', he took the remains of the blessed John [Moschos] and came to Jerusalem at the beginning of the eighth indiction"] [= Hermann Usener, *Sonderbare Heilige. Texte und Untersuchungen I: Der Heilige Tychon* (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1907), 91-3]; Sophronios, *Homily on the Nativity*, 10.

heretical clergy into signing documents perceived by the council to support monothelitism: the *Ekthesis*, in the case of Heraclius, and the *Typos*, in that of Constans.⁵⁸ The letter also echoes the sentiments of Sophronios' message fifteen years prior, once again associating renewed imperial piety with the destruction of the empire's worldly enemies, noting explicitly that "it is always the case that the preservation of the state goes together with the flourishing of the orthodox faith". Unlike with Sophronios, however, the promise of victory is here directly linked to the renunciation of monothelitism.⁵⁹

This position, criticising the doctrine adopted by the Constantinopolitan church and the imperial government while simultaneously whitewashing the role of the emperor in the dispute, appears multiple times in the *Acts* of the Lateran Council. Most importantly in canon 18, which anathematised the architects of monothelitism, and towards the end of the Council's encyclical letter.⁶⁰ The main actors of the anti-monothelite movement can thus all be seen promoting very similar notions regarding the relationship between the empire and Christian doctrine. They continued to possess a world-view common to the elite in the capital which understood an intrinsic connection between Christian faith and Roman empire, with the fortunes of one inextricably tied to the other and the support of God imperative for imperial rule and success. Where they differ from their opponents was in the proper role of the emperor in doctrinal issues, advocating that only clergy had the authority to pronounce on these matters. Yet, even in this, they were unwilling to completely cut the emperor out of the picture. While the convocation of a church council without imperial approval, like that of 649, could be perceived as a direct challenge to imperial authority (to judge by the

⁵⁸ *Acts of the Lateran Synod of 649*, 141.

⁵⁹ *Acts of the Lateran Synod of 649*, 145.

⁶⁰ *Acts of the Lateran Synod of 649*, 379-84, and 408.

swift arrest of both Martin and Maximos that is indeed how it appeared to Constans II), the implication of the Council's *Acts* seems to be that it would eventually receive the imperial seal of approval as a *de facto* ecumenical council. Indeed, the council's organisation and the later discussions with Maximos all suggest as much.⁶¹

This was, after all, the thrust of Martin's letter to the emperor; that, even if he ought not to have the power to make pronouncements on doctrinal matters, it was of vital importance for the empire that the emperor support those made by the ecclesiastical establishment. For the dyothelites, the preservation of the Christian faith was contingent on the success of the empire, which in turn depended on adherence to the correct forms of belief. Far from being a fifth column in the way Maximos and Martin were presented at their trials, as Christians and Romans, it was imperative that they save the imperial state from itself: opposing its doctrinal position while having a vested interest in seeing it brought back in line with one's own definition of orthodoxy as the way of achieving Christian dominion. It was, in a way, not at all dissimilar to the position of some miaphysites in the empire in the same period.⁶² Disagreement with the Christological position adopted by the imperial state and church, however vehemently, was one thing; disavowing one's identification with it was quite another.

Before we move our discussion away from the monothelite controversy, it is worth mentioning that the way that this supposedly universal Christian dilemma, cloaked in rhetoric which makes it appear an issue of vital importance to the wellbeing of all Christians, was in fact an issue that was only of particular importance to only a small number of people in the empire. The conceit inherent in the presentation of the

⁶¹ Catherine Cubitt, 'The Lateran Council of 649 as an Ecumenical Council', in Richard Price and Mary Whitby (eds.), *Chalcedon in Context: Church Councils 400-700*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009), 139-40.

⁶² See the discussion in section 3.1.

monothelite controversy as an ecumenical problem is indicative of the way individuals operating within the intellectual world of the empire tended to conflate the idea of the political Roman state with the Christian faith. The geographical distribution of the bishops and other clerics who took part in the Lateran Council makes plain the fairly restricted scope of the debate at the council, with almost all of the signatories presiding over bishoprics in Italy and the supporting statements coming from parties that were either closely connected to the same cultural milieu as Sophronios and Maximos (the exiled 'Greek' monks in Rome, Stephen of Dora, and archbishop Sergios of Cyprus) or, in the case of the African bishops, had been drawn into the debate thanks to Maximos' agitations.⁶³ The nature of the council and the close relationships between its main actors has led to it being characterised as a stage-managed undertaking by Maximos and his followers, with the *Acts* a carefully constructed account of the synod intended to wield the maximum amount of influence through the position of Rome as primate see; a point that is repeatedly stressed throughout the *Acts*.⁶⁴ As a result, the claim made in Martin's opening address that the actions of Sergios and his successors had "caused alarm to almost the entire world" and that "a great number of orthodox in various places felt compelled to present pleas or charges against them to our apostolic see" boils down to a gathering of Italian bishops (albeit a reasonably large one) and a handful of supporting documents, each with appreciable connections to the convenors.⁶⁵ For a council with ecumenical aspirations, it could hardly be said to have been representative of the Christian *oikoumene*. The most striking omission is the total lack of representation from southern Gaul or Visigothic Spain, where Esders has shown that

⁶³ Richard Price, Phil Booth, and Catherine Cubitt, *The Acts of the Lateran Synod of 649* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014), 69-70.

⁶⁴ Booth, *Crisis*, 280; Cubitt, 'Lateran Council', 140; Price, Booth, and Cubitt, *Acts*, 76.

⁶⁵ *Acts of the Lateran Synod of 649*, 1.20.

the monothelite controversy and its significance for the division between secular power of the monarch and ecclesiastical authority of the clergy was an issue of great importance to bishops there.⁶⁶

Indeed, at the Seventh Council of Toledo, held in 646, three years before the Lateran Council, the Visigothic bishops had made an injunction against clergy being forced to accept the doctrines of secular rulers when those were thought to be heretical, likely as a response to circumstances in Byzantium at the time.⁶⁷ It is known that the *Acts* were circulated to western bishops and monarchs, with an encyclical being sent to bishop Amandus of Maastricht for distribution to the Merovingian kings.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, this does not excuse the absence of western representation at the council itself, particularly since considerable lengths were taken at the Sixth Ecumenical Council to ensure precisely that and prior to which Pope Agatho had held a council at Rome with representatives from Francia and England to formulate and present a unified western position at the main council later that year.⁶⁹ The lack of representation from Christian communities beyond the bounds of Roman imperial authority seems not to have troubled the organisers of the Council and did nothing to allay the conceit of this being an ‘ecumenical’ exercise. For those living in it, the empire was the Christian community and its ruler the God-ordained commander of the Christians, making heresy in Constantinople, by definition, an ecumenical matter — regardless of whether people in the West knew or cared about it.

⁶⁶ Stefan Esders, ‘Chindasvinth, the ‘Gothic disease’, and the Monothelite crisis’, *Millennium* 16.1 (2019): 175-212.

⁶⁷ Esders, ‘Chindasvinth’, 187-8.

⁶⁸ Price, Booth, and Cubitt, *Acts*, 78-9.

⁶⁹ Price, Booth, and Cubitt, *Acts*, 71-2.

2.3: *A Tale of Three Cities*

Hitherto, our discussion has largely been focused on texts either produced in Constantinople itself, or involving people closely connected to the upper echelons of the imperial elite. That such individuals should be involved with and sometimes actively promote the potent matrix of political and religious loyalties that made up the discourse around Romanness is unsurprising, given that they were often directly involved with the institutional mechanisms that relied on and existed to perpetuate it. Indeed, simply living in Constantinople could have left one in no doubt as to the importance of the twin pillars of church and empire in controlling and shaping the world around you, given the city's concentration of imperial monuments, religious foundations, elite mansions, processions (political, religious, or both), and even government-sponsored shipping and food-distribution. In much the same way that even the modern visitor to the centre of Istanbul cannot escape the legacy of Ottoman imperial power, a visitor or resident of Byzantine Constantinople would have been unable to avoid the influence of the empire that was governed from the city. If the acceptance of Roman identity among the imperial elite and the population of the capital is expected, the same cannot be said for the rest of the empire. Moving forward, we will concentrate on provincial texts that can offer us a glimpse at the worldview of those whose connection to and identification with the empire was less obvious, but no less powerful. In doing so, we will also examine some of the mechanisms by which Roman identity percolated down through the social strata and away from the imperial centre.

The *Life of Theodore of Sykeon* is widely recognised by Byzantinists as perhaps the foremost source for attitudes in the rural landscape of central Anatolia in the late sixth

and seventh centuries. The star of the narrative, the eponymous St. Theodore, hailed from the region of Galatia and spends much of the *Life* travelling around the villages in the vicinity of the monastery he founded at Sykeon, performing miracles and exorcising demons from both people and objects, receiving visitors at the monastery, and making occasional journeys to Constantinople and elsewhere before his death in 613. The *Life* claims to have been written by one of Theodore's disciples, originally called Eleusios but rechristened George by Theodore, and was completed sometime after 641, to judge by Theodore's *vaticinium ex eventu* on the length of Heraclius' reign.⁷⁰ The complex way the *Life* was compiled, with parts of it apparently written contemporary to events and the rest edited together from the personal recollections of George and the other monks at Sykeon, makes giving a precise historical context for specific passages quite difficult — save for the fact that they likely all pass through the filter of the events of Heraclius' reign.⁷¹

One of the more remarkable aspects of the *Life* is the way it manages to encapsulate a view of a holistic Roman world whilst remaining focused on central Anatolia. Theodore manages to make three pilgrimages to Jerusalem, becomes a personal acquaintance of three patriarchs of Constantinople (Cyriacus, Thomas, and Sergios), and three emperors (Maurice, Phokas, and Heraclius), amongst other prominent personages. This connectivity between the *Life* and wider historical processes is part of the reason it is so well-known to contemporary historians, but it also raises questions as to whom the intended audience of the text was and, consequently, the degree to which any attitudes expressed in it can be ascribed to the

⁷⁰ *Life of Theodore of Sykeon*, 29.166.

⁷¹ Derek Baker, 'Theodore of Sykeon and the historians', *Studies in Church History* 13 (1976): 90; Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses*, 149-50.

social context of seventh-century Anatolia. Is the *Life* an artefact of the provinces, or another Constantinopolitan production?

The spectre of later interpolation into the *Life* (the only full version of which comes from an eleventh-century menologion) was raised by Baker not long after the appearance of Festugière's modern edition of the text. He noted the absence of most of the details in the second half of the *Life* from Nikephoros the Skeuophylax's *Encomium on Theodore of Sykeon* (written c.850-950) — precisely the section which contains most of the references to events in the wider empire and all of Theodore's encounters with imperial personages, with the exception of a visit to the monastery by the soon-to-be emperor Maurice.⁷² The chronological gap between the text's composition and the earliest manuscript tradition precludes any definitive answer as to whether much of the material which makes the *Life* significant to our purposes is a later addition, but an analysis of the contents on historical grounds would seem to suggest that much of the text is indeed as it was originally compiled by George.

The main problem with the hypothesis that the material from the second half of the *Life* is a later addition is that there would seem to be little to gain from adding any of it to the existing text. In addition to the chapters devoted to Theodore's relations with patriarchs, emperors, and the like, the supposedly 'missing' material deals with standard miracles and ascetic practices. Their omission would do little to harm Theodore's status as a thaumaturge and their inclusion in the original text seems to be entirely in-keeping with George having accumulated various miracle-tales from the monks at Sykeon over the years and then worked them into a coherent whole.

⁷² Baker, 'Theodore of Sykeon', 93-4.

Moreover, certain features of the second half of the *Life* would seem to make more sense if they were to be omitted in later versions, rather than added in.

While Theodore has an ambivalent relationship with the emperor Phokas, the same cannot be said for his nephew, Domentziolos, nor the newly enthroned patriarch Sergios. In the case of the former, Theodore is presented as having an especially close relationship. He repeatedly offers him blessings and intercedes to prevent his execution after the fall of the Phokas regime. The latter, meanwhile, is predicted by Theodore to have “a long and fine episcopate”.⁷³ Given both the hostility generally shown in Byzantine historiography towards Phokas, a “Calydonian ... mongrel barbarian tyrant” according to Simocatta, and Sergios’ anathematisation by the Sixth Ecumenical Council in 681, it would in fact seem rather prudent for sections of the second half of the *Life* to have been strategically cut and thus unlikely that they would have been added in.⁷⁴ In fact, if one accepts that Nikephoros Skeuophylax’s encomium was commissioned by a patriarch of Constantinople and was intended to bolster the iconodule credentials of the monastery to which Theodore’s relics had been translated (by Heraclius), then avoiding any association of the saint with unsavoury characters and heretics becomes all the more important: and thus it is more likely that the Skeuophylax chose to omit these sections of the *Life* or was using a version of the text from which they had already been removed, rather than them having been added later.⁷⁵

The failure of the *Life* to so much as hint at the translation of Theodore’s relics from Sykeon to Constantinople, our only information for which comes from the

⁷³ *Life of Theodore of Sykeon*, 22.120 [Domentziolos], 23.133 [Phokas], 136 [Sergios], and 27.152 [Domentziolos’ trial].

⁷⁴ Theophylact Simocatta, *Histories*, 8.10.4-5.

⁷⁵ Dirk Krausmüller, ‘Metaphrasis after the second iconoclasm; Nicephorus Skeuophylax and his Encomia of Theophanes Confessor (BHG 1790), Theodore of Sykeon (BHG 1749), and George the Martyr (BHG 682)’, *Symbolae Osloenses* 78.1 (2003): 51-2.

Encomium, is another point against assuming substantial later additions to the text, since such imperial support would be an obvious thing for a later redactor to include. That very imperial interest in Theodore, as well as his unusually prominent connections, makes it tempting to posit some kind of link between the translation of the relics and the commissioning of the *Life*, but again, its absence from any extant version of the text wards against this — to say nothing of the *Life*'s sympathetic treatment of the family of Phokas making it less-than-ideal as a Heraclian commission. Thus, as it stands, the *Life* of Theodore of Sykeon occupies the unusual position of being a parochial text produced by and for the benefit of the monks of Sykeon, yet which manages to tap into much wider historical processes and give us a perspective on them from the position of central Anatolia. Despite the connections to multiple emperors and patriarchs, and notwithstanding Heraclius' interest in the relics, both the *Life* and Theodore's cult seem to have had limited reach. Those imperial connections seem to genuinely be more by chance than design: brought about by Theodore's reputation while living and facilitated by Sykeon's location on a major military highway during a time of repeated campaigns in the east.⁷⁶

Having dealt with the question of the *Life*'s usefulness as a window onto provincial perceptions of Romanness, it is possible to move on to the aspects of Romanness that it illuminates. One of the more prominent elements of the *Life*, and one which has already been touched upon, is the way in which it gives the impression of the empire functioning as a unified cultural zone as well as political entity. Theodore ends up travelling to Jerusalem on three separate occasions, at one point spending some time at Mar Saba in the Palestinian desert, where one of the monks from Sykeon, Evagrius,

⁷⁶ David Barchard, 'Sykeon rediscovered? A site at Kiliseler near Beypazarı', *Anatolian Studies* 53.1 (2003): 175-6.

also settles. Even further afield, one of the Sykeon monks, named Elpidius, becomes a hesychast in Sinai.⁷⁷ Each of these places, difficult and dangerous as the journey to them must have been, are mentioned without much fanfare whatsoever — the idea that a monk might travel from central Anatolia to Egypt or Palestine seems to be an entirely normal proposition. In a sense, the view of the empire given in the *Life* is similar to that great compendium of apophthegmata, John Moschos' *Spiritual Meadow* — which also happens to be contemporary to Theodore's lifetime, if not necessarily his *vita*. In both, travel between the various settlements and monastic foundations of the empire (at least those outside the Balkans) appears to have been routine. In Moschos' work, we encounter a cast of characters whose origins range across the full span of the then-empire, from Rome and Africa to Thessaloniki and Constantinople, to Cilicia, Syria, and Egypt.⁷⁸ Of course, the range of locations in the *Life* is substantially more restricted, being concerned with one man and one monastery rather than a collection of tales from several of each. Nevertheless, a hint at this same expansive world appears in the guise of a visitor to Sykeon: a wizened old man called Antiochus, said to be originally from Africa, who stays at the monastery while travelling from Constantinople back to a village that had been pillaged by barbarians, suggesting a location quite far to the east of Galatia given the setting during the period of peace prior to Khusrow's invasion.⁷⁹ In this short encounter we find Africa, Constantinople, and the eastern fringes of the empire all meeting at a monastery in Galatia, covering almost the entire breadth of the empire at the turn of the seventh century.

This view of the empire as a holistic entity, from the perspective of a monastic community in central Anatolia, becomes keener still in the face of the Sasanian invasion

⁷⁷ *Life of Theodore of Sykeon*, 9.47.11-20, 9.49.10-22, 15.62.1-7, 15.63.1-7.

⁷⁸ John Moschos, *Pratum Spirituale*, 3, 43, 101, 108, 110, and 173.

⁷⁹ *Life of Theodore of Sykeon*, 17.73.1-18.

and manifests as an unusually direct claim of collective ownership of the empire's territories. This occurs during Theodore's first encounter with Domentziolos, not long after Maurice's assassination in 602. Domentziolos is described as having been given command of the army in the east by the emperor to "ἀντιπαρατάξασθαι τῷ τῶν Περσῶν ἔθνει ἐπιβαίνοντι καὶ πραιδεύοντι τὰς ἡμετέρας χώρας".⁸⁰ The explicit reference to the territories being invaded by the Persians as "our lands" is then followed up later in the same section by Domentziolos being forced to flee "ἐπὶ τὰ Ῥωμαίων": that is, to those (lands) still under the control of the Romans, 'our' land from the perspective of George writing in Sykeon. The nature of the text's composition makes it difficult to work out exactly what lands the Persians had invaded. But, if we assume contemporaneity between the passage and events in the *Life*, then the invaded territories at this stage of the war would have been largely restricted to the frontier zone between the two empires.⁸¹ If George's mindset was more reflective of events closer to his own present, then "our lands" could mean anything up to Constantinople itself. The ambiguity is perhaps intentional: "our lands" constitutes whatever the individual wants it to mean, the key thing is that the first-person element refers to the Romans as a distinct group to which George and his fellow Sykeote monks belonged.

As well as giving us a sense of a unified territorial state to which the monks of Sykeon claimed allegiance to, the *Life* also corroborates what our more elite-focused sources present regarding the intrinsic qualities of the people belonging to that state. The most immediate example of this comes in the form of a prophecy delivered by Theodore to the patriarch Thomas by way of an explanation for the trembling of the

⁸⁰ *Life of Theodore of Sykeon*, 22.120.2-6 ["[Domentziolos was sent] to face off against the nation of the Persians who had invaded and plundered our lands"].

⁸¹ For a detailed analysis of the progress of the conflict at this stage, see: James Howard-Johnston, *The Last Great War of Antiquity*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 22-28.

processional crosses in the towns and villages around Sykeon. Quite what the prophecy foretells is not entirely clear. Being not long before the coup that deposed Phokas, the “host of troubles and dangers for us” that it predicts could easily refer to either the rapid deterioration in the empire’s position in the war against Persia that would soon take place, or it could refer even further in the future to the Arab invasions, or perhaps a mixture of both.⁸²

The apocalyptic nature of the prophecy, predicting the “overthrow and disorder of the empire” amongst other things, taps into an undercurrent of eschatological thinking that took as a given the belief that the Romans were God’s particular people on earth and their empire the ultimate symbol of Christian triumph over the forces of the heretics and heathens.⁸³ These eschatologies tap into the fusion of religious and political power inherent in the ideology of the empire and the identity which bound the population to it, which finds its clearest expression in the belief that the fate of the empire was bound up with the fate of Christian people and vice versa.

In the case of Theodore’s prophecy, this comes in the form of a various distinct elements which together express a vision of Christian Roman empire and people:

‘[ὁ τῶν σταυρίων σεισμὸς σημαίνει] ταλαντισμὸν τῆς πίστεως ἡμῶν καὶ ἀποστασίαν [...] καὶ βαρβαρικῶν πολλῶν ἐθνῶν ἐφόδους [...] καὶ φθορὰν καὶ αἰχμαλωσίαν κοσμικὴν καὶ ἐρήμωσιν τῶν ἁγίων ἐκκλησιῶν, καὶ κατάπαυσιν τῆς θείας δοξολογίας, καὶ τῆς βασιλείας πῶσιν καὶ ἀκαταστασίαν, καὶ πολλὴν τῆς πολιτείας ἀπορίαν καὶ περίστασιν’.⁸⁴

⁸² *Life of Theodore of Sykeon*, 23.134.

⁸³ Gerrit Reinink, ‘Heraclius, the New Alexander. Apocalyptic Prophecies during the Reign of Heraclius’, in Gerrit Reinink and Bernard Stolte (eds.), *The Reign of Heraclius (610-641): Crisis and Confrontation*, (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 82; Shoemaker, *Apocalypse*, 75-6; Stoyanov, *Defenders and Enemies*, 59.

⁸⁴ *Life of Theodore of Sykeon*, 23.134.22-29 [“[the shaking of the crosses signals] a fluctuation of our faith and apostasy ... and incursions of many barbarian peoples ... and destruction and enslavement of the world, desolation of the holy churches, cessation of the sacred prayer, overthrow and disorder of the empire, and much anxiety and misfortune for the state”].

Here we find a nexus of several assumptions made by Theodore/George and, one can assume, others in the monastery. The wavering of the Christian faith, invasion by barbarians, and the overthrow of the empire are all intimately connected to and follow on from each other. It may seem a straightforward observation, but there is really nothing inherent that connects difficulties for the Christian faith with concomitant problems in the imperial state. What makes the connection seem so natural to us, as to the Romans themselves, is the *longue durée* development of a group identity tied to a particular ideology which presented the two as inseparable. Eschatologies, which tend to be both the products of periods of crisis and to ‘manufacture’ their own imagined or predicted crises, are a particularly useful tool in highlighting such assumptions that would otherwise remain latent — and this is far from the last such text we will encounter.

The ‘apocalypse’ of Theodore of Sykeon may be more a throwaway comment in comparison to its much longer and influential counterparts, but it is a useful indicator of the degree to which such attitudes had penetrated the society of what would soon become the heartland of the much-reduced empire. What is also striking about this eschatological excursus is the terminology it uses to refer to the empire. As well as the usual ‘βασιλεία’, defined broadly as “that which is ruled over by a king/emperor” (‘βασιλεὺς’), the choice of the term ‘πολιτεία’ is noteworthy due to its particular connotations of a definable group of people with a collective political identity, as opposed to merely subjects of a monarch’s authority as the former term suggests. It is, in a way, a subtle expression of the idea of collective identity being tied to the political entity that one is a member of, rather than just which ruler you have fealty towards. This is an important point to stress, since it is one of only a handful of occasions when a specifically ‘secular’, political aspect to Romanness is isolated from the Christianising

element which so often overrides it, although even here the two are never far apart — it is also an element which comes into play in our next ‘provincial’ text, the *Miracles of St. Demetrios*.

Like Theodore of Sykeon’s *Life*, and indeed most texts, the *Miracles of St. Demetrios* has a relatively complex compositional history. Thanks to the work of Paul Lemerle, the *Miracles* can be divided up into two distinct collections. The first was written by John, metropolitan of Thessaloniki, at some point between the accession of Heraclius in 610 and 649, when a letter of Pope Martin confirms the occupant of the see was a monothelite called Paul; although the real *terminus ante quem* seems more likely to be around 622, when John appears as a character in the second miracle collection during the Avar siege of the city in that year, a major event that does not make it into his own collection.⁸⁵ Despite dating from Heraclius’ reign, they are largely set several decades before their composition and clearly drew upon material from John’s predecessor in the post, Eusebios.⁸⁶ They are thus more an artefact of the late-sixth century with some inevitable colouration from the first quarter of the seventh, rather than an *ex nihilo* creation of the Heraclian period and, more than likely, all date from before the beginning of the Arab invasions in c. 634.

The dating and composition of the second collection of miracles is more complex. Its author is anonymous, which does not help matters, and was divided by Lemerle into three sections with different origins. Of the six miracles in the second collection, the first three are set during the time of metropolitan John and likely depend on documents from his tenure, the fourth and fifth cover events in the 670s and were written sometime

⁸⁵ Lemerle, *Les plus anciens recueils*, II, 28. Letter of Pope Martin to Paul of Thessaloniki = Mansi, 10.843-9.

⁸⁶ Lemerle, *Les plus anciens recueils*, II, 27-8 and 83.

later – drawing the author’s own eyewitness testimony.⁸⁷ The sixth miracle is the odd one out. It was surmised by Lemerle, based on the textual discrepancies between it and the rest of the collection, that it had a different author and had been appended to the collection later — something that has now been corroborated by manuscript evidence showing its independent transmission in the ninth century.⁸⁸ It is the distinction between the ‘Johannine’ miracle stories and the two miracles from the 670s that will occupy our discussion here.

The first collection of *Miracles* offers a neat comparison with the *Life of Theodore of Sykeon* as both concern themselves with events at roughly the same time (coinciding with the reigns of Maurice, Phokas, and the first half of Heraclius’) and both present strikingly similar visions of a community of Romans organised around a collective identity. Like the *Life of Theodore*, the *Miracles* project an image of a unified and homogenous Roman world with easy communications between the various regions and cities under imperial control: Thessaloniki itself may be beset by barbarian peoples, but it is unequivocally part of a much wider community of Christians bound together by a common political identity. In the tenth miracle we are told that, after the death of the emperor Maurice, the devil

ψύξας τὴν ἀγάπην καὶ μισαλληλίαν ἐνσπείρας κατὰ τὴν ἀνατολὴν πᾶσαν καὶ Κιλικίαν καὶ Ἀσίαν καὶ Παλαιστίνην, καὶ πάσας τὰς ἀμφὶ τὰ ἐκεῖσε μέρη πατρίδας, ἕως καὶ αὐτῆς τῆς βασιλίδος τῶν πόλεων.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Lemerle, *Les plus anciens recueils*, II, 172.

⁸⁸ Marina Detoraki-Flusin, ‘Les collections de miracles: Histoire du texte et histoire du culte: a propos des Miracles des Saints Cyr et Jean par Sophrone de Jérusalem’, *TM* 23.1 (2019): 251; Lemerle, *Les plus anciens recueils*, II, 163-4.

⁸⁹ *Miracles of St Demetrios*, 1.10.82 [“the Devil, having extinguished goodwill and sown hatred for one another throughout all the east, Cilicia, Asia, Palestine, and all the homelands around those parts as far as the Queen of Cities itself”].

This caused revolts in all these places. This not only shows an awareness in Thessaloniki of the situation in the rest of the empire, but the later spread of disorder to the city itself is compared to a fire whose embers overwhelm the houses in the neighbourhood, tying the empire together into a single community suffering from the same affliction.⁹⁰ As for the people inhabiting this world, they are exemplified by qualities assigned to the Thessalonians who routinely oppose the barbaric hordes at the gates of their city. They are described as “the Christian people of the Thessalonian city”, which is itself later typified as “surpassing in its most Christian people” (amongst other things), contrasted in the same breath with the tribe of the Sclavenes seeking to inflict child-murder on “τὸ ῥωμαϊκὸν κράτος”.⁹¹

In the first collection, our best window onto how Romanness was conceived comes at the very end of the last miracle. Among general exhortations on the part of Archbishop John to his audience to commit themselves to good conduct and piety in order to ensure the continued support of Demetrios and for divine goodwill, protection against enemies both spiritual and physical, and eternal salvation, comes a request prior to the doxology to pray “περὶ τε τῆς θεοφυλάκτου ἡμῶν πόλεως καὶ περὶ τοῦ παντὸς τῶν χριστιανῶν εὐσεβοῦς πολιτεύματος”.⁹² This last section, “περὶ τοῦ παντὸς τῶν χριστιανῶν εὐσεβοῦς πολιτεύματος”, was rendered by Lemerle as “pour tout la chrétienté” (“for all Christendom”), which implies that it envisages the whole community of Christians everywhere as one body. Rather, ‘τὸ πολίτευμα’ has the same politically

⁹⁰ *Miracles of St Demetrios*, 1.10.83 [“Ὡσπερ δὲ τινος πυρμοληθέντος τόπου, καὶ τῆς φλογὸς κατακρατούσης τῶν ἀπομαχομένων τῶ ὕδατι, αἱ πέριξ οἰκίαι, τῇ σφοδρότητι ἐκθερμαινόμεναι τοῦ καπνοῦ, αὐταὶ τε μελαίνονται δαλοῦ δίκην, καὶ πρὸς ἄναψιν ἐτοιμότητα γίνονται, μιᾶς τινος καὶ βραχείας προφάσεως καὶ ταύτης προσδοκησίμου δρασσομεναι”].

⁹¹ *Miracles of St Demetrios*, 1.5.51 [“ὁ τῶν χριστιανῶν λαὸς τῆς Θεσσαλονικέων [...] πόλεως”] and 13.117 [“ἡ θεοφύλακτος τῶν Θεσσαλονικέων μητρόπολις ὑπερβαλλόντως προὔχει πλούτῳ τε ποικίλῳ, καὶ ἀνθρώποις εὐθεάτοις καὶ συνετοῖς καὶ χριστιανικωτάτοις”], “the Roman sovereignty”].

⁹² *Miracles of St Demetrios*, 1.15.175 [“for both our God-protected city and for the entire pious body-politic of the Christians”].

charged resonance that ‘πολιτεία’ has in the *Life of Theodore of Sykeon* and is more akin to ‘res publica’ than ‘Christendom’. It refers not to a generalised community of people tied by common belief but to a specific abstract corporate entity defined by political loyalty. That the term certainly had this meaning in the seventh century can be determined by the fact that it was used in prototypical biblical contexts to refer either to specific political entities, as in 2 Maccabees, or to the envisaged ‘Kingdom of God’ in the heavens: of which the Roman empire was supposed to be a reflection.⁹³

This latter use in fact appears to have been in common currency among theological writers contemporary to the *Miracles*, appearing in Maximos the Confessor’s *Quaestiones* and the *Scala Paradisi* of John Climacus.⁹⁴ More telling still to the specifically political aspect of this term is a passage from none other than the *Life of Theodore of Sykeon*. On returning to Constantinople at the behest of Heraclius and patriarch Sergios, Theodore finds that the *patrikios* Niketas is rumoured to have been poisoned and is lying paralysed; going to him, the saint says “ἀνάστηθι, τέκνον, ὅτι καιρὸς καμάτου ἐστὶν καὶ χρήζει σου τὸ πολίτευμα ἡμῶν”: “rise, child, since [the] moment of toil is [now] and the state has need of you”.⁹⁵ In this light, ‘τὸ πᾶν τῶν χριστιανῶν εὐσεβῆς πολίτευμα’ can only mean the community of the Christians as defined specifically by the limits of imperial authority. Like the use of ‘πολιτεία’ in *Theodore of Sykeon*, it is an expression of identification with an abstracted political entity, with the added implication here that the members of that entity are explicitly Christians, creating an imagined community of people who are defined by their common

⁹³ 2 Macc. 12.7.2; Phil. 3.20 [“ἡμῶν γὰρ τὸ πολίτευμα ἐν οὐρανοῖς ὑπάρχει, ἐξ οὗ καὶ σωτῆρα ἀπεκδεχόμεθα κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν”].

⁹⁴ John Climacus, *Scala Paradisi*, 15.881.40 [“ὁ δὲ τῆ μεγάλης σελήνης, ὁ δὲ τῷ λαμπρῷ ἡλίῳ προσοείκασιν ἄμφοτεροὶ δὲ ἐν οὐρανοῖς τὸ πολίτευμα κέκτηνται”]; Maximos the Confessor, *Quaestiones et Dubia*, 1.68.48 [“Τὸ δὲ μαῦρα τὰ ἐνδύματα εἶναι σημαίνει ὅτι χρὴ ἡμᾶς ἀφανεῖς εἶναι τῷ κόσμῳ, ὡς τὸ πολίτευμα ἔχοντας ἐν οὐρανῷ”].

⁹⁵ *Life of Theodore of Sykeon*, 27.154.34.

Christian faith and membership of the empire ruled from Constantinople — all given the common demonym ‘Roman’.

Perhaps the most illuminating, and most frustrating, element of Roman discourse in either part of the *Miracles* concerns the appearance and later history of the so-called ‘Sermesians’. This group of people appear in the fifth miracle of the second collection and are described as the descendants of people taken prisoner by the Avars from throughout the Balkans and then settled in the vicinity of the ancient city of Sirmium — hence their ethnonym.⁹⁶ This group of people were then merged by the Avar khagan with a group of Bulgars led by Kouber, who has been equated in modern scholarship with the fourth son of Kubrat who led his Bulgars into Pannonia and under Avar dominion.⁹⁷ An examination of exactly who constituted this group of people at any one time and the discourse surrounding them in the *Miracles*, as well as in certain other texts, reveals several aspects of what can be seen as Roman group identity that corroborate what we have seen elsewhere.

It is important to state at the outset that the ‘Sermesians’ are characterised by the anonymous author of the text as Romans. They are explicitly described at their first appearance as being made up of peoples taken prisoner by the Avars who then intermarried with the Bulgar, Avar, and Slavic populations of their new home in Pannonia. The author takes great pains to affirm their Romanness by explaining that “each child received from its father the traditions of its homeland and the spirit of its ancestors according to the customs of the Romans”.⁹⁸ Not only are this group of people referred to as a “λαός”, the term normally used specifically to denote Romans, but they

⁹⁶ *Miracles of St Demetrios*, 2.5.284.

⁹⁷ Jankowiak, ‘The first Arab siege’, 288; *Miracles of St Demetrios*, 2.5.286; Nikephoros, *Breviarium*, 35.19-21; Theoph. *Chronographia*, AM6171.357.

⁹⁸ *Miracles of St Demetrios*, 2.5.285.

are compared to the Hebrews living under the pagan yoke of Pharaoh. Just as the Jews grew in number in Egypt, so “through the orthodox faith and the holy and life-giving baptism grew the people of the Christians”, and all the while they longed to return to their ancestral place within the empire.⁹⁹ It is this group of people whom Kouber and his Bulgars end up controlling and it is as a result of him “learning the desire of such a people [τοῦ τοιούτου λαοῦ] for [their] ancestral cities” that they end up embarking on their own version of the biblical Exodus, replete with neophytes labelled, significantly, “[τῶν] ἐτέρων ἐθνικῶν”.¹⁰⁰

This mixed group of people under Kouber’s command, that is, the ‘Sermesians’, assorted Christianised non-Romans, as well as, presumably, pagan Bulgars and others settled on the Keramision plain, were sent to reclaim the cities of the forefathers.¹⁰¹

Kouber, fearing that this group of people (ὁ λαός) would be taken away from his grasp by the emperor, requested that he and his people be allowed to remain where they had settled. This was granted and Kouber was also given control over the Slavic tribe of the Drogoubites in order to support the new population.¹⁰² However, learning from the Drogoubites about their proximity to Thessaloniki, “ἤρξαντο πλεῖστοι λοιπὸν οἱ ἐκ τῶν Ῥωμαίων ὄντες μετὰ γυναικῶν καὶ τέκνων ἐν τῇ θεοσώστῳ ταύτῃ εἰσιέναι πόλει”.¹⁰³

Throughout the narrative, the anonymous writer is careful to distinguish the ‘Sermesians’ from the other groups of people under the command of Kouber: they are Christians longing to be part of their empire once more, the ‘Chosen People’ like the Jews of Moses — ὁ λαός. In many ways, they are an archetypal caricature of what the

⁹⁹ *Miracles of St Demetrios*, 2.5.285.

¹⁰⁰ *Miracles of St Demetrios*, 2.5.287.

¹⁰¹ *Miracles of St Demetrios*, 2.5.288.

¹⁰² *Miracles of St Demetrios*, 2.5.289.

¹⁰³ *Miracles of St Demetrios*, 2.5.290 [“a great many of those remaining, being from the Romans, began to go over to this God-protected city with [their] women and children”].

anonymous author of the miracle collection understands Romans to be: a categorisation, a stereotype even, of his own group identity. We have no idea how these people saw themselves; the whole story is told from the point of view of our narrator in Thessaloniki who seems determined to emphasise distinctions within the group that Kouber arrived with, the loyal, Christian, Romans and the remainder, who are portrayed as conniving and acting against the interests of the empire. This latter group is clearly defined as non-Roman during the description of a failed coup against the civic authorities led by a man named Mauros, whilst those who attempted to reveal the coup plot are “τινὲς δὲ τῶν ἐκ τοῦ Ῥωμαίων φύλου”.¹⁰⁴

This identification, combined with the confusing mix of different groups in the ‘Sermesian’ narrative and a lack of additional information, has resulted in the claim that the ‘Sermesians’ were a ‘sub-Roman’ group or otherwise made up of a mixture of Roman and non-Roman people.¹⁰⁵ It has even been suggested that the ‘Sermesians’ should be identified with the group of Slavs taken in by Justinian II and organised into an army called the ‘Chosen’ or ‘Peculiar’ people in the 690s.¹⁰⁶ Should this ever be demonstrated conclusively, it would be a powerful example of the way in which discourse around identity can serve to radically alter how different groups can be perceived, particularly the difference between the external categorisation of others and the internal definition of a ‘living’ group identity. The difference here is that it is the author’s own group identity (Roman) that is being projected onto a category of people

¹⁰⁴ *Miracles of St Demetrios*, 2.5.293.

¹⁰⁵ Shay Eshel, *The Concept of the Elect Nation in Byzantium*, (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 62; Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses*, 153.

¹⁰⁶ Ilyas Anagnostakis, ‘Περιοῦσιος Λαός’, in Eleonora Kountoura-Galake (ed.), *The Dark Centuries of Byzantium (7th-9th c.)* (Athens: National Hellenic Research Foundation, 2001), 325-46; Nikephoros, *Breviarium*, 38.7-29; Theoph. *Chronographia*, AM 6180.364 and 6184.366.

(the 'Sermesians') in order to illustrate their commonality, in contrast to the other ethnic categories used in the text (Slav and Bulgar).

It is more likely, however, that there is little to connect the 'Sermesians' and Justinian's 'Chosen' people beyond geographic and temporal coincidence, providing one accepts a later dating of the second collection. Justinian's Slavs are said to have been taken prisoner by force or willingly recruited in the vicinity of Thessaloniki and then settled in the Opsikion theme. This, however, was done in the wake of a military expedition led by the emperor.¹⁰⁷ While the 'Sermesians' may fulfil the criteria of coming over "by treaty", as Nikephoros puts it, the *Miracles* records no such confrontation, moreover the emperor never leaves Constantinople.¹⁰⁸ More problematic still is the failure of Theophanes' and Nikephoros' common source for this event (the so-called chronicle of Trajan the Patrician), to furnish us with the name 'Sermesian' in relation to these Slavs; something one might expect given the combination of Trajan's supposed military background and the existence of a near-contemporary group called 'Sermesians' that had its own commander.¹⁰⁹

One possible indication that the 'Sermesians' were not as indistinguishable from the Roman population as the *Miracles* suggests is the fact that the sigillographic evidence for their later commander indicates that he was made 'archon' of the *Sermesianoi* and the Bulgars, rather than 'strategos' as in the miracle story — a title

¹⁰⁷ The historicity of this is confirmed by an inscription put up in Hagios Demetrios in Thessaloniki: Alexander Vasiliev, 'An Edict of the Emperor Justinian II, September 688', *Speculum* 18.1 (1943), 1-13.

¹⁰⁸ *Miracles of St Demetrios*, 2.5.302-3; Nikephoros, *Breviarium*, 38.7-29; Theoph. *Chronographia*, AM 6180.364.

¹⁰⁹ Jankowiak, 'The first Arab siege', 242-51; *contra* Treadgold, who sees Trajan as a civil official and lifelong resident of Constantinople: Warren Treadgold, 'Trajan the Patrician, Nicephorus, and Theophanes', in Dmitrij Bumazhnov, Emmanouela Grypeou, Timothy Sailors, and Alexander Toepel (eds.), *Bibel, Byzanz und Christlicher Orient: Festschrift für Stephen Gerö zum 65. Geburtstag* (Leuven: Peeters — Departement Oosterse Studies, 2011), 618. On the existence of the Sermesians and their strategos, see: Nicolas Oikonomides, *A Collection of Dated Byzantine Lead Seals*, (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1986), n.25 ["Μαύρω πατρικίω (καὶ) [ἄρ]χοντι τῶν Σερμησι[τ]ῶν (καὶ) Βουλγάρων)].

which was used into the ninth century for the leaders of certain Slavic tribes, or otherwise non-Roman peoples, appointed or approved by the imperial government.¹¹⁰ Searching for any kind of definitive answer as to who the ‘Sermesians’ ‘really were’ is likely to end up in the same place as a search for who the similarly enigmatic, and contemporary, ‘Mardaites’ were. Both groups have left us with no documents produced by themselves, both incidentally disappear from the historical record at roughly the same time (although the Mardaites do emerge once more in the tenth century), and both are ‘categories’ of identity, rather than identity ‘groups’ in their own right: empty labels whose meaning is applied external to the people concerned, rather than a self-description as in a collective identity proper.¹¹¹

What can be seen from the ‘Sermesian’ episode, however, are the strategies of identification used by the author to distinguish a subgroup of Kouber’s party that the author evidently understood to be Roman. The question of why this discourse is relevant to a miracle story is an important one, but which would require taking an in-depth look at the circumstances of the creation of the second collection – a task far beyond the space and purpose of this study. Whatever the rationale, the key aspects of the ‘Sermesians’ that make them Roman in the writer’s eyes are not primarily their maintenance of putative Roman ‘customs’ (the only real custom of named is baptism, which is tantamount to just calling them Christians), but their adherence to the orthodox faith and their identification with and loyalty towards the imperial state. It is in fact this last which is the crucial factor identified by the writer that marks out the ‘Sermesians’ from the Christianised “ἔθνικοί” who joined them on their travels south.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Kaldellis, *Romanland*, 140; Leo IV, *Taktika*, 18.95; Oikonomides, *Byzantine Lead Seals*, n.25.

¹¹¹ *De Cer.* II.44.

¹¹² *Miracles of St Demetrios*, 2.5.284 and 287.

2.4: *Conclusions*

From this discussion we can see the foundational principles of Romanness in a synthesis of loyalty towards the imperial state, an identification with its aims and its ruler (at least in the abstract), and an adherence to Christian belief. It is the close association of these that appears repeatedly in our sources from this period, which is used by the imperial government in order to rally support against the Persians, and which are used as a tool to identify enemies. But what of other possible markers of group identity? Most of the sources we have so far examined are what could be termed 'normative' Roman materials: that is, they conformed to the cultural standards accepted by the elites at the centre of the empire, namely in their use of Greek and adherence to the orthodoxy espoused by the Constantinopolitan church. But the empire prior to the Arab conquests was far from monolingual or mono-confessional. We have already seen in the cases of Maximos and Pope Martin the complications that could arise when an individual or group were seen to deviate from one aspect of this normative standard. What of more established heterodox communities, such as those that predominated in the empire's eastern territories, and which were not necessarily Hellenophone? Just how ecumenical was Roman groupness in the seventh century, and would it be better to refine our definition to restrict it to Chalcedonian Greek-speakers?

3. Fluctuating Boundaries: Romanness in Syria-Palestine and Egypt

Thus far, our texts can be generally characterised as having been produced within a 'normative' Roman cultural milieu. That is, the authors of the texts and the bulk of their expected audiences can be categorised as Chalcedonian Greek-speakers; conforming to that standard template of Romanness which would become broadly synonymous with Romanness in general as the empire's territory and overall diversity declined. Prior to this, the empire consisted of a much more varied population both linguistically and confessionally. The most significant element of this being large miaphysite populations, concentrated in the eastern and southern parts of the empire, some of whom would have been Greek-speaking or bilingual, but a good deal were primarily Syriac or Coptic-speakers. Under the rubric of pre-Islamic Roman group identity that has been discussed so far, neither of these deviations from the normative identity poses a particular issue, since they need not be seen as conflicting either with an identification with the imperial state or Christian faith — the two principles benchmark characteristics of Romanness.

3.1: *Schrödinger's Romans: Both dead and alive?*

It must be stressed once more that our formulation of a dominant Roman group identity does not presuppose that subaltern identities could not, or did not, exist, or that those belonging to the 'normative' version of Roman identity could not be involved in the process of categorising and 'othering' these subaltern groups based on linguistic and religious difference. The statement of one writer at one moment concerning whether a miaphysite or non-Greek speaker is 'Roman' or not cannot be taken as showing that

either one of those characteristics was enough to mark an individual or group out as definitively 'not Roman'. Likewise, a text produced by a writer falling into these categories that sets up a contrast between them and Chalcedonian Greek-speakers does not *a priori* represent a rejection of Roman groupness in favour of something else. To do so would require the separation of their own sense of Christian identity from the imperial context that characterised Romanness at its foundational level.

This fact, that non-Greek speaking, non-Chalcedonian populations did not necessarily see themselves as distinctly 'non-Roman' in comparison to their compatriots, has been recognised for several decades. Since Jones' 1959 article critiquing the tendency to equate religious doctrine with 'national' identity, scholars have questioned the paradigm of Syrian or Egyptian Christians seeing themselves as being 'apart' from the empire they inhabited based on their religious affiliation.¹ Yet, as Wipszycka noted in her seminal article on Coptic Egyptian nationalism, such works generally had little impact on the broader narrative of non-Chalcedonian as inherently 'other'. This was driven, as she puts it, by the tendency of Byzantinists to treat evidence from Syria and Egypt in overly broad-brush terms, leaving more in-depth study to dedicated Syriologists and Coptologists.² More recently, beginning in earnest with Moorhead's rejection of the essentialist interpretation of 'Syrian' ethnic identity and Wipszycka's critique of the same with regard to Egypt, the trend has been towards understanding that miaphysites in the seventh century were not inherently opposed to the empire and did not set themselves apart from it as a matter of course.³ Rather,

¹ Arnold Hugh Martin Jones, 'Were ancient heresies national or social movements in disguise?', *Journal of Theological Studies*, 10.2 (1959): 280-98.

² Ewa Wipszycka, 'Le nationalisme a-t-il existé dans l'Égypte byzantine?', *Journal of Juristic Papyrology* 22 (1992): 83-4.

³ John Moorhead, 'The Monophysite Response to the Arab Invasions', *Byzantion* 51 (1981): 580-4; and Wipszycka, 'Le nationalisme', 83-128. As well as, more recently: Fergus Millar, 'The Evolution of the Syrian Orthodox Church in the Pre-Islamic Period: From Greek to Syriac?', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 21.1

recognising the fact that many of the portrayals of the end of Roman rule in these areas come from much later and must be understood in the context of processes of identity formation that occurred only after the Arab conquests of the mid-seventh century.

Such times that we have contemporary writers seeking to actively differentiate themselves as ‘Romans’ vis-à-vis miaphysites or non-Greek speakers, and vice versa, this must be understood within historical circumstances and with an eye to the inherently fluid nature of identity. Indeed, for every instance of the former one can find an example of the latter: the common denominator being that both, at that moment, saw themselves as the normative ‘Roman’ grouping and their opponents as ‘non-Roman’ deviants. Groups that did not conform to the doctrine of the Constantinopolitan church and did not use the imperial lingua franca were particularly susceptible to being ‘othered’ as a result of the highly contingent nature of group identity. Nevertheless, neither imperially defined orthodoxy, nor the Greek language can be understood as acting as definitive markers of Romanness, since their usage in a discourse of othering was contingent on specific contexts — at least in the seventh century.

One particularly striking example of the dangers present in privileging any one definition of ‘orthodoxy’ as a benchmark for understanding Romanness in this period becomes apparent when comparing the relationship between Heraclius and the various

(2013): 45-49; Bernard Palme, ‘Political Identity versus Religious Distinction? The Case of Egypt in the Later Roman Empire’, in Walter Pohl, Clemens Gantner, and Richard Payne (eds.), *Visions of Community in the Post-Roman World: The West, Byzantium, and the Islamic World*, (London: Routledge, 2016), 81-98; Arietta Papaconstantinou, ‘Historiography, Hagiography and the Making of the Coptic “Church of the Martyrs”’, *DOP* 60 (2006): 65-86; Arietta Papaconstantinou, ‘Between *umma* and *dhimma*. The Christians of the Middle East under the Umayyads’, *Annales islamologiques* 42 (2008): 127-56; Bas ter Haar Romeny, ‘Ethnicity, Ethnogenesis and the Identity of Syriac Orthodox Christians’, in Walter Pohl, Clemens Gantner, and Richard Payne (eds.), *Visions of Community in the Post-Roman World: The West, Byzantium, and the Islamic World*, (London: Routledge, 2016), 183-204; Jacques van der Vliet, ‘The Copts: Modern ‘Sons of the Pharaohs’?’, in Bas ter Haar Romeny (ed.), *Religious Origins of Nations?: The Christian Communities of the Middle East*, (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 279-90; and Jan van Ginkel, ‘The Perception and Presentation of the Arab Conquest in Syriac Historiography: How Did the Changing Social Position of the Syrian Orthodox Community Influence the Account of their Historiographers?’, in Emmanouela Grypeou, Mark Swanson, and David Thomas (eds.), *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*, (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 171-84.

miaphysite communities in the east, versus the rhetoric against them which seems to have been simultaneously deployed back in Constantinople. It illustrates a kind of 'Schrödinger's Roman': the constant making and unmaking of Romans. The exact same group of people can be both Roman and non-Roman simultaneously; the only way to determine which is to ask, but the answer depends on both when and of whom the question is put. Much as the cat in Erwin Schrödinger's eponymous thought-experiment exists in the paradoxical state of being both dead and alive, until the moment one opens the box and fixes its state as one or the other.

The works of John of Ephesus, the well-known sixth-century Syriac churchman and historian, illustrate this fluctuating and context-dependent attitude towards Romanness. John's two major surviving works, the *Ecclesiastical History* and the *Lives of the Eastern Saints* (both written in Syriac), between them offer us an intriguing glimpse at the changing attitudes of a prominent member of the Syrian miaphysite clergy in the mid-to-late sixth century. At various times, both between and within the two texts, we see John's attitude towards the empire, his own sense of belonging to it, and the relationship of that to his identity as a Syriac-speaking miaphysite change depending on the context that he found himself living in at the time he was writing.

John straddles a fine line, criticising the imperial authorities in Constantinople for their willingness to persecute miaphysites, advocating for a particular sense of community among the Syriac miaphysites based on their shared doctrine, language, locale, and customs, whilst also claiming affinity towards the wider idea of a Roman empire led by a just, orthodox emperor. As Wood noted, both the *Ecclesiastical History* and the *Lives of the Eastern Saints* seek to provide a common set of cultural references and a shared history for a Syrian miaphysite community that had become increasingly

atomised in the wake of imperial persecutions.⁴ Indeed, the entire conceptual framework of the *Lives of the Eastern Saints* is to provide a common hagiographical canon of explicitly miaphysite holy figures to be used as common exemplars for the community at large — demonstrating John’s own vision of that community’s existence in the world beyond Constantinople.

Yet, despite this vision of a wider Syrian miaphysite community and the focus on their persecution by members of the Chalcedonian imperial authorities in both the *Lives* and the *Ecclesiastical History*, John never seems to waver in his own conviction that the Roman empire was the definitive Christian state and that he was both Roman and Christian, despite the empire being controlled by Chalcedonians. John characterises the miaphysite community and himself, by extension, as the true orthodox Christian Roman community. Far from following the logic of rejecting Romanness because of imperial persecution, he doubles-down on his claims to true Romanness. He describes the empire as “the *politeia* of us Romans” in the *Lives of the Five Patriarchs*, in the *Life of Mar Simeon* it is “this, our country, the country of the Romans”.⁵ In the *Ecclesiastical History*, he adopts the language of ‘othering’ usually used in Chalcedonian texts for miaphysites, subtly claiming for himself and his co-religionists the title of ‘Christian’, and thus ‘Roman’, whilst insinuating that those who sought to persecute and kill them were acting like the pagan Diocletian.⁶ John’s identification with the empire and its ultimate aims as the state of the Christians also comes through in his unwillingness to

⁴ Philip Wood, *We have no king but Christ: Christian Political Thought in Greater Syria on the Eve of the Arab Conquest (c.400-585)*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 179-181.

⁵ John of Ephesus, *Life of Mar Simeon the Bishop* [=Brooks, *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, 139] and *Lives of the Five Patriarchs* [=Brooks, 688-9]. My thanks to Paul Ulishney for checking the Syriac for me.

⁶ John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.1.37 [“‘If then, as you bear witness,’ said the Caesar [Tiberius], ‘they are Christians, why then do you urge me to persecute Christians, as if I were a Diocletian, or one of those old heathen emperors? Go sit in thy church, and be quiet, and do not trouble me again with such things.’”].

pin the blame for the persecutions of miaphysites on the decisions of the emperor Justin II, instead implicating first John Scholasticus (patriarch, 565-77), then Eutychius (577-82).⁷

While Justin II does eventually receive some direct censure from John, (mostly after his imprisonment at the emperor's orders) his successors, Tiberius and Maurice, both largely escape blame for anti-miaphysite decisions during their reign. John actually goes out of his way to exculpate Tiberius, giving him the excuse of being too preoccupied with dealing with barbarian threats to check the persecuting impulses of patriarch Eutychius.⁸ The same excuse is supplied for Maurice, whose thoughts are said to be all "wrapped in the war with the barbarians" and who supposedly argues "[we have] enough to do with the wars with the barbarians on all our confines, [and] you want to bring upon us intestine wars also!"⁹ This unwillingness to pin imperial persecution of his compatriots to the figure of the reigning emperor may well have been the result of John's relatively exposed position in Constantinople and consequently his desire to remain within the established bounds of *Kaiserkritik* to avoid retribution and maintain imperial patronage.¹⁰

Equally, however, that same position in Constantinople likely offered him a much more sanguine view of the shifting attitudes of the imperial government towards the miaphysites, even when on the receiving end of persecution himself. John seems perfectly aware of different camps in the capital advocating accommodation and

⁷ See, for instance: John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.1.11 ["The person who stirred up and occasioned and put into execution all these evils was the John mentioned above as head of the church in the city. For he, by his slanders, inflamed the emperor against the whole part of the believers and so worked upon him at length that he obtained permission to treat them as he liked."].

⁸ John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.3.2 and 3.3.21.

⁹ John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.5.21.

¹⁰ David Taylor, 'The Psalm Commentary of Daniel of Salah and the Formation of Sixth-Century Syrian Orthodox Identity', *Church History and Religious Culture* 89.1 (2009): 79.

reconciliation between Chalcedonians and miaphysites, as well as the hardliners that he blames for the persecutions.¹¹ He is also cognisant of the fact that the government's policy could change dramatically depending on who held the most influence at any given time. He is thus much more forgiving of the vacillating position of the state towards the miaphysites than someone removed from the centre of power and who only saw the outcome of decisions taken in Constantinople, might have been.¹²

John is an advocate of a distinct Syrian miaphysite sense of groupness, yes, but never at the expense of his sense that the legitimate authority to rule over that group was the Roman empire. In fact, at times, he claims primacy for miaphysite doctrine as the only true position that any Christian, that any Roman, should adopt. Instead of presenting his miaphysite identity as antithetical to a Chalcedonian Roman empire, he instead sees the empire as fundamental and its Chalcedonianism as the mutable element. All it would take would be the right emperor.

At different times and for different audiences, John's sense of his relative 'Syrianness' and 'Romanness' (that is, his sense of attachment and identification with the Syriac-speaking miaphysite community in his home region and his sense of being part of a wider Christian Roman state) fluctuates. At some points he demonstrates a clear attachment to the notion of the empire as the rightful Christian state, to which he and his co-religionists naturally owed their allegiance, and, at others, he emphasises his connection to a wider culture of Syrian miaphysites. The latter, however, never seems to interfere in any meaningful way with the former. On occasion, John seems even to adopt the term 'Syrian' as a pejorative, using it to describe Patriarch Damian of Alexandria,

¹¹ See, for instance, his description of events in the capital under Maurice, where the patriarch, John the Almsgiver, refuses to instigate a persecution despite the advocacy of extremists, likewise, Maurice: John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.5.21.

¹² See the more hard-line position taken by John's contemporary Daniel of Salah: Taylor, 'Psalm Commentary', 83.

whom John held responsible for the schism between Alexandria and Antioch in the later sixth century.¹³ When it came down to it, he was much more likely to seek to align himself with the empire when considering external powers. He calls an embassy to Persia made up of miaphysite officials as being “on behalf of the whole Roman state”, and refers to “the polity of the Christians” during the Persian war under Maurice.¹⁴ He is also loath to call Chalcedonians ‘Romans’ in contrast to miaphysite Syrians, instead referring to the two groups in purely religious terms as ‘synodites’ and ‘orthodox’, or ‘believers’.¹⁵ Clearly, John seems not to have had a problem holding both identities, such as they were, and bringing one or another to the fore depending on circumstances.

In this regard, he has a similar outlook to the anonymous near-contemporary author of the Syriac text known as the *Julian Romance*.¹⁶ The *Romance*, which narrates a stylised account of the reign of the emperor Julian in the late fourth century, offers a commentary on the state of the Roman empire at the time of its production in the sixth century, with Justinian occupying Julian’s role as the heretical, persecuting emperor.¹⁷ To that end, the text is highly critical of the perversion of Roman imperial power at the hands of the pagan Julian. The author, a native of Edessa in Osrhoene, focuses on the piety of the city and its people, extolling their Christian faith in opposition to “the contemptible foreigner, the worshipper of idols”.¹⁸ Although there is no indication in the text as to the doctrinal affiliation of the author, the context of its production in the sixth century during a time of persecution for miaphysites, the fact that it was written in Syriac, and Edessa’s status as perhaps the pre-eminent centre for Syrian miaphysite

¹³ John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.4.43.

¹⁴ John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.2.10 and 3.6.2.

¹⁵ John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.2.9 and 3.2.30 [“the synodites had rooted up the churches of the orthodox”]; John of Ephesus, *Life of Jacob Baradaeus*, [=Brooks, 693].

¹⁶ On the dating of the *Romance* to the first half of the sixth century: Wood, ‘*We have no king*’, 141-2.

¹⁷ Wood, ‘*We have no king*’, 159-61.

¹⁸ *Julian Romance*, 123.

culture, makes it likely that the author was a miaphysite. Or, at least, unlikely that he was Chalcedonian. Consequently, if one substitutes the criticism of Julian for criticism of Justinian, then the text's focus on the piety and faith of Edessa, its heritage as a Christian centre, and its resistance to the depredations of heretics and heathens alike becomes something of a paean for Syrian miaphysites. As John of Ephesus extols the virtues of Syrian holy men in the *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, so the *Julian Romance* presents a portrait of Edessa as the supreme Christian city — reinforcing a sense of Edessene, and Syrian, solidarity in the face of persecution.¹⁹

On the face of things, the text's excoriation of both the Roman emperor for his persecution of Christians and of other cities in the empire (notably Constantinople and Antioch) for their lack of faith, along with its fulsome praise for Edessa and its denizens, might make it seem as though it were solely a rallying-cry for the oppressed miaphysites of Syria to reject tyrannical Roman rule, as Edessa had that of Julian.²⁰ However, this would be to overly privilege the 'present' of the text (both the historicised present of the narrative and the real present of the author) to the detriment of the text's understanding of the past and, more importantly, the future. While the *Romance* is unremitting in its negative portrayal of the state of the empire under Julian(/Justinian), the text makes it clear that things were not always such. Harkening back to the reign of Constantine, it sets up a comparison of the past greatness of the Romans versus the 'present':

¹⁹ For instance, *Julian Romance*, 127 [“Far be it that Edessa, the Blessed One, the Mother of Christians, should let a stranger [Julian] enter over her true king, through whom she became strong and powerful!”], and 137 [“[Edessa] alone of all the cities of the east dared to maintain her truth and to persevere in a united fashion in her religion, all of her publicly worshipping Christ and acknowledging Him without fear; [that even] if she would have to be destroyed, she would not consent to paganism”].

²⁰ *Julian Romance*, 117.

‘There is great mourning in Edessa, and a bitter suffering, that so-and-so sits on the throne of Rome: Instead of Constantine, the Christian, Julian, the Apostate; the Wicked One instead of the Righteous One; the pagan instead of the Christian; the madman instead of the Upright and Wise one’.²¹

The picture is not one of interminable and inevitable decline, however. The *Romance* closes on a hopeful note for the future, with the death of Julian and the accession of Jovian heralding a return to Christianity and an end to persecution.²² Transferred into the sixth century, the message of the author is clear: that although the circumstances of the miaphysites found them being tormented by imperial authorities, there was hope for the future and that a new emperor may yet return the empire to its Constantinian state of unity.

The degree to which a Syrian miaphysite identity comes to the fore in a text and is set against a more ecumenical Roman Christian identity varies considerably depending on the circumstances of the time and the attitude of the ruling emperor. As with John of Ephesus, whilst the author of the *Julian Romance* certainly had a sense of his identity as a Syrian miaphysite and, most particularly, of the status of Edessa as a bastion of orthodox faith, he does not reject an allegiance to the empire because of this, even when that empire was opposed to him, his beliefs, and his city. The hope remained that a change in Constantinople could remove the friction between the two identities. Like with John, writing some fifty years earlier and six hundred miles away, the anonymous author of the *Romance* demonstrates his attachment to both a sense of Syrian miaphysite identity as well as — not instead of — a wider Roman Christian identity.²³

²¹ *Julian Romance*, 123.

²² *Julian Romance*, 228 and 240.

²³ It must be noted that the works of John of Ephesus and the *Julian Romance*, while both advancing ‘Syrian miaphysite’ identity in a very broad sense, their conceptions of what and who constitutes that group vary quite considerably; the one privileging people from a certain region, the other seeing Edessa

3.2: *Schrödinger's Romans: the Chalcedonians*

Much like the above examples in the broader miaphysite community, the perception of who constituted the Roman people among the 'normative', Chalcedonian, Greek-speaking community fluctuated. We shall begin our examination of Chalcedonian attitudes along geographical lines, focusing on the immediate aftermath of the end of the Persian war in 628: one view from the city of Edessa, the other from Constantinople. Then, in the next section, we shall examine the empire's eastern provinces with an eye to social differentiation and the way in which our source base, produced by a limited set of monastic figures, tends to distort our view thanks to excessive focus on doctrinal difference which, while evidently mattering a great deal to the writers, seems to have mattered very little to the population at large.

No doubt suffused with confidence following the death of Khusrow II and the final withdrawal of Persian troops in 628/9, Heraclius acted swiftly to reimpose imperial authority in the newly re-captured territories, sending his brother Theodore to oversee the removal of the remaining Persian forces within the empire's borders, and to begin a campaign to bring about unity between the dyophysites and miaphysites. Heraclius' actions in the years between the end of the Persian war and the appearance of the forces of Islam have long been recognised as wrapped up with an idea of imperial

as the paramount centre almost to the exclusion of all others. This difference in how these two writers perceive their own group identity points to much more widespread divisions within the miaphysite movement that make it impossible to ever speak of a unified 'miaphysite' identity in opposition to a Chalcedonian identity in either Syria or Egypt, let alone across the empire. This is a subject that will be discussed in greater detail below.

renewal.²⁴ This was most clearly expressed in the circumstances surrounding the return of the True Cross to Jerusalem, the timing of which was deliberately engineered to suggest the beginning of a new age, with Heraclius himself being extolled as something approaching a reincarnation of Constantine in George of Pisidia's poem honouring the occasion.²⁵

Given this confidence in the future success of the empire, one could be forgiven for expecting that Heraclius would have taken advantage of the strength of his position to purge and persecute the miaphysite heretics of Syria and Egypt. However, the attitude of the emperor and his entourage in these crucial few years seems to have been quite the opposite. In two episodes, Heraclius appears to have struck a remarkably conciliatory tone towards the miaphysite population in this crucial period after the war: a fact even more remarkable for appearing in sources that otherwise tend to depict Heraclius as the *bête-noire* of non-Chalcedonians everywhere.²⁶

The first of these occurred immediately after the end of the Persian war. Heraclius, having accepted the peace agreement with Kavad/Siroe at Ctesiphon in summer 628, sent his brother, Theodore, as an advance-guard in order to implement the basic terms of the agreement: namely the removal of Persian forces from the cities that were to be returned to Roman control.²⁷ Heraclius would then follow on to reinstate Roman administration in the cities.²⁸ Problems soon arose, with the Persian garrison at Edessa refusing to recognise the authority of the new shahanshah, forcing

²⁴ Jan Willem Drijvers, 'Heraclius and the *Restitutio Crucis*: Notes on Symbolism and Ideology', in Gerrit Reinink and Bernard Stolte (eds.), *The Reign of Heraclius (610-41): Crisis and Confrontation* (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 186-8; Olster, *Roman Defeat*, 99-102; Stoyanov, *Defenders and Enemies*, 74.

²⁵ George Pisides, *Restoratio sanctae crucis*, 46-63. Booth, *Crisis of Empire*, 160; Drijvers, 'Heraclius', 186.

²⁶ Marek Jankowiak, 'Essai d'histoire politique du monothélisme à partir de la correspondance entre les empereurs byzantins, les patriarches de Constantinople et les papes de Rome', (PhD diss., École Pratique des Hautes Études/Uniwersytet Warszawski, 2009), 61-2.

²⁷ Agapios, *Kitab al-'Unwan*, 2.2.466; *Chron.1234*, 100.

²⁸ Agapios, *Kitab al-'Unwan*, 2.2.466.

Theodore to besiege the city until the garrison surrendered and went peaceably back to Persia.²⁹ It is at this point that we begin to see the formation of a policy of reconciliation on Heraclius' towards the heterogeneous peoples of the newly-retaken territories.

Theodore, blaming the recalcitrant response of the Persians on Jews in the city, appears to have begun a pogrom against them. The massacre was halted thanks to an order from Heraclius, prompted by a petition from an escapee called Zachariah, who instead instructed his brother to “open [the Jews'] eyes to their faults”, according to at least one source.³⁰ This in itself is a surprising reaction on the part of the emperor, not just because of the generally hostile attitude towards Jews in Byzantium, but because of the tendency in this period in particular to connect atrocities committed against Christians by the Persians with Jews, as well as Heraclius' own actions later.³¹ Jews were at least partly blamed for the fall and sack of Jerusalem by the Persians in 614, in the aftermath of which it was claimed that they bought Christians who had been sold into slavery to kill them. We have already seen how this was capitalised on by George of Pisidia to malign the Jews as “false Israelites” who ought to abandon their faith.³² After the restoration of the Cross, Heraclius himself would expel the Jews from Jerusalem and, it would seem, instigate a programme of forced baptism.³³ That latter decision could be interpreted as “open[ing] their eyes to their faults” — indeed Heraclius, having gone on from Edessa to Jerusalem, would apparently later ‘convince’ a Galilean Jew called

²⁹ Agaprios, *Kitab al-'Unwan*, 2.2.466; *Chron.1234*, 101.

³⁰ Agaprios, *Kitab al-'Unwan*, 2.2.466.

³¹ On the fraught relationship between Jews and Christians in Byzantium, see: Olster, *Roman Defeat*; and the response in Averil Cameron, ‘Byzantines and Jews: some recent work on early Byzantium’, *BMGS* 20 (1996): 249-74. In addition to Vincent Déroche, ‘Polémique anti-judaïque et émergence de l’Islam’, *RÉB* 57 (1999): 141-161; and Gilbert Dagron and Vincent Déroche, ‘Juifs et Chrétiens dans l’Orient du VIIe siècle’, *TM* 11 (1991): 17-46.

³² *Chron.1234*, 93 ; George Pisides, *Restoratio sanctae crucis*, 15-24; Ps. Sebeos, *History*, 32.115-6; Theoph., *Chronographia*, AM.6106.300-301.

³³ Robert Devreesse, ‘La fin inédite d’une lettre de saint Maxime: un baptême forcé de Juifs et de Samaritains à Carthage’, *Revue des sciences religieuses* 17.1 (1937), 34; *Doctrina Jacobi nuper baptizati*, 1.2; Theoph., *Chronographia*, AM6120.328-9.

Benjamin to be baptised — but there is no real evidence of any hostile action that followed on from the Edessa incident and the programme of forced baptisms began four years later, in 632.³⁴

This unusually lenient attitude towards the Jews of Edessa also apparently extended to the miaphysite population, at least for a time. Once Theodore had departed for the west, Heraclius arrived at Edessa and was met with a crowd of people, including miaphysite priests and monks. The appearance of so many clerics is said to have prompted the emperor to make enquiries about their beliefs and, upon finding out that they were non-Chalcedonians, to question “How can it be that we leave such admirable people outside us?”, he then entered the city, preoccupied with reconciling the sects.³⁵ That the people of Edessa should actively welcome the arrival of the Roman emperor not only speaks to their having a sense of belonging to the state he ruled, but also flies in the face of any claim that miaphysites were somehow inherently inimical to a Chalcedonian emperor. Indeed, the Syriac historical tradition provides good reasons for why the people of Edessa, Chalcedonian and miaphysite, might have recognised Heraclius and the return of Christian Roman rule as positive.

The three extant sources that provide details for events under the Persian occupation and for Heraclius’ stay in Edessa (Agapios of Manbij, Michael the Syrian, and the *Anonymous Chronicle to 1234*) all draw upon a common miaphysite Edessene text: the a mid-ninth century history written by Dionysius of Tel-Mahre, itself was on another lost source the *Chronicle* of Theophilus of Edessa.³⁶ Each follows the same broad outline of events, albeit with sometimes different specifics — the account of Heraclius’

³⁴ Theoph. *Chronographia*, AM 6120.328. On this date, see: Dagron and Déroche, ‘Juifs’, 28.

³⁵ Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, 11.3.409.

³⁶ Robert Hoyland, *Theophilus of Edessa’s Chronicle and the Circulation of Historical Knowledge in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 11-15.

reception by the people of Edessa, for instance, is only preserved by Michael the Syrian. All, however, are in agreement regarding the hostile treatment of the city and its people under Khusrow. The Persian occupation saw increased taxes and the plundering of the city's churches, including the Great Church of the miaphysite bishop, culminating in an order from Khusrow to deport the population to Ctesiphon à la Nebuchadnezzar.³⁷ This last abuse was only halted thanks to news of Heraclius' invasion of Mesopotamia reaching the city, encouraging the governor to cease the deportations.³⁸ All a far cry from the later claim made by Dionysius, and repeated by Michael, that the Arab invasion was the deliverance of the miaphysites from Roman oppression: quite the opposite, in fact.

Two of the sources also agree that Heraclius did nothing to impinge upon the activities of the miaphysites in the city until provoked into doing so by the actions of the miaphysite bishop, Isaiah — himself a Persian appointee.³⁹ Heraclius is described distributing largesse to the people of the city and even going to worship in the Great Church at a service presided over by Isaiah: emblematic of a desire to reconcile rather than oppress.⁴⁰ Isaiah, “in the fervour of his zeal” decided to prohibit Heraclius from taking communion unless he rejected the Council of Chalcedon and the so-called ‘Tome of Leo’. When and where this incident took place differs between the two accounts, although both agree that Heraclius tried to take communion in the Great Church; the more precise of the two, that of Michael the Syrian, states that it happened in the Great Church itself.⁴¹ Not pleased by being denied sacred rites by an upstart bishop, one

³⁷ *Chron.1234*, 97; Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, 11.3.409.

³⁸ *Chron.1234*, 97; Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, 11.3.409.

³⁹ *Chron.1234*, 88 ; Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, 11.2.403. This detail is omitted from Agapios' account.

⁴⁰ Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, 11.3.411-2.

⁴¹ *Chron.1234*, 102; Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, 11.3.411-2.

appointed by Khusrow no less, the emperor expelled Isaiah from the city and gave the Great Church over to the Chalcedonians.

Concerning the aftermath of this, the sources differ. Agapios, who omits the incident entirely, merely states that upon arriving in the city Heraclius commanded that the Edessenes abandon their Jacobite (miaphysite) doctrine and adopt that of the Melkites (dyophysite Chalcedonian), which they did with the exception of a few prominent families.⁴² Likewise, Michael the Syrian also notes that a handful of prominent miaphysite families remained supportive of Isaiah, but fails to report any additional measures taken against them, despite stating that this event was the reason for the beginning of persecutions in Syria.⁴³ Finally, the *Chronicle to 1234* also fails to record any persecution arising as a result of Isaiah's actions, commenting only that the Great Church was handed over to the Chalcedonians, the "supporters in [the emperor's] faith".⁴⁴

Irrespective of which account one accepts to be closer to the truth, what is apparent from all is the fact that Heraclius clearly did not travel to Edessa intending to browbeat the miaphysite population into accepting Chalcedon. If anything, the emperor seems to have shown a remarkable degree of ecumenism in the city and a willingness to accept its heterodox population universally under his care as members of the Roman empire. Any hostile actions taken by him in Edessa were a reaction to a decision by Isaiah, which the miaphysite chronicles themselves describe as the result of his "stupidity and lack of sophistication" rather than any malicious intent on Heraclius' part.⁴⁵ All told, the attitude displayed by Heraclius towards the heterodox populations

⁴² Agapios, *Kitab al-Unwan*, 2.2.466.

⁴³ Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, 11.3.408-9.

⁴⁴ *Chron.1234*, 102.

⁴⁵ *Chron.1234*, 102; Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, 11.3.411-2.

in the reconquered territories and the positive reporting it receives in generally anti-Chalcedonian sources demonstrates both the emperor's view of these people and territories as part of the Roman world and the receptiveness of the population (at least in Edessa) towards being reincorporated into the empire — delivered from the oppressive policies that Khusrow is accused of instigating.

Whether this was due to genuine feeling on the part of the emperor or political expediency to restore control in the reconquered lands, the fact that this attitude was adopted by an emperor who, given his then-pre-eminence, could have acted as he pleased does indeed suggest at least some desire to treat the population on its own terms as Roman subjects rather than a conquered people. Likewise, the later willingness of the Jacobite leadership in Syria to parley with the emperor and accept a compromise, while eventually scuppered by extremist monastic factions, shows a receptiveness to the restoration of imperial power and a hope that the future would be one of peace and religious unity.⁴⁶

In direct contrast to the conciliatory, if ultimately ineffective, initiatives of Heraclius on the ground in Syria, the notion of rapprochement between miaphysites and Chalcedonians was viewed with anything but forbearance by elites in Constantinople. Our best source for the view of those in the capital towards the miaphysites is a long, polemic poem written by George of Pisidia which personifies the miaphysite doctrine in the form of its 'founder', Severos of Antioch. The date of this poem, entitled *Contra impium Severum Antiochiae*, is disputed, although it has a definitive *terminus post quem* of mid-628, based on references to Khusrow's death.⁴⁷ It can also be asserted with some

⁴⁶ Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, 11.3.409-10; Theoph., *Chronographia*, AM 6121.330-2.

⁴⁷ George Pisides, *Contra Severum*, 35 and 453.

For a discussion concerning the date of the poem, see: Jankowiak, 'Essai d'histoire politique', 46-7; Daniel Larison, 'George of Pisidia and *Contra Severum*: Panegyric and Polemic as Sources for Interpreting Religious Policy', in Christian Raffensperger and David Olster (eds.), *Radical Traditionalism: The Influence*

confidence that it was written after the 629/30 meeting between Heraclius, Athanasios Gammolo, and the miaphysite clerics, since the meeting's location at Hierapolis/Manbij seems likely to be the otherwise-unidentifiable "Kamboe" referred to in the penultimate stanza.⁴⁸

The view of the miaphysite population of the empire that one develops from this poem is vastly different from the moderate position that seems to have been adopted by Heraclius on the ground. While one must make allowances for the fact that the poem is an exercise in polemic, it is also important to stress that this was clearly intended for public consumption in Constantinople and capitalise on pre-existing attitudes in the capital in the wake of the empire's victory after nearly twenty-six years of war — most of which were punctuated with defeats. In this undoubtedly charged atmosphere, in which the boundaries between 'us' and 'them' must have appeared clearer than ever, one finds George connecting the faith of the miaphysites in the empire to the actions of Khusrow and the Persians. Taking advantage of the obvious parallel between one of the common Greek terms used for miaphysites at the time ('*Akephalites*', literally 'headless ones') and the emperor's name, he compares the sect to the mythical hydra and Heraclius to Heracles, whose actions in defeating Khusrow and seeking to convert the miaphysites are akin to the great hero chopping off the heads of the beast "καυτήρι θερμῷ πίστεως πυρουμένης".⁴⁹

of Walter Kaegi in *Late Antique, Byzantine, and Medieval Studies* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019), 163. Also: Nadine Viermann, "A New Image for a New Age': Contextualising George of Pisidia's *Contra Severum*." Paper presented at 'A Celebration of Mary Whitby', Faculty of History, University of Oxford, 13 March 2020.

The assertion of Leslie MacCoull that the poem postdates the *Ekthesis* of 638 and was intended to offer support to dyophysites in Syria does not bear scrutiny given the hortatory, post-victory tone of the poem and the lack of any evidence that it circulated beyond Constantinople: Leslie MacCoull, 'George of Pisidia, *Against Severos*: In Praise of Heraclius', in Roger Dahood (ed.), *The Future of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Problems, Trends, and Opportunities for Research* (Brepols: Turnhout, 1998), 78.

⁴⁸ For the identification of Kamboe with Hierapolis in Syria, see: Jankowiak, 'Essai d'histoire politique', 47; Walter Kaegi, 'A Misunderstood Place-Name in a Poem of George of Pisidia', *BF* 26 (2000): 229-30.

⁴⁹ George Pisides, *Contra Severum*, 55-78 ["with a cauterising heat of fiery faith"].

The very fact that Pisides refers to Heraclius' attempts to bring about ecclesiastical union in such terms and in direct connection to the recent defeat of Khusrow demonstrates quite clearly that the view of the empire's heterodox population from Constantinople bore little resemblance to Heraclius' own attitude. Far from being imperial subjects who ought to be treated with due respect, they are in league with the Persians and whose beliefs need to be expunged — by force if necessary.⁵⁰ This charge of collusion with the enemy was not wholly without cause: Khusrow's own wife, Shirin, was a miaphysite Christian and the Sasanians likewise favoured miaphysite churches over Chalcedonian during the occupation.⁵¹ An account reported by Agapios, likely apocryphal, has Khusrow forcing the Chalcedonian population of Edessa to either convert to miaphysitism or Nestorianism, or remain Chalcedonian, as part of a test to see whether they were loyal to Heraclius or Khusrow.⁵² The implication, of course, being that miaphysites and Nestorians were more likely to support the Persian shahanshah, whilst Chalcedonians felt more affinity towards the Roman emperor. Isaiah's refusal to give Heraclius communion would likely have done nothing to dispel this perception. Nevertheless, as has been noted, the miaphysite population of the occupied territories often suffered just as much as their Chalcedonian counterparts at the hands of the Sasanian regime.⁵³

The exact purpose of *Contra Severum* is subject to some disagreement, but the most appealing explanation is that, like Pisides' other works extolling Heraclius' successes, it was specifically commissioned by someone in the imperial government to placate those in the capital who may have held reservations about the reconciliation

⁵⁰ George Pisides, *Contra Severum*, 453-58.

⁵¹ *Chron.* 1234, 88; Ps. Sebeos, *History*, 13.85; Theophylact Simocatta, *Histories*, 5.13.7.

⁵² Agapios, *Kitab al-'Unwan*, 2.2.459.

⁵³ Sawirus ibn al-Muqaffa', *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria*, I.214-9, for instance, goes so far as to describe Heraclius' defeat of Khusrow as being "by the grace of Christ".

underway in the east.⁵⁴ George makes it quite clear that he is aware of what had been happening in Syria and, in that light, the overall tone of the poem comes across as a defensive action on the part of the imperial government seeking to extricate the emperor from any charge of somehow ‘selling out’ to the miaphysites.⁵⁵ This also helps to explain the poem’s focus on Heraclius’ piety and his role as the saviour of the empire from Khusrow, which otherwise has little relevance to the theological dispute between miaphysites and Chalcedonians — focusing on the emperor’s existing feats in preserving Christianity as a means of convincing naysayers that he has the empire’s best interests at heart. Furthermore, as Nadine Viermann has argued, if one accepts the text as being produced specifically for a Constantinopolitan audience, this reconciles the unremittingly hostile tone of the poem with Heraclius’ own approach in the east. It was, in a sense, a public relations exercise in the capital rather than a reflection on the attitude of the imperial government or the emperor, whose actions appear to have been sincere in seeking reconciliation.⁵⁶

Whether one accepts this premise or believes the poem to be a product of George’s personal attitude to the situation, the result as to how miaphysites were perceived in the capital remains the same. Either the poem sought to tap into genuine public or courtly outrage and hostility, or it acts as a window onto the opinions of a high-ranking clerical official at court. Seen from Constantinople, a city whose people had suffered from the trauma of their first siege in two and a half centuries, the heterodox

⁵⁴ Whitby, ‘Defender of the Cross’, 251. For a fuller discussion of Heraclius’ apparent post-war programme of ecclesiastical union, see: Booth, *Crisis*, 232-9.

⁵⁵ George Pisides, *Contra Severum*, 692-712 [“Even Kamboe, as it is called in Persian tongue, since it received a spark from your lamp, bears witness to me; so great a light of a radiant sun does not turn back the powerful onset of a storm, so much as you snatched away darkness and the bitter storm of ignorance from this place: you showed them a light that shines in darkness.”] Thanks are owed to Mary Whitby for helping me work through this passage.

⁵⁶ Nadine Viermann, ‘A New Image for a New Age’: Contextualising George of Pisidia’s *Contra Severum*. Paper presented at ‘A Celebration of Mary Whitby’, Faculty of History, University of Oxford, 13 March 2020.

populations of the empire could quite easily be ‘othered’ and blamed for the destruction wrought by the war, not only because their heresy was displeasing to God, but also because it was possible to pigeonhole them as collaborators.⁵⁷

Far removed from any substantial miaphysite community and buoyed by a renewed sense of common identity after the defeat of an existential threat, the impulse in the capital was not to focus on their commonality with their eastern compatriots. Rather, the rhetoric was focused on emphasising religious difference, circumscribing Romanness to Chalcedonianism and intimating that heterodox populations in the east were somehow ‘in league’ with the Persians and needed to be viewed as enemies as a result. By contrast, the response of Heraclius and the administration to the same set of circumstances on the ground in the east was instead to approach the miaphysites with caution; as a group not intrinsically different to themselves and not wholly incompatible to a sense of common identity across the empire. This multifaceted and variable picture with regards to how non-Chalcedonians were viewed in this period appears repeatedly when one looks at our sources in the round. It defies neat conclusions that seek to portray any one group of people in the empire as being ‘definitively’ Roman solely based on their doctrinal alignment.

3.3: Normative Toleration; Aberrant Sectarianism

Complicating the picture is the fact that the different communities of Chalcedonians, miaphysites, and, after 681, the relict monothelites (the Maronites) were themselves engaged in a process of sociological differentiation from each other until long after they

⁵⁷ This double accusation is in fact explicitly stated early on in the poem: George Pisides, *Contra Severum*, 34-50.

had been politically separated from the empire as a result of the Arab conquests, as Tannous has pointed out.⁵⁸ The process of differentiation on the part of non-Chalcedonians was long and drawn out, part of a much wider process of growing sectarianism which saw the replacement of geographical and linguistic criteria with doctrinal adherence as the prime elements of individual identity on a day-to-day basis.⁵⁹ Conceptions of 'orthodoxy' are, rather like identity itself, inherently mutable depending on circumstances. Just as the imperial government itself vacillated between repressing and accommodating the religious communities under its purview, so too did the communities themselves vary in their relationship both with groups they perceived as heterodox and with the imperial government.⁶⁰ On a practical level, this manifests as a degree of code-switching between different doctrinal groups and an increasing 'fuzziness' in what constituted the boundaries of any one of these religious groupings, depending on how far removed one was from particular centres for the socio-cultural organisation of such groups. In the case of the miaphysites, that would be somewhere like the monastery of Qinnasrin on the upper Euphrates; for the Chalcedonians, somewhere like Mar Saba outside Jerusalem, St. Catherine's in Sinai, or Skete in the Egyptian desert.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Jack Tannous, 'You Are What You Read: Qenneshre and the Miaphysite Church in the Seventh Century', in Philip Wood (ed.), *History and Identity in the Late Antique Near East*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 90-1. On the still-primordial status of Syrian-miaphysite ethnic identity in this period, see also: Bas ter Haar Romeny, Naures Atto, Jan van Ginkel, Mat Immerzeel, and Bas Snelders, 'The Formation of a Communal Identity among West Syrian Christians: Results and Conclusions of the Leiden Project', *Church History and Religious Culture* 89.1-3 (2009): 46-8.

⁵⁹ Michael Morony, 'History and Identity in the Syrian Churches', in Jan van Ginkel, Heleen Murre-van den Berg, and Theo van Lint (eds.), *Redefining Christian Identity: Cultural Interaction in the Middle East since the Rise of Islam* (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 1.

⁶⁰ For a fuller discussion on the mutability inherent in how one defines 'orthodoxy', see: Averil Cameron, 'Enforcing Orthodoxy in Byzantium', *Studies in Church History* 43 (2007): 1-24; *eadem*, 'The Cost of Orthodoxy', *Church History and Religious Culture* 93.3 (2013): 339-61.

⁶¹ Tannous, 'You Are What You Read', 101.

In addition to this ‘fuzziness’ and fluctuating levels of identification within the wider miaphysite community, one must also question the validity of even speaking about such a group in the first place. Hitherto, we have used terms such as ‘the miaphysites’ or ‘miaphysite community’ as a useful shorthand, a catch-all term to refer to the religious group that constituted most of the empire’s non-Chalcedonian Christian population. Yet, by using this term indiscriminately, we run the risk of implying that such a holistic group existed in the period in question and, in doing so, overstating the relative homogeneity of the ‘miaphysite community’ within the empire. Not only was non-Chalcedonian religious identity in flux within and between communities, but, on a macro level, there existed significant divisions and disputes within the ‘miaphysite community’ itself as to what constituted an ‘orthodox’ Christian. It will serve our purposes to present a simplified and truncated narrative of the various changes that took place among the ‘miaphysite community’ at large in the sixth and early seventh centuries, to illustrate the heterogeneity within it and the fact that division was a more common state than unity.

Our narrative begins in 519 at the breakdown of the period of (relative) reconciliation brought about by Zeno’s *Henotikon* — the ‘Act of Union’ implemented in 482.⁶² Justin I’s rejection of the compromise that had lasted almost four decades may have ended the Acacian schism and brought Constantinople back into communion with Rome, but it was accompanied by the imposition of Pope Hormisdas’ *Libellus fidei* that same year, which forced all clergy and monks in the empire to sign a statement accepting Chalcedon.⁶³ By 522, the imposition of the *Libellus* was largely complete (with the exception of Egypt) and, to judge from the testimony of John of Ephesus, had largely

⁶² For the official state position on the impact of the *Henotikon*, see, for example, Acacius’ letter to Peter Mongus: Ps.-Zacharias, *Chronicle*, 5.11.

⁶³ Wood, *We have no king*, 166.

succeeded in destroying what formal structures of miaphysite worship had developed in Syria, scattering the movement's leadership and leaving the rural monastic communities as the remaining bastions of worship.⁶⁴

After the atomisation caused by the *Libellus* and the exile of the Syrian miaphysite leadership into Egypt (most notably Severos, the deposed patriarch of Antioch), the miaphysite movement split into the followers of Severos (the Severans) and Julian of Halicarnassus (the Julianists, Aphthartodocetists, or Phantasiasts).⁶⁵ In Syria, limited attempts by figures such as John of Tella to re-establish an ordered church hierarchy were derailed. First by Justinian's novel of 536, which followed the deposition of the pro-miaphysite Patriarch Anthimos and expelled all remaining non-Chalcedonian bishops from their cities, then by the death of Severos in 538, who was still recognised as the legitimate patriarch of Antioch by miaphysites and thus was the closest to an overall leader for the movement in Syria.⁶⁶

In Egypt, which had been spared the decapitation of its miaphysite leadership in 519-22, the arrival of refugees from Syria brought with them the schism between Severans and Julianists. The elevation of the Severan Theodosios as patriarch of Alexandria in 535 resulted in the Julianists appointing Gaïanos as their own patriarch (leading to another alternative name, Gaïanites).⁶⁷ Military intervention by Constantinople swiftly removed Gaïanos and re-installed Theodosios, only for him to fall victim to Justinian's novel the following year; which, unlike the *Libellus fidei*, was

⁶⁴ The full account of these persecutions formed part of the lost second book of John of Ephesus' *Ecclesiastical History*, but can be partially recovered from Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, 9.13 and augmented with *Chronicle*, 9.14.

⁶⁵ Wood, *We have no king*, 167. On the exile of Severos prior to the *Libellus*, see: *Melkite Chronicle to 641*, 15-17 [=André de Halleux, 'La chronique melkite abrégée du ms. Sinaï syr. 10', *Le Muséon* 91 (1978): 35-38].

⁶⁶ Booth, 'Towards the Coptic Church', 154-5. On the impact of the arrival of Agapetus in Constantinople, see: John of Ephesus, *Life of Z'ura*, [=Brooks, 26-7].

⁶⁷ Ps.-Zacharias, *Chronicle*, 9.135.

applied to Egypt as elsewhere.⁶⁸ Somewhat paradoxically, Theodosios would spend his decades of exile in the imperial capital under the protection of Theodora, as the nominal head of the miaphysites in Egypt and, after Severos' death, the *de facto* leader of the entire movement.

By 538, the leadership of the erstwhile miaphysite church in both Syria and Egypt had been driven into exile. In Syria, the patriarchal seat was occupied by a Chalcedonian, without a miaphysite claimant after Severos' death, and the flame kept alive mainly by rural monastic communities. In Egypt, the movement was still divided into Theodosian/Severan and Gaianite/Julianist factions and while, unlike in Syria, there still existed parallel Chalcedonian and miaphysite patriarchates, albeit with Theodosios in exile in Constantinople, the situation on the ground amongst local clerics and monasteries would have been much the same picture of fragmentation as in Syria.

The power vacuum in Syria continued until, with the support of Theodora and the exiled Theodosios, Jacob Baradaeus was appointed bishop of Edessa in 542/3 — thereby lending the Syrian Severans their alternative name, 'Jacobites'. Jacob began by appointing new miaphysite priests in the region. The reconstitution of an organised movement in the region did not begin in earnest until the 550s, when Jacob began appointing new bishops; including, a new patriarch of Antioch in 558, Sergios of Tella, in opposition to the pre-existing Chalcedonian patriarchate of Domninos.⁶⁹ As a new miaphysite hierarchy began to take shape, yet another schism took root. This was the doctrine of Tritheism, among the main proponents of which were two of Jacob's own appointees, Eugenios of Seleucia and Konon of Tarsus: its spread among the Syrian

⁶⁸ Booth, 'Towards the Coptic Church', 154-5.

⁶⁹ Pauline Allen, 'Episcopal Succession in Antioch in the Sixth Century', in Johan Leemans, Peter van Nuffelen, Shawn Keogh, and Carla Nicolaye (eds.), *Episcopal Elections in Late Antiquity*, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 30.

clergy is shown by the fact that the new patriarch, Sergios, was also a Tritheite — the doctrine also had a major proponent in Egypt in the form of John Philoponos.⁷⁰ The infighting among the miaphysites in Syria was serious enough to catch the attention of the imperial authorities, with Justin II arranging a synod in order to reconcile the two parties, recognising that intractable division between the miaphysites would preclude effective union with the Chalcedonians.⁷¹

At this point, as well as the internal schisms within the Syrian and Egyptian miaphysite movements, tensions between the nascent miaphysite patriarchates of Antioch and Alexandria begin to come to the fore. By the 560s, the Syrian miaphysites had a distinct church hierarchy established by Jacob Baradaeus paralleling the Chalcedonian one, with its own Antiochene patriarch. In Egypt, a similar process had only begun in 564, when Theodosios (still in exile) appointed twelve bishops to sees in Egypt, likely in reaction to the strengthening of the Gaïanites after Justinian's *volte face* adoption of their doctrine late that year.⁷² Indeed, in 569, there seems to have been three patriarchs of Alexandria: the Chalcedonian John, the Severan/Theodosian Damian, and the Gaïanite/Julianist Dorotheos.⁷³ Alongside the appointment of the Egyptian bishops, 564 saw the appointment of Paul the Black as the miaphysite patriarch of Antioch, three years after the death of Sergius of Tella. A native of Alexandria and synkellos of Theodosios, Paul became patriarch thanks to his patron's support and seems to have had little connection to Syria, causing resentment among the Syrian

⁷⁰ Allen, 'Episcopal Succession', 31; Wood, *We have no king*, 170. For the origins and nature of the Tritheist movement, see: Albert van Roey and Pauline Allen, *Monophysite Texts of the Sixth Century*, (Leuven: Peeters, 1994), 122-6. On Eugenios and Konon, see: John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.1.31 and 3.5.1-7. On John Philoponos and his place in the Tritheite movement, see: Dirk Krausmüller, 'Under the Spell of John Philoponos: How Chalcedonian Theologians of the Late Patristic Period Attempted to Safeguard the Oneness of God', *Journal of Theological Studies* 68.2 (2017): 625-49; Albert van Roey, 'Les fragments trithéites de Jean Philopon', *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 11 (1980): 135-47.

⁷¹ John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.5.3-4.

⁷² Booth, 'Towards the Coptic Church', 163-4.

⁷³ John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.1.40 and 3.4.44.

clergy and monasteries at this apparent interference by the Alexandrine patriarch, sowing the seeds for the later division between the Severans/Jacobites and Paulites (supporters of the new patriarch) after Paul failed to secure his own appointment to the see of Alexandria.⁷⁴

The reverse scenario played out in Egypt following Theodosios' death in 566. After a ten-year intermezzo, in which there seems not to have been a separate Severan/Theodosian patriarch of Alexandria and instead an uneasy arrangement with Dorotheos, a new patriarch was appointed c.576 — although not without dispute.⁷⁵ Initially, Theodore of Rhamnis was appointed with the support of Paul the Black in Antioch. This was met by opposition in Alexandria, resulting in the appointment of Peter IV as patriarch, who began a programme of ordination that created a parallel miaphysite church in Egypt along the lines of that in Syria.⁷⁶ It was the acceptance of Peter by Jacob Baradaeus against the wishes of Paul the Black that instigated the aforementioned Jacobite-Paulite division within the Syrian church.⁷⁷ Meanwhile, resentment and suspicion between Antioch and Alexandria manifested into outright hostility under the respective successors to Peter IV and Paul the Black, Damian (r.576-605) and Peter of Callinicum (r.581-91).⁷⁸ Damian, who had previously attempted to appoint a rival Antiochene patriarch to Paul the Black (foiled by the Chalcedonian patriarch of Antioch, Gregory), asserted Alexandria's authority over Antioch and entered into a disagreement with Peter of Callinicum over the Tritheists, resulting in a full-blown schism between the two miaphysite patriarchates after Peter declared

⁷⁴ Allen, 'Episcopal Succession', 32. For history of the division among the Syrian clerics after the incidents in Alexandria, see: John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.4.18-31.

⁷⁵ John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.4.11-14.

⁷⁶ Booth, 'Towards the Coptic Church', 167-8. John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.4.11-14.

⁷⁷ John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.4.18-19.

⁷⁸ John of Ephesus already calls the disagreement over the ordination of Peter "a bitter schism between them": John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.4.14.

Damian a heretic in 586.⁷⁹ This schism would last three decades until, amid the Persian war, the then-patriarch of Antioch, Athanasios Gammolo, restored communion with his counterpart in Alexandria, Anastasios.⁸⁰ During this period of conflict between the two miaphysite patriarchal sees, both were engaged in internecine conflicts with the still-extant heterodox groups of the Tritheists and the Julianists/Gaïanites/Aphthartodocetists.

The development of multiple heterodox beliefs, the destruction and reconstruction of formal clerical structures, the lengthy periods without clear leadership, and continued division even when such leadership had been established does not bode well for anyone trying to reconstruct a holistic 'miaphysite identity'. When one then also takes into consideration the degree of 'fuzziness' in religious identity and code-switching that would have taken place outside of monastic and ecclesiastical circles, then it becomes apparent that any homogenous and definable 'miaphysite' identity, either in Syria, Egypt, or between the two, is precluded, at least in this period. There is an absence of a stable *Traditionskern* and attendant ethnicising discourse from which such an identity may have developed: a great deal of the attention of those actors who understood themselves as 'Syrian miaphysite' or 'Egyptian miaphysite' was instead consumed by the need to establish the legitimacy of their religious positions both against the dominant Chalcedonian group and, more importantly, other non-Chalcedonians. It was, in effect, too indistinct and too unstable to adequately develop as an identity that could offer an alternative to the dominant

⁷⁹ Allen, 'Episcopal Succession', 33-4; Booth, 'Towards the Coptic Church', 171-2. For Damian's attempt to appoint his own patriarch in Antioch, see: John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.4.43-5.

⁸⁰ Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, 10.26.

Roman imperial discourse, at least prior to the removal of that in the wake of the Arab conquests.⁸¹

Two exceptions to this may be identified. One are extremist factions within the wider movement that, through either genuine belief or political expediency, defined themselves against the empire's dominant Chalcedonian stance: though even here there is little to suggest that this translated into a rejection of Romanness and the legitimacy of the empire's rule *per se*.⁸² The second exception being the artificial 'miaphysite' identity constructed by Chalcedonian writers as a strawman to rail against as a fictitious and intractable enemy that needed to be destroyed – exemplified by Pisides' *Contra Severum*.

As such, the view perpetuated by many older narratives, that there was in some way a unified miaphysite movement in opposition to the imperial state and offering a viable alternative to Romanness, is largely the product of textual sources written centuries after the fact. These are, by virtue of the nature of textual production and preservation, largely from 'hard' areas of religious group identity (major monastic centres, for instance). The accounts of these later writers, like Dionysios of Tel-Mahre and Michael the Syrian, are reflective of the attitudes of their own time, when the sense of a distinct miaphysite religious identity in Syria and Egypt was more entrenched and developed. The imbalance in our source base, produced by a tiny fraction of the population with specific interests and agendas, generates what Papaconstantinou has referred to as a 'trompe l'oeil' effect — creating the illusion of a fully formed and

⁸¹ Bas ter Haar Romeny, 'Ethnicity, Ethnogenesis and the Identity of Syriac Orthodox Christians', in Walter Pohl, Clemens Gantner, and Richard Payne (eds.), *Visions of Community in the Post-Roman World: The West, Byzantium and the Islamic World, 300-1100*, (London: Routledge, 2016), 195-7.

⁸² See, for example, the bishops that derailed reconciliation under Justin II despite criticism from the laity, and likewise the situation with the negotiations between Athanasios Gammolo, the clerics, and Heraclius at Hierapolis in 630: John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.1.22 [Justin II]; Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, 11.2.405-8 and 11.3.409-10; Theoph. *Chron.* AM6121; and Booth, *Crisis of Empire*, 234.

distinctive miaphysite group (Syriac-speaking in Syria; Coptic-speaking in Egypt) that existed in parallel to an equally distinctive Chalcedonian, Greek-speaking, Roman one.⁸³ Once one takes into account the highly heterogeneous character of the non-Chalcedonian groups in the empire, the overall lack of continuity in their leadership in the period before the Arab conquests, and the multifaceted approach of different imperial governments towards them, then this illusion becomes readily apparent.⁸⁴

In line with this more fluid, less absolutist position, when one examines the few contemporary sources that shine a light on the everyday practices of people away from the fundamentalist core of either doctrinal position, then the picture becomes less ‘clash of civilisations’ and more ‘*convivencia*’. These sources reveal a world in which miaphysites and Chalcedonians operated largely as equals, broadly unconcerned about the doctrinal disputes that so exercised monks and clerics.

One of our best sources for escaping the fundamentalist narratives of texts produced in areas of ‘hard’ sectarian identity is the *Spiritual Meadow* of John Moschos and his disciple, the future patriarch Sophronios. Not so much thanks to the intentions of its authors, who followed the general pattern of categorising miaphysites as a homogenous ‘other’ group, but rather because of its character as a synoptical view of opinions and stories recorded across the empire’s eastern provinces over a period of several decades. Several examples exist in the *Meadow* attesting to the relatively indifferent attitude of people in the region towards the theological differences which the holy men in the work exercise themselves over. Indeed, even some of the monks in the

⁸³ Papaconstantinou, ‘Between *umma* and *dhimma*’, 130.

⁸⁴ For direct testimony for the vacillating position of the imperial government even within the reign of the same emperor, contrast the attitude ascribed to Justin II by John of Ephesus. At once the arch-persecutor of non-Chalcedonians: John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.1.5. But then later seeking reconciliation and sending non-Chalcedonian officials as part of an embassy to secure peace with the Sassanians: John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2.10. Likewise, under Tiberius: John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.3.12 and 3.3.20-21.

apophthegmata appear to be either unaware of the difference between the putative communities, or simply do not care.

In one story, a monk on Cyprus originally from Melitene told Moschos that his wife (both miaphysite) once went over to a neighbour's to take communion, without realising that said neighbour was a Chalcedonian and thus a heretic.⁸⁵ In another, a monk is described as being "indiscriminate" in matters of faith, taking communion in whatever church he happened to be nearest to on his travels, irrespective of whether it was Chalcedonian or miaphysite. It took the intervention of another monk and then the apparition of an angel to convince him to restrict himself only to Chalcedonian churches.⁸⁶ In a third, a Nestorian monk from Dara, called Theophanes, echoes the sentiments of many a weary person confronted by an evangelist: "But truly, abba, all the sects speak like that sir: that if you are not in communion with us, you are not being saved". It is only thanks to another angelic appearance and the threat of eternal damnation that he converts, not out of any real religious conviction or theological insight delivered by the abba.⁸⁷

Amidst the confusion and indifference, there is also very little evidence to show that miaphysites were treated any differently to their Chalcedonian counterparts, apart from various divine interventions and Moschos' holy men accosting them (even then, those same men occasionally admit that the miaphysites, on the surface, are often no different to them). A story from Anastasios, treasurer of Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, informs us that Cosmiana, the wife of a certain *patrikios* Germanos (quite a high-ranking imperial dignity), was a miaphysite. In another of Anastasios' tales, we find out that one

⁸⁵ John Moschos, *Pratum Spirituale*, 30.

⁸⁶ John Moschos, *Pratum Spirituale*, 178.

⁸⁷ John Moschos, *Pratum Spirituale*, 26.

of the military governors of Palestine, Gebemer, was also a miaphysite.⁸⁸ Abba Theodore, the bishop of Seleucia, tells us about a businessman who was “both devout and rich” but also a heretical miaphysite, whilst his manager was a Chalcedonian — epitomising the intersecting lives of the two religious groups as well as an admission that a miaphysite could be devout, whilst also being a heretic.⁸⁹ Later, we are given an description of the people present for the miracle that causes the businessman to convert to Chalcedonianism:

townsfolk and countrymen, natives and immigrants, all who travelled by land and sea, men and women, old men and children, youths and elders, masters and slaves, rich and poor, rulers and their subjects, literate and illiterate, those dedicated to the clerical life and those who had espoused virginity and asceticism; widows and recently married people; those in and those under authority.

This is followed by a statement that “many joined the holy catholic and apostolic Church” as result, a tacit admission that a good number of those ordinary people in the city were miaphysite.⁹⁰ We hear from an Abba Theodoulos about a Syriac-speaking miaphysite monk in Alexandria who exhibits all the hallmarks of the perfect ascetical life, causing Theodoulos to remark on “his excellent behaviour and his blameless way of life”; of course, his faith then manifests itself as a “blackened and disgusting dove”, but the acceptance is there that miaphysites could (or appear to) be just as devout as Chalcedonians.⁹¹

We see the same set of circumstances being repeated in Egypt. The mid-seventh century *vita* written by the pro-Chalcedonian hagiographer Leontios of Neapolis on John the Almsgiver (Chalcedonian patriarch of Alexandria, 610-619/20) unwittingly reveals

⁸⁸ John Moschos, *Pratum Spirituale*, 47-8.

⁸⁹ John Moschos, *Pratum Spirituale*, 79.

⁹⁰ John Moschos, *Pratum Spirituale*, 79.

⁹¹ John Moschos, *Pratum Spirituale*, 106.

the degree to which the two communities, ostensibly bitterly opposed to each other, seem to have been getting along just fine for the most part. At the behest of Sophronios, John sent out an entreaty to the faithful of Egypt as part of his paschal letter, forbidding them from taking communion or otherwise worshipping alongside people of non-Chalcedonian sects — comparing such an act to committing adultery or accepting counterfeit currency.⁹² The very fact that the patriarch — or rather Sophronios — felt the need to issue this ban in such strident terms indicates that people in Egypt of different sects were not only worshipping in each other's churches but even accepting the sacrament in them. This fluidity between the groups could also explain why the Chalcedonian conversion drive initiated under Patriarch Kyros seems to have been so effective, since in real terms it would have made little difference for many to 'convert' if one was already going to the churches of the opposing doctrine.

Both the *History of the Patriarchs* and the *Sermon on Cana* of Benjamin I (miaphysite patriarch of Alexandria, 623-662) begrudgingly provide evidence for the rapidity and success of Cyrus' push to reconcile the miaphysite population with imperial doctrine.⁹³ The view of general quiescence and lack of doctrinal conflict outside the confines of the monasteries in Egypt is also borne out by the papyrological evidence from both before and after the period of the Arab conquest, which shows no correlation between language use, ethnic identity, or religious doctrine as well as, in general, a total lack of awareness of any doctrinal conflict in the country.⁹⁴

⁹² Leontios of Neapolis, *Life of John the Almsgiver*, 49.1-48.

⁹³ Maged Mikhail, 'On Cana of Galilee: A Sermon by the Coptic Patriarch Benjamin I', *Coptic Church Review* 23:2 (2002): 90-1; Sawirus ibn al-Muqaffa', *History of the Patriarchs*, 1.221. The reference in the *Sermon* is to Zech. 13:7-9, in which God strikes down the shepherd causing the flock to scatter, two thirds of the people perish, and the rest are refined and tested: the 'flock' here is clearly the miaphysite populace in Egypt.

⁹⁴ Arietta Papaconstantinou, 'What remains behind': Hellenism and Romanitas in Christian Egypt after the Arab conquest', in Hannah Cotton, Robert Hoyland, Jonathan Price, and David Wasserstein (eds.), *From Hellenism to Islam: Culture and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 447-9; Bernard Palme, 'Political Identity versus Religious Distinction? The Case

As Tannous noted, the groups of people engaged in the doctrinal disputes between Chalcedonians, miaphysites, and their various offshoots made up only a tiny segment of the total population, even accounting only the literate, educated population (which in itself was miniscule).⁹⁵ Whilst a proportion of the population was likely curious about the different doctrines and could be manipulated into collective action in their name, even if they did not necessarily have the means to fully understand the finer theological points, the vast majority, both urban and rural, can be characterised as ‘simple believers’: versed in Christian belief, but more interested in receiving the Eucharist, getting married, and baptising their children, rather than the Christology of the priest performing these ceremonies.⁹⁶

In a world of ‘simple believers’, orthopraxy was of vastly greater importance than orthodoxy.⁹⁷ Much like the wife of the Cypriot monk in the *Spiritual Meadow*, most people seem to either have been unaware of the difference between the Chalcedonian and miaphysite churches, or else they simply did not care enough about it until encouraged or coerced to do so by those in positions of power. Given the highly esoteric nature of the distinction between the two doctrines, one can hardly blame them.

All together, these appearances attest to a thriving community existing alongside and intrinsically connected to that of the Chalcedonians. Members of both groups appear in all social strata and any recriminations against one or the other came at the behest of individuals with a particular personal stake in advancing their particular brand of Christianity. For most people, most of the time, the view seems to

of Egypt in the Later Roman Empire’, in Walter Pohl, Clemens Gantner, and Richard Payne (eds.), *Visions of Community in the Post-Roman World: The West, Byzantium and the Islamic World, 300-1100*, (London: Routledge, 2016), 95.

⁹⁵ Tannous, *The Making of the Medieval Middle East: Religion, Society, and Simple Believers*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 22-7.

⁹⁶ Tannous, *Making of the Medieval Middle East*, 124.

⁹⁷ Tannous, *Making of the Medieval Middle East*, 134.

have been that, to paraphrase the Nestorian monk, 'all sects speak alike'. This is not to say that doctrinal differences were completely inconsequential, or that they played no part in the discourse on Romanness in the empire prior to the rise of Islam, merely that such instances are either so situational that they should not be taken into consideration as part of the basic elements that constituted the group identity, or were important to only a very small number of people who possessed a heightened awareness of their identity based on church doctrine: some clerics and monastic communities, for example. By contrast, not being a Christian at all or being in opposition to the empire were widely and invariably understood as distinguishing Romans from non-Romans.

3.4: *You Are What You Speak? The Fallacy of Linguistic Determinism*

If adherence to a particular doctrine, what about linguistic differences? Speaking a common language is often cited as one of the hallmarks of an ethnic identity. Kaldellis has characterised Roman identity in Byzantium as being inherently connected to the Greek language: that speaking Greek was seen by people in the empire as one of the key aspects of their collective identity as Romans.⁹⁸ Yet, when one examines our sources for the seventh century — the last period prior to the tenth century that the empire encompassed significant areas of territory that were not majority Greek-speaking — there is little to support the assertion that the Greek language was seen as being indicative of Romanness. In fact, what emerges from the sources is a bipolar sense of what language meant for group identity, with Greek tending to be identified as 'our language', yet Latin seen as the 'language of the Romans', even though these same

⁹⁸ Kaldellis, *Romanland*, 271.

sources come from cultural contexts that cannot be interpreted as anything other than Roman.

Theophylact Simocatta, unusually in the Roman historical tradition, makes repeated reference to the language spoken by the various characters whose speeches he recorded. The language is referred to in such terms as “the ancestral language” or “the ancestral language of the Romans”; the assumption that this might be Greek must be tempered by the fact that Simocatta mentions one general, Priscus, speaking in the “ancestral language” then also delivering a speech “speaking the Attic of Themistocles in Latin”.⁹⁹ The only explanation is that the “ancestral language” is Latin. When wishing to refer explicitly to Greek, Simocatta uses “Ἑλληνικοῖς γράμμασιν” or “Ἑλληνικῇ”; a similar phrase to that used by John Moschos, “Ὁ δὲ εἷς τῶν Σαρακηνῶν ἀπεκρίθη μοι Ἑλληνιστὶ”.¹⁰⁰ Here then, we find Roman authors writing in Greek, but not referring to the language that they themselves spoke as ‘the language of the Romans’, reserving that term instead for a language that they may well not have been fluent in or even understood. The same phenomenon occurs in the *Short History*. Nikephoros, relying upon the continuation of John of Antioch, notes that the rank of a certain man “was that which the Romans are wont to call *candidatus*” and later, likely relying on Trajan the Patrician, that the recently crowned Tiberius III once held “an office which the Romans are wont to call *droungarios*” — a superficially Greek word, but one that, like *candidatus*, is derived from Latin (and probably of Gallic origin).¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, 6.7.9 [“καὶ γοῦν ὁ στρατῆγός τῃ πατρίῳ φωνῇ τοῖς Ῥωμαίοις τῶνδε λόγων ἀπήρξατο”], 8.1 [“Ἔτι γοῦν τοῦ στρατηγοῦ τοῖς λόγοις ἐπικυμαίνοντος καὶ τὰ θεμιστοκλέους Ῥωμαϊκῶς ἀττικίζοντος” (literally, ‘in the Roman manner’)], and 7.2.6 [“ὁ τοῖνυν τούτων ἐπιστατῶν (Ἀλέξανδρος ὄνομα αὐτῷ) τῃ πατρίῳ τῶν Ῥωμαίων φωνῇ τοῖς Ῥωμαίοις ἐνεκελεύετο”].

¹⁰⁰ John Moschos, *Pratum Spirituale*, 155.24-5; Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, 5.13.3 and 5.13.7.

¹⁰¹ Nikephoros, *Short History*, 4.1-5 and 41.22. Philip Rance, ‘Drungus, Δροῦγγος and Δρουγγιστί — a Gallicism and Continuity in Roman Cavalry Tactics’, *Phoenix* 58 (2004): 100-1.

It should come as little surprise that many of these references to Latin come in the context of the army, since it was in military matters that the language had the greatest linguistic impact and the context where it was most likely to be found being spoken in the empire outside of Italy and North Africa.¹⁰² Indeed, the frequency of Latin-derived words in those sections of Nikephoros' work and Theophanes' *Chronographia* thought to come from the lost history of Trajan the Patrician has been used to determine that he was more than likely a military official — or, at least, that whoever wrote the common source was.¹⁰³

The author of the second collection of the *Miracles of St Demetrios* twice makes a distinction between being 'Roman' and the language he and his audience spoke. The Slavic leader Perboundos is described as "wearing Roman garb and speaking our language", an odd construction given that it would have been simple enough to use 'Roman garb and the Roman language' or 'our garb and our language', whilst later in the text, a man named Maurois is sent to infiltrate Thessaloniki because he "knew our tongue and those of the Romans, Slavs, and Bulgars".¹⁰⁴ Again, this creates a distinction between the language spoken by the people in Thessaloniki a 'Roman' language; despite the fact that the text elsewhere makes it perfectly clear that the Thessalonians were themselves Romans.

¹⁰² One key text that demonstrates this is Maurice's *Strategikon*, in which the orders being given by heralds (in the text, 'mandator', itself Latin-derived) and drill sergeants are in Latin: Maurice, *Strategikon*, 12.8.14 ["Παραγγέλλει ὁ μανδάτωρ · Silentium. Mandata captate. Nos vos turbatis. Ordinem servate. Bando sequute. Nemo demittat bandum et inimicos seque."] and 16. On the continued use of Latin in Byzantium more generally, see: Gilbert Dagron, 'Aux origines de la civilisation byzantine: Langue de culture et langue d'État', *Revue historique* 241.1 (1969): 54-6; and Nicolas Oikonomides, 'Administrative Language and its Public Deployment', in Evangelos Chrysos and Ian Wood (eds.), *East and West: Modes of Communication. Proceedings of the First Plenary Conference at Merida* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 49-51.

¹⁰³ Jankowiak, 'The first Arab siege', 250.

¹⁰⁴ *Miracles of St Demetrios*, 2.234-7 ["ὡς φορῶν ῥωμαῖον σχῆμα καὶ λαλῶν τῇ ἡμετέρῃ διαλέκτῳ"] and 289-91 ["καὶ τὴν καθ' ἡμᾶς ἐπιστάμενον γλῶσσαν καὶ τὴν Ῥωμαίων, Σκλάβων καὶ Βουλγάρων"].

If language were such a crucial factor in determining who was or was not Roman in this period, one would at least expect that ‘Roman language’ to be spoken by the Romans themselves. Some people in the empire certainly did speak Latin, but these would have been concentrated in imperial centres such as Constantinople, and in Italy, North Africa, and the western Balkans. Thus, to limit Romanness to those who spoke the ‘Roman language’ would necessarily exclude most of the Roman population; likewise, restricting Romanness to those who spoke Greek in the seventh century is to then exclude most of those who spoke the ‘language of the Romans’. So long as one accepts that language acted as a determining factor in Roman identity, this presents an insoluble problem.

Another clear example is a puzzling passage in the record of the trial of Maximos the Confessor. In it, Maximos is questioned as to why he “love[s] the Romans and hate[s] the Greeks”, to which the response is: “Παραγγελίαν ἔχομεν τοῦ μὴ μισῆσαι τινά. Ἀγαπῶ τοὺς Ῥωμαίους ὡς ὁμοπίστους, τοὺς δὲ Γραικοὺς ὡς ὁμογλώσσους”.¹⁰⁵ Taking language as a definitive aspect of Romanness inevitably results in the conclusion that Maximos is referring to a Greek identity that was differentiated from the Roman. The reality, however, is that the two terms here are not used as ethnic markers. ‘Romans’ here refers specifically to the people inhabiting the city of Rome, or, at least, under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Roman see, and the ‘Greeks’ the predominantly Greek-speaking population of Constantinople, or, again, those under the control of that city’s see. Maximos is not here seeking to define ‘Romans’ as an ethnic group distinct from Greek-speakers.

¹⁰⁵ *Relatio motionis*, 11 [“We have an instruction not to have hate towards anyone. I love the Romans since they are of like-faith, the Greeks since they are of like-tongue”].

Key to this interpretation is the fact that a distinction already exists in the text prior to this between ‘Romans’ and ‘Byzantines’ regarding ecclesiastical matters.¹⁰⁶ As Theodoropoulos has argued, there existed a more general distinction between ‘Romans’ and ‘Byzantines’ in the empire, with the former being the inhabitants of the city of Rome and its see and the latter the people of Constantinople and its see.¹⁰⁷ Likewise, the *Sacra* of Constantine IV that was sent to Pope Donus in 678 to initiate the Sixth Ecumenical Council made a distinction between ‘Roman’ and ‘Byzantine’ seemingly on the basis of ecclesiastical practices by requesting that the papal delegation to the council include four members each from the “four Byzantine monasteries” in Rome.¹⁰⁸ This can only be an indication of the fact that these monasteries were among those founded by Greek-speaking refugees from the eastern parts of the empire. It is therefore not a distinction in ethnic terms, but rather linguistic and geographical ones.¹⁰⁹ In this sense, ‘Greek’ (Greek-speaker under Constantinople), is functionally synonymous with ‘Byzantine’ when contrasted with ‘Roman’, meaning Latin-speaking and from the area under the see of Rome.

When this is applied to Maximos, who himself was among the ‘Byzantines’ in Rome, he meets the criteria to be a member of all these groups — as he himself confesses. He is ‘Roman’, in the sense of following the doctrine adopted by the Roman see, and he is ‘Byzantine’/‘Greek’, insofar as he is a Greek-speaker originating from a region outside the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of Rome. The only logical reason why ‘Γραικοὺς’ is used over ‘Βυζαντίους’ in this section of the text is because the latter

¹⁰⁶ *Relatio motionis*, 7.

¹⁰⁷ Panagiotis Theodoropoulos, ‘Did the Byzantines call themselves Byzantine? Elements of Eastern Roman identity in the imperial discourse of the seventh century’, *BMGS* 45.1 (2021): 26-7.

¹⁰⁸ *ACO* 2.2, 1.6.30 [“[ἐκπέμψει] ἐκ δὲ τῶν τεσσάρων Βυζαντίων μοναστηρίων ἕξ ἐκάστου μοναστηρίου ἀββάδας τέσσαρας”].

¹⁰⁹ Theodoropoulos, ‘Elements of Eastern Roman identity’, 30-31.

makes no sense in conjunction with ‘ὁμογλώσσους’, since ‘Byzantios’ was not the term used to refer to the Greek language, whereas ‘Graikos’ certainly was. As to whether the interrogator in Constantinople used the same term in anticipation of Maximos’ reply, we shall never know — although it does seem unlikely. In short, so far as Maximos and whoever wrote down the text of the trial is concerned, Maximos is Roman in confession and Greek in language, whilst the imperial officials in Constantinople are Byzantine in confession and, likewise, Greek in language. All, however, are Roman in terms of their ethnic identity; whether they are ‘Roman’ or ‘Greek’ in their language makes no difference to that.

In itself, the term ‘Graikos’ rarely appears in Byzantine literature as an ethnonym for ‘Greeks’; the usual term being some variation on ‘Hellene’, which itself was typically used to refer to either pagans or people from the region of the province of Achaia that would later become the theme of Hellas.¹¹⁰ On the other hand, ‘Graikos’, or some related word, could, and was, used to refer specifically to the Greek language. We see it clearly separated from any connotation of Romanness in a passage from Theophanes concerning the arrival in Constantinople of Charlemagne’s daughter, Rotrude (known in Greek as Erythro), to marry the future Constantine VI. Having come to Byzantium from Francia, she is assigned a eunuch named Elissaios “πρὸς τὸ διδάξει αὐτὴν τὰ τε τῶν Γραικῶν γράμματα καὶ τὴν γλῶσσαν” as well as “παιδεῦσαι αὐτὴν τὰ ἥθη τῆς Ῥωμαίων βασιλείας”.¹¹¹ The same use of the term in reference to the Greek language, rather than any particular ethnicity, appears in the *Taktika* of Leo VI, in which his father Basil I is

¹¹⁰ For an example of the former, see: John Moschos, *Pratum Spirituale*, 136; for the latter, see: *Miracles of St Demetrios*, 1.122-9 and *Pratum Spirituale*, 163. ‘Graikoi’ does appear in the tenth-century *Suda* as an ethnonym, but is defined principally as a synonym for ‘Hellenes’: *Suda*, gamma, 447 [“Γραικοί: οἱ Ἕλληνες, ἀπὸ κώμης τινὸς, ἢ ἀπὸ Γραικοῦ τινος. ἐκ τοῦ Γραίξ, Γραικός”; “Graikoi’: the Hellenes. From a certain village, or from a certain ‘Graikos’. Derived from ‘Graix’, genitive ‘Graikos’”].

¹¹¹ Theoph. *Chronographia*, AM6274.5-7 [“in order to teach her both the letters and language of the Greeks”, “to instruct her in the customs of the empire of the Romans”].

noted to have ‘Greekified’ the Slavs inhabiting the mountainous areas of Greece (that is, encouraged them to learn Greek) and then reorganised them politically in the manner of the Romans.¹¹²

Why would the need arise to assign different names to the people of the empire and the language they spoke? Because ‘Roman language’ was still being used for Latin in Byzantium until well into the tenth century: multiple entries of the *Suda*, for instance, use ‘Roman’ to refer to texts that were written in or translated into Latin.¹¹³ The transformative process which saw ‘Roman’ to both language and people was likely already underway by this point, but it seems not to have become standard practice: at least, not among elite circles.

To return to Maximos: making the Greek language an intrinsic factor in defining Romanness would put us in the bizarre situation of having people who spoke Greek being Roman and, paradoxically, people who spoke a language called ‘Roman’ by the Romans, yet who would not be Romans because of that fact. Moreover, as other texts show, this is a scenario that would be repeated not only across the seventh century empire, but down to at least the tenth century in some circles. The solution, of course, is to recognise that Romanness in the seventh century was not seen as being tied to speaking Greek, thus allowing for the existence of a polyglot community of Greek and Latin-speakers, among other languages, existing under a common rubric of Romanness

¹¹² Leo VI, *Taktika*, 18.95 [“Ταῦτα δὲ ὁ ἡμέτερος ἐν θεῖα τῇ λήξει γεγόμενος πατήρ καὶ Ῥωμαίων αὐτοκράτωρ Βασίλειος τῶν ἀρχαίων ἐθῶν ἔπεισε μεταστῆναι καὶ, γραικώσας, καὶ ἄρχουσι κατὰ τὸν Ῥωμαϊκὸν τύπον ὑποτάξας”].

¹¹³ For instance: *Suda*, alpha, 4148 [“Ἀσίνιος Πωλίων, Ῥωμαῖος, ἱστορίας Ῥωμαϊκᾶς συνέταξεν ἐν βιβλίοις ιζ’. οὗτος πρῶτος Ἑλληνικὴν ἱστορίαν Ῥωμαϊκῶς συνεγράψατο”; “Asinius Pollio, Roman. Wrote a Roman history in seventeen books. This man was the first to compose Greek history in Latin”] and kappa, 1196 [“Καῖσαρ Ἰούλιος, ὁ πρῶτος μοναρχήσας. ἔγραψε μετάφρασιν τῶν Ἀράτου Φαινομένων, τέχνων γραμματικὴν Ῥωμαϊκῶς”; “Caesar, Julius, the first to reign. Wrote a translation of Aratos’ *Phenomena* and a grammar in Latin”].

— the real underpinnings of which were their shared Christian faith and acceptance of imperial hegemony.

Complicating the job of parsing the already complex linguistic makeup of Romanness is the fact that both Syria-Palestine and Egypt were linguistically highly diverse, as well as religiously pluralistic. Attempting to pin down the exact language spoken by individuals in any one text is an invidious task since, as Nike Koutrakou noted in relation to hagiography. Most of the literature glides effortlessly over issues of language, seemingly assuming that everyone had a working knowledge of whatever language the author themselves wrote in (or else a universal translator).¹¹⁴

In both regions, Greek functioned as a lingua franca and it seems that this facilitated a high level of bilingualism even outside of urban centres — the evidence for which is borne out in inscriptions (in Syria) and papyri (in Egypt).¹¹⁵ Even if one were, paraphrasing Peter Webb in a recent work on Arab ethnogenesis, ‘to put the (linguistic) cart before the horse’ and assume that the ethnic identity of groups was determined (or encouraged) by the language they spoke and wrote in, one would quickly come up against the problem that not only were these putative ethno-linguistic groups bilingual, but they were very often multiconfessional too.¹¹⁶ That is to say, there is precious little evidence to show that different religious groups in Syria or Egypt were exclusively users of any one language or attached a sense of ethnic identity to them. There seems no

¹¹⁴ Nike Koutrakou, ‘Language and Dynamics of Communication in Byzantium: the ‘Image’ of the Arabs in Hagiographical Sources’, in Barbara Crostini and Sergio La Porta (eds.), *Negotiating Co-Existence: Communities, Cultures, and Convivencia in Byzantine Society* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2013), 48.

¹¹⁵ Maged Mikhail, *From Byzantine to Islamic Egypt: Religion, Identity and Politics after the Arab Conquest* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 91-2; David Taylor, ‘Bilingualism and Diglossia in Late Antique Syria and Mesopotamia’, in James Adams, Mark Janse, and Simon Swain (eds.), *Bilingualism in Ancient Society: Language Contact and the Written Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 304-5.

¹¹⁶ Peter Webb, *Imagining the Arabs: Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 63.

reason to preclude the existence of either many Syriac or Coptic-speaking Chalcedonians or Greek-speaking miaphysites and vice versa.

One small episode from the Coptic *Life of St Pistentios*, written in the late seventh century, appears to confirm this suspicion. In it, an unnamed soldier from the region of Nilopolis travels to visit Pistentios (sometimes rendered as Pesynthios) to ask the saint's advice on a matter. It is safe to assume that this soldier was a miaphysite, given that the text does not make clear his confession, which likely would have been the case in this miaphysite hagiography if he were a Chalcedonian seeking out the miaphysite bishop of Coptos. The text, in a rare instance, explicitly refers to Pistentios speaking to the man through a translator.¹¹⁷ It seems safe to assume then that this soldier was both a miaphysite and a monolingual Greek-speaker, since it is known from archaeological and papyrological evidence that Pistentios knew Coptic.¹¹⁸ Whilst it is possible that Pistentios also knew Greek and was attempting to make a similar statement to John of Tella, who refused to speak it at his interrogation, the reverse scenario (the soldier knowing but refusing to speak Coptic to the saint) is highly improbable.¹¹⁹ As this episode takes place during the period of the Persian occupation of Egypt, there remains the possibility that the soldier spoke only Persian; but the fact that he is said to be a native of Upper Egypt makes this extremely unlikely. Here then we have a very minor, but nonetheless revealing, encounter between a Coptic-speaking miaphysite bishop and a Greek-speaking miaphysite soldier, both adhering to the same religious doctrine, yet needing an interpreter to communicate with one another. Who are we to say that the soldier was

¹¹⁷ John the Elder, *Life of St Pistentios* [=Ernest Wallis Budge, *Coptic Apocrypha in the Dialect of Upper Egypt*, (London: British Museum, 1913), 258-321], 315-16.

¹¹⁸ Phil Booth, 'A Circle of Egyptian Bishops at the End of Roman Rule (c.600): Texts and Contexts', *Le Muséon* 131.1 (2018): 39-42.

¹¹⁹ On John of Tella's refusal to speak Greek, see: Fergus Millar, 'The Evolution of the Syrian Orthodox Church in the Pre-Islamic Period: From Greek to Syriac?', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 21.1 (2013): 63. For the episode in question: Ps.-Zacharias, *Chronicle*, 10.175.

any less a 'miaphysite' because of his lack of Coptic; likewise, how can we tell if he is any more 'Roman' than Pistentios since he knew Greek?

The vast majority of miaphysite patriarchs of Alexandria in the sixth and seventh centuries demonstrate considerable learnedness in Greek and many betray no knowledge of Coptic.¹²⁰ Even into the early eighth century, we find the Patriarch Alexander II (r.705-30) issuing his annual paschal letter in high-style Greek, not Coptic.¹²¹ This letter, which would have been circulated throughout Egypt, presupposes that someone at its destination (in the case of the surviving papyrus copy, Deir el-Abyad, halfway between Aswan and Alexandria) would have been able to read and understand such elevated Greek and leaves the question as to whether or not it would have then been translated into lower-register Greek or Coptic for onward transmission to local communities. Whatever the case, it is clear that the miaphysite patriarch in the first half of the eighth century, some half century after the disappearance of Roman rule, preferred to use Greek over Coptic in his festal communication and, moreover, expected that the monasteries scattered throughout the land had the language skills necessary to understand his message: dispelling the notion that, even long after the end of Chalcedonian domination, Egyptian miaphysites had abandoned Greek as a means of communication in favour of Coptic.

It is clear from the papyrological evidence that language choice in Egypt in the sixth and seventh centuries, both before and after the Arab conquests, had much more to do with social relations and the relative perceived appropriateness of each language for certain communications than it had with any claim to ethnic identity.¹²² Coptic was

¹²⁰ Mikhail, *From Byzantine to Islamic Egypt*, 85-6.

¹²¹ Leslie MacCoull, 'The Paschal Letter of Alexander II, Patriarch of Alexandria: A Greek Defense of Coptic Theology under Arab Rule', *DOP* 44 (1990): 27-9.

¹²² van der Vliet, 'The Copts', 286

seen as being the language fit largely for private documents; Greek for public ones.¹²³ This distinction persisted into the Islamic period, even when there was no longer any effective basis for considering Greek the language of administration or law. The fact that the choice of language was based not on questions of identity, but social appropriateness, is borne out from the fact that when such public documents began to eventually be written in a language other than Greek, the choice was Arabic, the successor to Greek as Egypt's administrative and legal language, and not Coptic.¹²⁴ Whilst there was some limited development in the process of associating Coptic with miaphysitism and Greek with Chalcedonianism, this only really became significant in the period after the end of Roman imperial rule; when the discourse of the miaphysite church began to present itself as the 'native' church of Egypt, speaking Egypt's native language, and the Chalcedonian church and its Greek language as a foreign import.¹²⁵ The contemporary papyrological and textual evidence from the sixth and seventh centuries suggests a land that was thoroughly bilingual and where linguistic groups cut across confessional lines, with no indication that the choice to use either Coptic or Greek was a claim to either miaphysite or Chalcedonian religious identity, let alone an Egyptian or Roman identity.

While arguing from a vacuum of evidence is always a dangerous proposition, it does seem reasonable, when one takes into account the lack of definitive concordance between religious identity and language in the Byzantine East, as well as the high level of bilingualism in the region, to make the case that speaking Syriac, Coptic, or other

¹²³ Booth, 'A Circle of Egyptian Bishops', 49.

¹²⁴ Papaconstantinou, 'Making of the Coptic "Church of the Martyrs" in Early Islamic Egypt' 81; Tonio Sebastian Richter, 'Language Choice in the Qurra Dossier', in Arietta Papaconstantinou (ed.), *The Multilingual Experience in Egypt, from the Ptolemies to the 'Abbāsids*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 216.

¹²⁵ Papaconstantinou, 'Making of the Coptic "Church of the Martyrs"', 83-4; van der Vliet, 'The Copts', 286; Wipszycka, 'Le nationalism', 84-5.

languages did not present a barrier to people being seen as part of a wider Roman ethnic identity. Indeed, one could make the case that the very dearth of evidence for what language individuals spoke, while it makes assessing the linguistic makeup difficult, is indicative of the relative unimportance of this aspect of identity in the seventh century empire: the reason it is not commented upon in most cases is precisely because few considered it relevant enough to do so.

If it is self-evident that speaking Greek or Latin did not *a priori* make one a Roman, then it is also clear that there exists no real basis to assume that the reverse. The predominant view of the role of language as an identity-marker in this period is that, most of the time, it simply was not. That is not to say absolutely that language could not be used to exclude or delegitimise certain groups. This clearly did happen before, during, and after our period. For instance, in the fifth-century, speaking Syriac could certainly provide a barrier to acceptance for some: it is the language of demons in the *Historia Ecclesiastica* of Theodoret of Cyrrhus.¹²⁶ In the eleventh century, meanwhile, Anna Komnene considered being literate in Greek to be an intrinsically Roman quality (simply being able to speak it was evidently not enough for her).¹²⁷ What is clear, however, is that language was not a fundamental tool used by people in the empire for identifying Romans and, as such, nor should it be used by modern historians. It is the centuries-long process that aligned Roman ethnic identity with the use of Greek, its displacement of Latin as the definitive ‘Roman language’, and the loss of the polyglot

¹²⁶ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 21.15-16. For more on the relationship between Greek and Syriac as Christian languages in the east prior to the seventh century see: Fergus Millar, ‘Theodoret of Cyrrhus: A Syrian in Greek Dress?’, in Hagit Amirav and Bas ter Haar Romeny (eds.), *From Rome to Constantinople: Studies in Honour of Averil Cameron*, (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 117-20; Theresa Urbainczyk, ‘The Devil Spoke Syriac to Me’: Theodoret in Syria’, in Stephen Mitchell and Geoffrey Greatrex (eds.), *Ethnicity and Culture in Late Antiquity*, (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2000), 253-65.

¹²⁷ Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*, 15.7.9.6-9 [“καὶ ἔστιν ἰδεῖν καὶ Λατῖνον ἐνταῦθα παιδοτιβούμενον καὶ Σκύθον ἑλληνίζοντα καὶ Ῥωμαῖον τὰ τῶν Ἑλλήνων συγγράμματα μεταχειριζόμενον καὶ τὸν ἀγράμματον Ἑλληνα ὀρθῶς ἑλληνίζοντα”]; “And he even saw here a Latin being taught, a Scythian speaking Greek, a Roman bearing the works of the pagans in hand, and the illiterate Hellene speaking Greek correctly”].

communities of the East that provides the basis for language to be adopted more widely as an identity marker of Romanness. As to how and when this process started and when it can be judged to have reached such a critical mass as to be recognised by historians as the default position requires much more attention than can be devoted here: it is self-evident, though, that it was very far from that stage in the seventh century and, arguably, even in the tenth.¹²⁸

3.5: *Conclusions*

In this chapter we have seen how the traditional elements of Roman group identity — Orthodoxy and the Greek language — are fundamentally inadequate to address the degree of diversity and fluctuation in identity which characterised the pre-Islamic empire. In fact, by sticking to the mantra that Romanness was associated with specific religious and linguistic markers, we actively mask the complexities of the situation on the ground and risk falling into the primordialist trap set by our sources: projecting discrete versions of Roman, Syrian, and Egyptian identity onto the seventh century, crafting a mosaic pavement of separate ethnic identities using tesserae that, in some cases, postdate our period by several centuries.

Identities, like anything else in history, must invariably be seen as belonging to diachronic processes. Thus, while it would be foolish to dismiss the idea that Syrian and Egyptian ethnic identities based on language and religion could not have existed, their

¹²⁸ For instance, see *De Ceremoniis*, in which Latin is still referred to as the ‘Roman’ language and yet the banners brought before the emperor and empress are also ‘Roman’ only a few lines before: *De Ceremoniis*, 1.1.8.13 [“τά τε ῥωμαϊκὰ σκῆπτρα τὰ λεγόμενα βῆλα], 1.1.8.19 [“[οἱ καγκελλάριοι] ῥωμαΐζοντες τὰ τῆ ἐορτῆ ἀρμόζοντα”].

Kaldellis has argued that the process in spoken Greek had completed by the mid-thirteenth century and, in popular discourse, had likely begun before the eleventh century: Kaldellis, *Romanland*, 102-5.

formation would be part of a process of differentiation which was far from complete in the first half of the seventh century. Equally true is the fact that Romanness changed its defining qualities as the centuries passed and circumstances evolved.

The purpose of this chapter has been to provide us with a model of Romanness that considers the diversity of the seventh-century empire. It is necessarily a snapshot of Romanness frozen at a particular time and a Romanness suited to the context of a state which had been multilingual for centuries, where significant heterodox populations precluded a 'closing-off' of Romanness, and where these minorities had not yet fully developed independent ethnic identities. We thus end up with a version of Romanness where the boundaries of the group identity were elastic enough to encompass such differences, for the most part. Although religion and language could indeed be used by certain historical actors to make exclusive claims to Roman identity, or to delegitimise the claims of others, such instances were connected to specific contexts and usually bound up with the proclivities of a particular writer — most often clerics with a doctrinal axe to grind. For the most part, we find that heterodoxy and multilingualism paid little role in the lives of those on the ground, who continued to be governed by the Roman emperor, used Roman coinage to pay Roman taxes, were under Roman law administered by Roman officials, and were protected by a Roman army.

4. Creating the Islamic 'Other', Part One: A New Reality

Our discussion of Roman identity has been largely confined within a temporal bubble of around a hundred years covering the sixth and seventh centuries. Henceforth, our analysis will adopt a much more diachronic focus, as we begin to examine the impact of the monumental changes wrought on Roman society from the seventh century onwards. The end of the conflict with Sasanian Persia from 629 gave rise to a moment of Roman unipolarity in the geostrategic dynamic that had defined the Eastern Mediterranean for centuries. This moment lasted less than a decade and ended with the rise of a new military, political, and religious power in the form of Islam. In a matter of decades, the Roman world was radically redefined: reversing the triumphant victory secured only a few years before, dramatically shrinking the empire's territory and horizons, and plunging its society into a prolonged period of uncertainty where its survival was put into question.

This chapter, and those subsequent, will focus broadly on the impact that these changes had on how Romanness was constructed, given its nature as an identity fundamentally constructed around two pillars that were directly challenged by Islam. The claims made by the empire to universal dominion and its special relationship to the divine were undermined by progressive military and political collapse in the decades after 634; whilst the very legitimacy of Christianity itself was challenged by Islam's success. Yet, these pressures did not result in the destruction of Roman identity, but rather prompted a reassessment and redefinition: a hardening of Romanness in reaction to the existential threat it now faced. This involved two processes working in tandem, the one being an inward-looking reassessment of Roman imperial power,

Christianity, and the relationship between the two; the other, a gradual coming to terms with the nature of the threat posed by Islam and its depiction as an anti-Roman 'Other'.

We shall begin immediately prior to the arrival of Islam, outlining the ways in which the Persian enemy was characterised as being an 'Other' against which Romanness could be defined during the final Sasanian-Roman war. Our focus will be particularly on the brief window between 628 and 634, when Roman might had proven victorious and when the imprint of the armed struggle with Persia is most visible. It is important, in this regard, to understand what Roman perceptions of 'otherness' were at in the period immediately preceding the arrival of Islam, as it offers clues as to why the initial reaction to Islam was to effectively ignore its very existence.

That reaction can be divided between those still living under the authority of Constantinople and those among the Roman population that found itself once again under the dominion of a non-Christian imperial power. The reaction of the former group can also be divided up into two distinct phases. The first will be dealt with in this chapter and broadly covers the period from 634 until the rise of the Isaurian dynasty in 717. It encompassed the initial rationalisation of the cataclysm of the Arab conquests: a process marked by an internal debate that largely sidestepped understanding the Arabs and Islam in favour of carrying forward processes that began during the Persian war. The second phase shows much greater influence from communities within the Islamic world that had much less latitude to just ignore the existence of a new Abrahamic faith. It is also at this point that Romans truly began to construct an image of Islam and reconfigured Romanness in opposition to it. This image of Islam and its irreconcilable difference to Romanness had largely solidified by the ninth century and persisted for a remarkably long time. But first, back to 628.

4.1: *Constructing the 'Other' in the Persian War*

Insofar as any identity is fundamentally constructed around that which it is not as much as that which it is, careful attention must be paid to the strategies at work at all levels of Roman society as part of a discourse to 'other' opposing identities. Identifying the aspects of another group of people that set them apart from your own and highlighting, either by proxy or more deliberately, the core values that define the wider group identity. It is during times of armed conflict that this crystallisation of core group values attains its greatest degree of reification, due to the urgency of identifying 'us' from 'them'. The last Roman-Persian war, long-lasting and wide-reaching in its effects, thereby offers us something of a test-run for how strategies of othering operated among different groups within the Roman world vis-à-vis the 'enemy': the Persian invader, foremost, but also those groups seen as having facilitated or welcomed their aggression against the dominant Roman social group, namely the empire's Jewish population.

To avoid becoming bogged down in what is itself a weighty topic, our analysis of Roman attitudes towards the Persians and Jews will be limited in its scope and chronology. We will therefore be focusing on a relatively small sample of texts and authors, many of whom we have already encountered in examining how Romanness was constructed in the period running up to and during the war. This will aim to be a representative sample, despite its limited scope, involving authors writing for an audience in the imperial core in Constantinople, those in the provinces outside of the capital, and those on the front lines in the territories occupied by the Persians. Each of these, in accordance with the picture of Romanness that has been outlined, tends to present a remarkably consistent pattern of othering, adopting strategies that conform

with the normative attitude of Roman society: of the ultimate supremacy of Roman imperial might and of God's support for the Christian-Roman people.

The central, imperial position towards the Persians is the one for which we have the greatest amount of evidence and, consequently, is also the one that leaves the least room for ambiguity in its position towards them. By nature of the situation of the authors, being one step removed from the conflict, the attitudes of their audience, and the overwhelming ideological pressure from the imperial government to present the enemy in negative terms, these portrayals of Persian 'otherness' tend to be the most absolute and focus most assuredly on the aspects of Roman identity that the imperial government wished to emphasise most clearly. Whilst it is reasonable to adopt the position that the imperial government did not operate so sophisticated a propaganda machine as one might expect from a modern state, and thus that the views expressed by authors like George of Pisidia are not wholly that of the Heraclian regime, the sheer weight of ideological pressure coming from the palace (and simply from existing in Constantinople) meant that their views express that of the state almost by proxy.¹

Perhaps the closest we can get to how the imperial government sought to 'other' the Persians and emphasise Roman values is the preserved text of Heraclius' military dispatch in the closing days of the war in 628, reported almost verbatim by the author of the *Chronicon Paschale*. The language used by Heraclius in the dispatch is uncompromising towards Khusrow and the Persians, to say the least. The emperor describes his, now deceased, enemy as, amongst other things, "God-abhorred", "ingrate, arrogant, blaspheming opponent of God", who was defeated by "God and our Lady the Mother of God [who] collaborated with us and our Christ-loving contingents beyond

¹ On the lack of systematic use of propaganda by the imperial government: James Howard-Johnston, *The Last Great War of Antiquity*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 365-6.

mortal understanding”.² The emperor portrays his enemy as the enemy of Christianity itself, laying into him and presenting his defeat as a triumph for God and the empire; and, in doing so, depicting the Persian invasion and attack on the Romans as emblematic of a Godless people, whose depraved leadership had met its rightful end. Coming as part of a triumphant imperial military dispatch, ostensibly from the hand of the emperor himself, it is no surprise that this text adopts a hard-line stance that leaves no ambiguity to the Roman population of the empire of the justness of their victory and the evil of an enemy that had attacked both the political constitution of the empire and its faith.

Yet this dispatch is part of a much wider discourse that had developed in the empire over the course of the war that depicted the Persians and their leadership in similarly anti-Roman terms. Heraclius’ dispatch is a part of this discourse, shaping and being shaped by it, and giving official legitimacy to the position towards the Persians that had sprung up organically in many quarters and that drew upon a wider and deeply rooted set of assumptions about Romanness which allowed the depiction to achieve widespread currency. The attitude of the imperial government did not spring from a vacuum and Heraclius’ dispatch marks merely the capstone of a discussion that took place amongst Roman society before and over the course of the decades-long war about the nature of Persian aggression and how to understand the enemy.³ The consistency of this discourse can be seen from other texts produced in the imperial centre that replicate similar attitudes towards the Persians and their leadership: presenting the invasion as an attack on the Roman empire and the Roman church and making opposition to it the duty of those who believed in either.

² *Chronicon Paschale*, 729.628.

³ Scott McDonough, ‘Were the Sasanians Barbarians? Roman Writers on the “Empire of the Persians”’, in Ralph Mathisen and Danuta Shanzer (eds), *Romans, Barbarians, and the Transformation of the Roman World: Cultural Interaction and the Creation of Identity in Late Antiquity*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 55-65 and Jan Willem Drijvers, ‘A Roman Image of the “Barbarian” Sasanians’, in *idem*, 67-76.

The sermon given to Domitianos, bishop of Melitene, by Theophylact Simocatta upon the recapture of Martyropolis by the Romans is a case in point. It has been noted already that this passage is unusual in its break from the general tone of Simocatta's work and represents the insertion of his own concerns into an otherwise impersonal, classicising narrative history.⁴ Thus, in addition to the highly religiously charged accusations that we also find in Heraclius' dispatch and which we have argued elsewhere demonstrates the link between Roman and Christian identity, 'Domitianos' also presents a complex set of comparisons between the Persians and other unequivocally 'anti-Roman' groups.⁵ These anti-Roman tags hinge largely around the political 'secular' framing of Roman identity around the imperial state and its governing culture — not surprising given the author's own position close to the imperial government and the classicising nature of the work. In addition to the all-purpose "barbarian" label, the Persian ruler (Hormizd IV in the *History*, but really as a proxy for Khusrow II) is singled out as a "Babylonian tyrant" and the Persians themselves as the "Babylonian tribe".⁶

These labels operate on multiple levels. On the one hand, they reinforce the idea of the Persians as barbarians, fundamentally non-Romans, whose empire and culture were illegitimate and despotic in the manner of the biblical Babylonians. This hits at the notion of Roman rule being predicated on its political and legal legitimacy; that, while the emperor himself may be an autocrat wielding near-absolute power, he was at least

⁴ Joseph Frendo, 'Three Authors in Search of a Reader: An approach to the analysis of direct discourse in Procopius, Agathias and Theophylact Simocatta', in Claudia Sode and Sarolta Takács (eds.), *Novum Millennium: studies on Byzantine history and culture dedicated to Paul Speck*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 130

⁵ See chapter 2, p.31.

⁶ Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, 4.16.21-22.

governed by legal strictures that separated Romans from barbarians.⁷ The emperor may be a monarch, but he is not a tyrant. This particular view of the political basis of Romanness (that being Roman meant being governed by the empire's laws) was already ancient by this point and may have already been lacking in importance — although it likely would have played far better for Simocatta and his educated audience than the population at large.

The second level of meaning serves to tie together the politico-cultural idea of what was not Roman ('barbarian tyrant') with the religious ('Babylonian tribe'). As well as characterising the Persians as despotic, Simocatta also sets up a comparison between the Roman-Persian conflict and the biblical Israelite-Babylonian conflict, casting the Romans in the guise of the 'Chosen People' of God and the Persians as their heathen oppressors, similar to Theodore Synkellos in the wake of the Avar-Persian siege of Constantinople in 626. In that text, Khusrow II is characterised as another Nebuchadnezzar II, the "current tyrant of Babylon", and Shahrbaraz as another Holophernes, dispatched by his master to destroy the latter-day Israelites.⁸ An elaborate cosmological comparison between Constantinople and Jerusalem, between the Romans and Israelites, is used to show the folly of the siege and the status of the Romans as the true Chosen People of God.⁹

Such highly charged rhetoric denigrating the Persians as monstrous figures from biblical history, arrayed to destroy the Christian-Roman state and religion was borne out of the massive pressure that Roman society was put under because of Khusrow's

⁷ Gilbert Dagron, 'Lawful Society and Legitimate Power: "ἔννομος πολιτεία, ἔννομος ἀρχή"', in Angeliki Laiou and Dieter Simon (eds.), *Law and Society in Byzantium: Ninth-Twelfth Centuries*, (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1994), 27-52; Mike Humphreys, *Law, Power, and Imperial Ideology in the Iconoclast Era: c. 680-850*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 12-17; Kaldellis, *Ethnography*, 58-9.

⁸ Theodore Synkellos, *Homily*, 7, and again at 37.

⁹ Theodore Synkellos, *Homily*, 31.

invasion. It reflects a strategy, conscious and subconscious, of hardening collective identity through the identification of an 'other' group and the depiction of that group as completely antithetical to the widely understood values of 'us'. The way in which texts produced in the centre of the empire, partly in reaction to official ideology, but mainly an organic development, reached the point of an absolute rejection of the Persians represented a break in their traditional depiction in Roman literature.¹⁰

While Roman ethnographic discourse certainly considered the Persians to be 'other' to the Romans and they were usually seen as being barbarians, the picture was generally more nuanced than that for other barbarian peoples that Romans encountered. Indeed, in the sixth century, Roman elite discourse around Persia displayed a healthy respect for the competing superpower, if not outright admiration on the part of some groups — a cultural shift that has been described as something approaching outright 'Persophilia'.¹¹ The Persians were barbarians, but ones whose customs could, on occasion, be seen in a positive light and be used as a foil to implicitly criticise aspects of Roman rule. There was no room for any such nuance in the first decades of the seventh century. Instead, they find themselves categorised in terms antithetical to Romanness, their defeat an expression of Christian triumph — a vindication of the empire's political and religious fundament.

¹⁰ For a brief discussion on the more sympathetic outlook on the Sasanians in earlier writers, see: Tim Briscoe, 'Rome and Persia: rhetoric and religion', in Danijel Dzino and Ken Parry (eds.), *Byzantium, Its Neighbours, and Its Cultures*, (Brisbane: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 2014), 156-62.

¹¹ McDonough, 'Were the Sasanians Barbarians?', 59.

4.2: Jerusalem and the True Cross

Two literary movements during and after the war can help to illustrate this shift in Roman attitudes towards the Persians: the response to the fall of Jerusalem and the rapid canonisation of Anastasios 'the Persian'. Both events demonstrate the way in which the total othering of the Persians was at once promoted by an ideological shift at the top of the empire, but also the product of a more general reaction to the conflict and the need to assert Roman collective identity in the face of attack.

The fall of Jerusalem to Shahrbaraz in 614 represented not just a major strategic failure on the part of Roman forces but had a significant psychological impact that reverberated throughout the empire and beyond.¹² Jerusalem's symbolism as the site of Christ's death and resurrection, as well as its centrality as the religious centre of the Israelites in Old Testament literature, rendered it of immense spiritual importance to Christians. Its control by the Roman Empire, therefore, cemented and legitimated the empire's claim as the definitive Christian state and its people as the true Christian people. The city's capture by a non-Christian enemy, aided and abetted by the city's Jews, consequently delivered a body-blow to these claims, signalling God's displeasure beyond anything else that had yet occurred during the war, undermining the ideological foundations of the empire, and striking at the heart of its collective identity.

The importance of the city's fall can be read from the reaction of the author of the *Chronicon Paschale*.¹³ The chronicle is usually sanguine and matter of fact about events concerning the war and most of its rhetorical flourishes are found in those sections of

¹² See, for instance, its appearance in texts written in Armenia, Italy, and Hispania: Isidore of Seville, *Chronica maiora*, 413; Paul the Deacon, *History of the Langobards*, 4.36; ps.-Sebeos, *History*, 32.115-16.

¹³ *Chronicon Paschale*, 704.614.

the work that clearly derive from other texts.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the fall of Jerusalem was one of the rare moments that the author, first, wrote about events beyond the environs of the capital, and second, indulged in emotional rhetoric. He describes the event as “a calamity which deserves unceasing lamentations”, an emotional level comparable to the text’s later description of the siege of Constantinople: an event to which the author of the chronicle may well have been an eyewitness and thus somewhat more personally traumatic than something that had occurred a decade prior and several hundred miles away — such was the mental weight of Jerusalem’s fall.¹⁵

More tangible and resonant even than the fall of the city, however, was the concurrent loss of the relic of the True Cross to the Persians. The significance of the relic of the True Cross is difficult to overstate as an emblem of both the supremacy of the Christian faith and the synthesis of religious and imperial power that characterised contemporary Roman identity. The importance of the symbol to Constantine’s victory at the Milvian Bridge and subsequent conversion had been highlighted by Eusebios and the wedding of the Cross’ pre-existing religious symbolism to imperial rule was further cemented by the so-called ‘inventio crucis’ legend involving Constantine’s mother, Helena.¹⁶ The Cross became not simply a representation of Christ’s love and sacrifice for mankind, but also of Christianity’s ultimate victory over its oppressors, as well as an embodiment of the new relationship between Roman imperial rule and Christian faith; between the emperor and God.

¹⁴ Howard-Johnston, *Last Great War*, 89.

¹⁵ *Chronicon Paschale*, 704.614.

¹⁶ Eusebios, *Vita Constantini*, 1.28-32. Stephan Borgehammar, *How the Holy Cross was Found: From Event to Medieval Legend*, (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1991), 7-10; Jan Willem Drijvers, *Helena Augusta: the mother of Constantine the Great and the legend of her finding of the True Cross*, (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 81; Jan Willem Drijvers, ‘Promoting Jerusalem: Cyril and the True Cross’, in Jan Willem Drijvers and John Watt (eds.), *Portraits of Spiritual Authority: Religious Power in Early Christianity, Byzantium, and the Christian Orient*, (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 85-91.

The Cross, in symbological terms, occupied a hybrid matrix that was, in many ways, akin to Romanness itself, a representation both of Christian belief and the divinely ordained empire. The use of this double entendre by the imperial authorities to emphasise the empire's Christian character and its (and their) legitimacy can be seen in the importance attached of the Cross as a kind of apotropaic ward for the empire's soldiers.¹⁷ For those who saw the imperial government as heretical and as having appropriated the ultimate symbol of Christ's sacrifice for political purposes, disentangling the association between the two was a worthy goal: as shown by a mid-seventh century Coptic text that suggested the Cross discovered by Helena was a forgery and that God arranged it so that the real Cross remained in Jerusalem, away from interference from Roman authorities.¹⁸

Just how embarrassing the fall of Jerusalem and the loss of the True Cross was for those marshalling the war effort can be at least partially deduced from the absence of rhetoric involving the Cross as a symbol of Roman victory between 614 and 628.¹⁹ This is most obvious from those panegyrical works of George of Pisidia that are believed to have been written prior to the return of the relic of the True Cross, in which Heraclius' piety is repeatedly stressed and other Christian imagery is found in abundance, but the Cross is curiously absent: a similar absence is found in Theodore Synkellos' *Homily*.²⁰ Instead, the Cross is replaced by other relics, such as an

¹⁷ *Strategikon*, 2.18; Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, 5.16.11.

¹⁸ Harold Drake, 'A Coptic Version of the discovery of the Holy Sepulchre', *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 20.4 (1979): 391-92.

¹⁹ Jan Willem Drijvers, 'Heraclius and the *Restitutio Crucis*: Notes on Symbolism and Ideology', in Gerrit Reinink and Bernard Stolte (eds.), *The Reign of Heraclius (610-641): Crisis and Confrontation*, (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 182; Nadine Viermann, 'Imperial Piety, Warfare and Eschatology in the Age of Heraclius'. Paper presented at the *Late Antique and Byzantine Studies Seminar*, University of Oxford, 27th January 2021 [Online].

²⁰ As a snapshot, there are 24 references to 'τό ξύλον' and 15 to 'ὁ σταυρός' in the main body of Pisides' oeuvre (excluding epigrams), of these all but three are found in the *Hexaemeron*, *In restitutionem crucis*, and the *Laudatio sancti Anastasii Persae*, all thought to be written after 629/30.

acheiropoietos image of Christ paraded by Heraclius before his troops, or the icon of the Theotokos used by Sergios to ward off the Avar attack on Constantinople.²¹ Beyond those works produced within the circle of the imperial government in Constantinople, there is also a notable silence about the importance of the Cross prior to its restoration. The only contemporary account of the fall of Jerusalem, attributed to the monk Strategios, notably fails to draw attention to the confiscation of the relic of the True Cross in his extensive report on the devastation apparently wrought on the city.²² The theft of the Cross is mentioned in the opening of the work, but Strategios then completely fails to record the actual crime in his account of the atrocities he blames on the Persians and the Jerusalemite Jews, rather focusing on the plight of the Christian population and the burning of many of the city's churches.²³

The importance of the image of the Cross to the empire's Christian character made its recovery both one of the ultimate aims of the war and a tool for celebrating Roman victory: a fact that underlines the inextricable connection between Christianity and the Roman imperial government.²⁴ In both Roman and modern accounts of the end of the last Roman-Persian war, the restoration of the Cross to Jerusalem tends to be presented as the final victory celebration and was used by the Heraclian regime as a propaganda coup that further highlighted the amalgam of political and religious authority underwriting Roman power.²⁵

²¹ The *acheiropoietos* image: George Pisides, *De expeditione Persica*, 1.139-44 [cf. Theoph. *Chronographia*, AM 6113.303]; image of the Theotokos: Theodore Synkellos, *Homily*, 14-15.

²² Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses*, 164-7.

²³ Strategios, *On the Sack of Jerusalem*, 1.4 ["Hic liber a me descriptus notificat captivitatem ligni salutis et devastationem Christi ecclesiarum et combustionem et eversionem Hierosolymae"].

²⁴ That the recovery of the relics of the Cross was one of Heraclius' war aims is reflected in the lengths to which he seems to have gone to ensure its return, or at least make it seem that the genuine relic had been returned undamaged: Drijvers, 'Heraclius and the *Restitutio Crucis*', 182; Howard-Johnston, *Last Great War*, 343-5; Constantin Zuckerman, 'Heraclius and the Return of the Holy Cross', *TM* 17 (2013): 216-17.

²⁵ On the symbolism of Heraclius' restoration of the Cross, see, amongst others: Booth, *Crisis of Empire*, 160-61; Drijvers, 'Heraclius and the *Restitutio Crucis*', 183-84; Stoyanov, *Defenders*, 66-67.

By extension, celebrating Christian Roman triumph meant denigrating pagan Persian defeat, acting to further create distinction between the two. In his poem celebrating the return of the Cross, Pisides repeatedly returns to the theme of its theft by the Persians, describing that action in the opening few lines as having brought “the contempt of error upon [Golgotha]” while “the insolent Magi would have been laughing”, had it not been reversed.²⁶ The Persians, and Khusrow in particular, are guilty of irredeemable wickedness and compared to monstrous beasts:

πῶς ἀντανεῖλες ἀρπαγέντα τὰ ξύλα
τὸν ἀρπάσαντα ταῦτα κοιμήσας ὄφιν;
ἥρωες ἐδείχθης τῷ Θεῷ χρυσοῦν δέρας
ἐκ τοῦ δράκοντος τοῦ σφαγέντος ἀρπάσας·
οὐ φαρμάκοις γὰρ Μηδικοῖς τὸ θηρίον
ἀνεῖλες αὐτός, ἀλλὰ πήξας τῷ ξύλῳ.²⁷

Their foolishness in taking the Cross and their lack of belief in its power are mocked, their weakness contrasted with the power of the wood itself, and their doom assured because of their audacity to challenge the empire protected by God. Khusrow himself is described as having “looked down upon [the Cross] as [merely] wood, but found [it] a spear in his own heart”, responsible for his own destruction for having declared himself an enemy of God.²⁸

As for Heraclius, Pisides directly compares him to a new Constantine, having ‘rediscovered’ the Cross and restored it to its rightful place, a comparison that is not simply flattering to Heraclius as the restorer of empire and faith, but also places the

²⁶ George Pisides, *In restitutionem sanctae crucis*, 9-11.

²⁷ George Pisides, *In restitutionem sanctae crucis*, 19-24 [“How did you [Heraclius] rescue the wood that was snatched away, putting the serpent that took it to sleep? You have been shown to be a hero by God, having made away with a golden fleece from the dragon you slew; for you did not destroy the beast with Median poisons, but affixed it with the wood.”]

²⁸ George Pisides, *In restitutionem sanctae crucis*, 67-8.

Persians in the role of the pagans whose rule over the world was dissolved by Constantine's conversion.²⁹ In some ways, the Persians are even worse than the pagans, for while the pagans simply ignored the Cross, leaving it hidden in obscurity, the Persians actively sought to destroy it ("after it had not merely been hidden, but taken into Persian furnaces").³⁰ Running with the theme of the Persians as religious enemies, Pisides reflects on the Cross as a new, improved, Ark of the Covenant, whose wood resembles a bow sending arrows against the barbarian enemies.³¹ He exhorts the "remaining bastard Israelites [to] desist from your ancestral lack of faith", presumably referring to Jerusalem's Jews and once more hammering home the point that it was the Christian Romans who were the true Chosen People.³²

The poem, and indeed the whole ceremony of the Cross' restoration, represents three key elements; it is, first, a demonstration of the supremacy of Heraclius' rule and his legitimacy as the victorious warrior-emperor. Second, it is a celebration of the truth and triumph of Christianity and the love of God for his Chosen People. Finally, the decision to use the restoration of the Cross as the ultimate symbol of the end of the war speaks to the heightened religious rhetoric against the Persian enemy that had been generated by the conflict and employed in service to the regime's war goals. The Cross, symbol of both Christ's ultimate sacrifice and the empire's divine protection, is used as a military trophy and an emblem of a dual political-religious military victory over enemies of the empire and Christianity.

²⁹ George Pisides, *In restitutionem sanctae crucis*, 47-51 and 61-3 ["You [Constantine] have a descendant by the foresight of God, as though he were Constantine found anew, fortified by the life-giving wood"].

³⁰ George Pisides, *In restitutionem sanctae crucis*, 56-9.

³¹ George Pisides, *In restitutionem sanctae crucis*, 73-7.

³² George Pisides, *In restitutionem sanctae crucis*, 25-6 ["παύσασθε λοιπὸν Ἰσραηλιῖται νόθοι ἐκ τῆς παρ' ὑμῖν πατρικῆς ἀπιστίας"] and 73-77.

It may be argued that one ought not to read too much into Pisides' representation of the restoration of the Cross, or that, as with much of his other work, he is simply reflecting the ideals of the imperial court in a commissioned work. Yet, as Pisides makes clear from both the title of the poem and its conclusion, this was not wholly some carefully crafted, manicured version of how the Heraclian regime wanted the Cross' restoration to be understood. The full title of the poem is “Αύτοσχέδιοι πρὸς τὴν γενομένην ἀναγνωσιν τῶν κελεύσεων χάριν τῆς ἀποκαταστάσεως τῶν τιμίων ξύλων”, while the setting is established in the closing lines as Pisides paints the picture of civilians pouring “like grains of sand, like streams, like boundless waves made up of bodies” through the streets of the capital to hear the news being read out of the Cross' return.³³

The conceit is clearly that the poem was extemporaneously composed for the occasion, which is somewhat implausible given its nature and rhetorical complexity. Nevertheless, it seems equally unlikely that the work was meticulously prepared for any occasion or commissioned specifically; although, as is the case with all of Pisides' works, one cannot preclude the idea that it may have been read out for an imperial audience at some point. In any case, the claims made by the poet and the fact that he was not present to witness the ceremony, but rather, like almost everyone in the empire, had to be content with hearing the news being broadcast publicly gives the poem something of a 'real-time' quality. While Pisides might have expressed his emotions and opinions about the restoration of the Cross in much more sophisticated terms than most, you can quite easily imagine the same triumphalist rhetoric having resonance far beyond the halls of the imperial palace.

³³ George Pisides, *In restitutionem sanctae crucis*, Pr. and 111-13 [“ὅλη συνῆλθεν εἰς ἑαυτὴν ἡ Πόλις ὡς ψάμμος, ὡς ῥοῦς, ὡς ἄμετρα κύματα ποιοῦντα πολλὰς συματώδεις ἐκχύσεις”].

4.3: *Anastasios the Martyr and the Persian 'Other'*

The evolution of the war in the minds of the Romans into a religious struggle was the product of many factors, not least the pragmatic considerations of a regime that needed to galvanise support in a struggle against what would have seemed unwinnable odds. However, it ultimately boiled down to the fact that such a total war against the Roman state could only be fully rationalised as a concurrent war against Christianity. Did war waged by another state against the empire necessarily mean that that enemy was also waging a war against a religion that had adherents within its own borders? On the face of things, no. But even if Khusrow had no intention of waging a war against the Christian religion, the matrix of Roman state and Christian faith was embedded in the fabric of the collective identity of many in the empire and, as such, an attack on one would inevitably be perceived as an attack on the other.

A total war that seemed to have its goal in the destruction of the self-declared Christian empire could not be interpreted as anything but an attack on God; the defence of that empire was fought by and for God and its leaders and troops received divine rewards.³⁴ It is for this reason that Persian identity was reduced during the conflict to a mirror of the qualities of Romanness. As the existential pressure from the conflict grew, so the collective identity of Romanness was reified against the 'other', and thus the Persians became characterised as barbaric despoilers attacking the empire and Christianity itself. The impact of increased othering of the Persians in religious terms as

³⁴ See, for instance, the rhetoric ascribed to Heraclius in: Theoph. *Chron.* AM 6114.307.

a result of the war can be seen through the spread of the legend of St. Anastasios the Persian, the rapidity of which speaks to the resonance that the story seems to have had.

The story of Anastasios is told in a *vita* written by an unnamed monk from the monastery of an (unrelated) Anastasios at some point between the saint's martyrdom in January 628 and the death of Jerusalem's patriarch, Modestos, in December 630.³⁵

Anastasios, born Magoundat, hailed from a village near Rayy and was raised in the Zoroastrian traditions of his family.³⁶ Magoundat became a soldier and was in Ctesiphon when the relic of the True Cross was brought there after 614: as a result of this encounter, Christianity was "deposited like a treasure deep in his heart."³⁷ Deserting from the army in Anatolia the following year, he eventually ended up in Jerusalem and was baptised by Modestos, then the *locum tenens* for the Jerusalem patriarchate during Zacharias' exile in Persia.³⁸ Magoundat assumed the name Anastasios and became a monk at the monastery of the same name in 620. There, he learnt Greek under the supervision of the abba and became a full part of the monastic community.³⁹ Several years later, when visiting the Persian administrative capital at Caesarea and "seized by divine zeal", he decided to challenge a group of Persians celebrating Zoroastrian rites, upon which he was arrested by a band of cavalrymen as a spy and sent to prison.⁴⁰ After lengthy and repeated interrogations in the presence of the marzban, during which Anastasios refused to renounce his Christian faith, he was finally deported to Persia to

³⁵ Bernard Flusin, *Saint Anastase le Perse et l'histoire de la Palestine au début du VII siècle*, I, (Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1992), 40; Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses*, 170.

³⁶ *Passio sancti Anastasii*, 6.

³⁷ *Passio sancti Anastasii*, 6-7.

³⁸ *Passio sancti Anastasii*, 10. On Modestos' identity as the *locum tenens*, see the letter sent from him to Komitas, the metropolitan of Armenia, concerning the rebuilding of churches in Jerusalem after the city's sack in 614: ps.-Sebeos, *History*, 34.116-35.118; Strategios, *On the Sack of Jerusalem*, 24.10.

³⁹ *Passio sancti Anastasii*, 11.

⁴⁰ *Passio sancti Anastasii*, 15-17.

face judgement.⁴¹ The story, naturally, ends with his execution for apostasy a few weeks before the arrival of the Roman forces under Heraclius, followed by an explanation of the circumstances that led to the saint's body being stored away and the news of his death reaching his former monastery in Jerusalem.⁴²

As a window onto the circumstances of life in Palestine during the period of the Persian occupation, the martyrdom account of Anastasios is one of our most valuable sources of information.⁴³ The significance of the text lies less in the specific events of Anastasios' life, but rather the fact that such a figure exists at all, that his exploits were written down as a fully-fledged martyrology, and that this story received such widespread currency, if only for a relatively short time.⁴⁴ The initial *passio* was completed shortly after the end of the war, when news of Anastasios' death had arrived in Jerusalem, followed around a year later by another text written by the same monk that narrated the translation of the relics back to the monastery, where they arrived in November 631.⁴⁵

Two realistic possibilities arise for the logic behind creating the legend of the martyred Anastasios. The first is that the text was commissioned by someone external to the monastery with a specific intent, the second is that the story arose organically from the monastic community itself and was then picked up and spread by others. At first glance, it might appear that the first option is the more likely, since the legend of

⁴¹ *Passio sancti Anastasii*, 19-28.

⁴² *Passio sancti Anastasii*, 40-44. On the specific charge of apostasy: Foss, 'Persians', 161.

⁴³ Pauline Allen and Kosta Simic, 'Two foreign saints in Palestine: Responses to religious conflict in the fifth to seventh centuries', in Bronwen Neil and Kosta Simic (eds.), *Memories of Utopia: The Revision of Histories and Landscapes in Late Antiquity*, (London: Routledge, 2019), 150; Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses*, 171.

⁴⁴ The cult in Constantinople seems to have fizzled out relatively quickly and Anastasios' continued worship in the capital was due to factors unrelated to the saint's own life - a fact that itself speaks to the nature of Anastasios' importance deriving from him being specifically a Persian convert, a fact that lost its relevance within a few years thanks to the Arab invasions: Flusin, *Saint Anastase*, II, 389-93.

⁴⁵ *Translatio reliquiarum sancti Anastasii*, 6.

Anastasios very quickly made it to the very highest echelons of the imperial government: a metaphrasis of the *passio* was commissioned by patriarch Sergios and written by George of Pisidia to inaugurate the saint's cult in the capital. The events of both the *passio* and *translatio* also seem to have unusually close connections to Heraclius. The saint's death takes place only a week or so before the emperor's arrival at Dastagerd and Anastasios' fellow monk, who relays the news of his fate to the text's author, travels back from Persia with the emperor's army.⁴⁶ Likewise, in the *translatio*, the monks sent to retrieve the relics travelled with Heraclius' entourage from Jerusalem as far as Constantia/Tella, whence they split from the imperial party and continued to Mesopotamia.⁴⁷ Both texts are also unusual in the care that they take to reference the actions of the emperor, in addition to their use of imperial regnal years alongside indictional dates and the prominence of the restoration of the True Cross to the opening of the *translatio*.⁴⁸

Nevertheless, these connections, particularly those in the *passio*, need not have been inserted by the author out of a desire to tie the martyr and his story to that of Heraclius' victory. Indeed, the existence of Pisides' metaphrasis implies that the initial story of Anastasios' martyrdom was written without the involvement of the imperial authorities. What would have been the point of commissioning two different authors to write the same story in slightly different registers? It is more likely that the original version of the story was the product of genuine faith on the part of the monks and was written by them independently, possibly at the instigation of abba Justin.⁴⁹ If any external sponsor is to be found, it is more plausible that it was Modestos, who is known

⁴⁶ *Passio sancti Anastasii*, 43-44

⁴⁷ *Translatio reliquiarum sancti Anastasii*, 2-3.

⁴⁸ *Passio sancti Anastasii*, 11 and 40; *Translatio reliquiarum sancti Anastasii*, 1.

⁴⁹ Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses*, 170.

to have had a copy of the *passio* in his personal library and who baptised the future martyr.⁵⁰

The initial story of Anastasios, then, was a product of genuine belief on the part of the monks and of the social context of Palestine at the end of the war, not a cynical attempt at propaganda. The focus of the story on a figure who starts off life as a Zoroastrian Persian, who finds redemption in the light of Christianity and suffers and dies for his new faith is therefore particularly striking. The ‘moral’ of the story, besides the usual extolling of the virtues of martyrdom, is that of the overwhelming truth and righteousness of the Christian faith. Anastasios’ conviction that Christianity was the true religion is brought into stark relief because of his background as a Persian. Moreover, Magoundat flees to the Romans, rather than the Christian communities in Persia, and it is their language he learns, refusing to speak in another during his interrogation.⁵¹ It is the fact that he was a converted soldier from the side of the enemy that made Anastasios’ story worth recording.

His ‘Persianness’ and ‘otherness’ are in fact heightened in Pisides’ version of the story, which describes the young Magoundat as “as if he was born blind, he ignored the sun, or that, like a nocturnal bird, he liked being in the shadows of error ... he was given to suck at the teat of Magism”.⁵² It is also Pisides’ more bombastic version, commissioned by the government with an eye to emphasising the symbolism of Anastasios’ story, that sets out Anastasios’ multiple ‘conversions’ by virtue of his baptism: “Deserting the ranks of the barbarians, he came towards Christ; casting aside his lance, he took up the Cross; fleeing the tyrant, he sealed his soul with the imperial

⁵⁰ Flusin, *Saint Anastase*, II, 191-93; *Passio sancti Anastasii*, 10.

⁵¹ *Passio sancti Anastasii*, 33 [“The martyr of Christ replied through an interpreter, in fact he refused to speak with them in Persian, although we encouraged him strongly [to do so]”].

⁵² George Pisides, *Laudatio sancti Anastasii Persae*, 4.

seal.”⁵³ Anastasios moves from being a barbarian to being a Christian, wielding a weapon to wielding a cross, and serving a Persian tyrant to serving a Roman emperor: a set of mutually exclusive comparisons that are in line with how the Persians had been characterised over the course of the war in opposition to Romanness

The original text is no less scathing of the Persians than Pisides’, nor does it have any less of an eye on the ultimate victory of the empire and Christianity. It characterises the Persians as inhuman agents of divine wrath:

God delivered us to the hands of impious enemies, to an unjust king, the cruellest in all the land, who handed the cities and whole regions to flame or ruined them from top to bottom, who sent into captivity all that was choicest and most desirable in people and goods, destroying all the rest in his insatiable rage.⁵⁴

Anastasios himself, during one of his interrogations by the marzban, accuses his Persian captors, and former compatriots, of being demon-possessed Satan-worshippers.⁵⁵ It also accords a prominent place to the symbol of the Cross and, in particular, the relics of the True Cross. It is the appearance of the relics in Ctesiphon that introduces Magoundat to Christianity and begins the process of his conversion; it is the church of the Holy Sepulchre (the Anastasis) where he is baptised and where the relics of the Cross were housed in Jerusalem; and it is the feast of the Venerable Cross that Anastasios makes a point of celebrating when imprisoned in Caesarea.⁵⁶

The importance accorded to the Cross is unsurprising when one considers that the text was written in the immediate wake of its return to Jerusalem. In that sense, it reflects the renewed importance that the relics had attained as a result. Through this,

⁵³ George Pisides, *Laudatio sancti Anastasii Persae*, 7.

⁵⁴ *Passio sancti Anastasii*, 4.

⁵⁵ *Passio sancti Anastasii*, 33.

⁵⁶ *Passio sancti Anastasii*, 7, 10, 29-30.

the text consciously taps into the ideas of imperial victory and renewal that swirled around the restoration, tying the piety of its hero to the symbol of Christian and Roman victory, and reinforcing the idea that his conversion to Christianity was an embrace of the Romans as much as it was a repudiation of the Persians and a rejection of Zoroastrianism.

These texts illustrate how the core aspects of Romanness were heightened because of the war and the Romans' eventual victory over the 'ultimate' enemy that had been constructed out of the Persians. The greatly heightened religious rhetoric that directly connected the success of the empire in war with the preservation of the Christian church presented the empire's enemies as also the enemies of Christianity. The deliberate choice on the part of the Heraclian regime to use the restoration of the relics of the True Cross as the centrepiece of their victory celebrations reflects the amalgamation of military and religious victory that had underpinned the social and psychological war against the Persians: the relevance of which was bound up with ideas of collective identity, in opposition to a constructed Persian 'other'. Likewise, the choice of a former Persian soldier as the most significant martyr of the conflict highlighted the superiority of Roman values over Persian, enough that even the enemy would willingly convert after seeing the truth and remain faithful even unto death. The pressure of war and the need to instil resistance resulted in the reification of aspects of Romanness, focused on loyalty to the empire and its values (both secular and Christian), and the consequent construction of an opposite image in the form of the Persian enemy.

The lasting consequences of the war and its effect on how Persians were perceived relative to Romans will never be known; for, within a few years after its conclusion, a new and even graver crisis would arise and wipe away the certitudes of the old world. However, Roman victory in the war had created a renewed sense of

collective identity and internal cohesion in which the language of identity had been used to construct the image of a religious and political enemy over which Romans had prevailed. This was the intellectual context in which the Arab conquest took place and which provided a model for Roman society to understand the later invasions in terms of an assault on both the empire and its faith.

4.4: *"The tyrannical uprising of those called Agarenes"*

The Arabs, of course, were not a new people to the Romans. Large groups of them had lived along the frontier regions of the empire for centuries by the time of the advent of Islam. Consequently, the Roman image of the Arabs did not emerge *ex nihilo* in the 630s and the initial reaction to the conquests and to Islam was conditioned by pre-existing ideas of Arab identity — which is not to say that many Romans had a particularly sophisticated sense of what this entailed. The Arabs were but one of many equally barbarous non-Romans living beyond the empire's boundaries and therefore suffered the same treatment as other groups in the hands of Roman ethnographers.⁵⁷ Arabs were subjected to extreme prejudice in Roman intellectual discourse and denigrated as inferior in all regards by virtue of their pagan religion, nomadic lifestyle (one explanation of the origin of the exonym 'Saracen' is that it means 'tent-dwellers'), and a supposed racial disposition towards base morality.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Elizabeth Jeffreys, 'The Image of the Arabs in Byzantine Literature', in *The 17th International Byzantine Congress: Major Papers, Dumbarton Oaks/Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., August 3-8, 1986*, (New Rochelle: A.D. Caratzas, 1986), 312.

⁵⁸ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 25. On 'Saracens' as 'tent-dwellers': Daniel Sahas, "'Saracens' and the Syrians in the Byzantine Anti-Islamic Literature and Before', *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 256 (1998): 388-9. For different etymologies: Vassilios Christides, 'The Names APABEΣ, ΣΑΡΑΚΗΝΟΙ etc. and their False Byzantine Etymologies', *BZ* 65.2 (1972): 331-3; Alexis Savvides, 'Some Notes on the Terms Agarenoī, Ismaelītai, and Sarakenoī in Byzantine Sources', *Byzantion* 67.1 (1997): 94-6.

Unlike the pre-war Persians, whose culture and history could be admired to some degree despite their Zoroastrian faith, the Arabs were dismissed and looked down upon as barbarians whose culture was not worth understanding. Simocatta describes them thus: “the Saracen tribe is known to be most unreliable and fickle, their mind is not steadfast, and their judgement is not firmly grounded in prudence”.⁵⁹ A similar picture is given by John Moschos in the *Spiritual Meadow*, which provides a snapshot of opinions regarding the Arabs amongst Roman communities in contact with them. In many of Moschos’ apophthegmata, Arabs appear as a kind of stock character signalling danger for the Christians in the story. In one, a Saracen, unprovoked, beheads a travelling anchorite on the side of a road (and then gets picked up by a great bird and dropped to his death); in another, a Saracen in Clysma confesses to going out to hunt, finding a monk, and intending to rob or murder him. No explanation is given for why he should have done this, presumably because being Saracen was enough.⁶⁰ In a third, a group of Saracens took a young man prisoner to be sacrificed under the direction of their priest. Upon encountering an abba and being commanded to release the prisoner, they were immediately possessed by demons and proceeded to slaughter each other.⁶¹

In a letter to a monk named Eustathios, Antiochos, author of the *Pandects* and the then-head of the monastery of Mar Saba, presented an almost identical picture of the Arabs that had attacked the lavra during the breakdown in law and order that preceded the Persian attack in 614. The ‘Ishmaelites’ looted the holy vessels from the church, took several monks captive and brutalised them whilst looking for more plunder, after which they “became enraged and tore them limb from limb” and left the bodies unburied.⁶²

⁵⁹ Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, 3.17.7.

⁶⁰ John Moschos, *Pratum Spirituale*, 21 and 133.

⁶¹ John Moschos, *Pratum Spirituale*, 155.

⁶² Antiochus Monachus, *Epistula ad Eustathium*, 52-70 [“ἐμμανεῖς γενόμενοι πάντας μεληδὸν κατέτεμνον”].

This was part of a pattern of despoliation and killing recorded by monks living in the Judaeian desert, who identified their attackers as Arabs even in the shadow of invasion by the Persians.⁶³

This stock image of Arabs as bandits and murderers was the product of Roman confirmation bias towards all peoples considered 'barbarian'.⁶⁴ They were not worth understanding and lacked any real historical agency of their own, instead being compelled to act based on their natural tendencies or under the direction of a higher power. They are written about more like a force of nature rather than as a people-group with complex societies and motivations. The Persians may have been cruel and committed similar atrocities, but at least the reasoning behind them was comprehensible and their actions served a greater goal; the Arabs, on the other hand, seemed to murder and pillage simply whenever they had the opportunity to do so. Such a two-dimensional view of the Arabs was pervasive and fed directly into how the initial Muslim conquests were understood by the Romans. This pre-existing unwillingness to reckon with Arab motivations, beyond them being a perennial punishment from the Almighty, combined with the heady cocktail of religious triumphalism that had come with the defeat of the Persians and ensured that the invasions could not be envisaged in anything other than religious terms.

⁶³ Joseph Patrich, 'The Impact of the Muslim Conquest on Monasticism in the Desert of Jerusalem', in Antoine Borrut, Muriel Debié, Arietta Papaconstantinou, Dominique Pieri, and Jean-Paul Sodini (eds), *Le Proche-Orient de Justinian aux Abbassides: Peuplement et dynamiques spatiales*, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 208-9.

⁶⁴ For a fuller discussion of the history of pre-Islamic Arab-Roman relations in the frontier zone and their impact on the literature produced by monastic communities, with a particular focus on the southern zone of the Negev desert and Sinai, see: Daniel Caner, *History and Hagiography from the Late Antique Sinai*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 39-51.

4.5: *Identity Crisis*

The period at the end of the last Roman-Persian war is well known to historians of Byzantium as the beginning of what used to routinely be termed the Byzantine 'Dark Ages' for the paucity of surviving contemporary sources, particularly historiography. The 'Dark Ages', however, are only dark if one looks for the sorts of history-writing found in the preceding and succeeding periods of Byzantine history – such as Theophylact Simocatta and the *Chronicon Paschale* in the former and Theophanes the Confessor and Patriarch Nikephoros in the latter. The absence of surviving works of history written in the empire and the somewhat hazy view of the sequence of events that this brings does not prevent us from seeing the impacts of the Arab conquests. Indeed, in some ways, the lack of such documents and the presence of other materials can highlight aspects of how Roman society responded to the changed reality of the post-conquest world.

The source materials for this period focus to a great degree on the internal dynamics of the empire, in particular the continuing reverberations of Heraclius' failed attempts at ecclesiastical union between the Chalcedonian and miaphysite churches. There is, given the strategic catastrophe that was taking place across the wider Eastern Mediterranean at the same time, a remarkable gap in the discourse where the Arabs ought to be. The causes of this apparent disinterest are manifold. Given the quantity of information covering the early stages of the conquest available to later historians in the empire, the silence is at least partially the result of coincidences of source preservation.⁶⁵ It could also be that the magnitude of the crisis and the upheavals across

⁶⁵ See the lost chronicle of ps.-John of Antioch and its continuation, as well as the much-debated lost work attributed to Trajan the Patrician, both of which seem to have been available to Patriarch Nikephoros: Marek Jankowiak, 'The first Arab siege of Constantinople', *TM* 17 (2013): 242-5; Cyril Mango, *Nikephoros*,

the Roman world that it brought made reflecting on things more difficult. It was simply too big to comprehend without the perspective offered by time. Both explanations are likely true. Equally, however, when writing about the internal dynamics of the empire — especially the relationship between church and state — the authors were inherently commenting on the changed circumstances that they and their society found themselves in. Circumstances in which the old orthodoxies that had led to this situation (like the fundamental relationship between the empire and God) were being challenged. In a sense, the discourse in the empire in this period reveals one great, prolonged identity crisis.

The lack of direct discussion about the Arabs was, at least partly, the result of their image from the pre-Islamic period. Failure to properly account for the existence of complex Arab societies, outside of those immediately bordering the empire that had been Christianised, meant that the immediate reaction to the collapse of Roman power was not to question the practicalities behind Arab military success, but rather to present them as the force of nature they had always been. One did not need to understand the mechanics of an earthquake or volcanic eruption, only to wonder at what had provoked God into causing it.

Consequently, the initial reaction to the Arab conquests tended towards a complacent explanation based on the principles of theodicy: it was a punishment from God that required internal reflection to bring about its reversal. The Arab conquests were perceived as divine punishment for Roman sins, an ultimately temporary stumbling block on the road to the empire and Christianity's eventual domination. At least for the first few years, there would have been no sense that the loss of the empire's

Patriarch of Constantinople, Short History: Text, Translation, and Commentary, (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1990), 12-17.

territories was permanent. It had, after all, just recovered the very same lands after over a decade of Persian occupation and in the face of equally dire odds. Nor would there be any understanding that the current Arab rampage was qualitatively different to the raids that had come before, other than being on a wider scale.⁶⁶

This attitude comes through in the earliest surviving reactions to the news of the disaster. Apart from highly fragmentary texts, the earliest document for the conquest is likely to be the so-called *Doctrina Jacobi* — an anti-Jewish apologetic work produced in the wake of Heraclius' campaign of forced baptism at the end of the Persian war. The *Doctrina* is largely concerned with the forced baptism in Carthage of a Jewish merchant from Palestine named Jacob, who later sees the truth of Christianity and goes to convert more of the Jews in Africa that had also been forcibly baptised.⁶⁷ After convincing them of the truth of Christianity, Jacob is confronted by and engages in a dialogue with a cousin of one of the African Jews, named Justus, who had arrived from Palestine. Justus eventually comes around, but then produces a letter from his brother, Abraham, who writes from Caesarea to tell of a battle between Roman forces and the 'Saracens' and of a supposed prophet who had appeared amongst them.⁶⁸

The author of the *Doctrina* uses the medium of Abraham's letter to dismiss any claim that a real religious figure might have appeared, instead falling back on the usual trope of the Saracens being nothing more than bloodthirsty killers. Their so-called 'prophet' is reduced to the figure of a warlord and the importance placed on him blamed on overblown messianic urges among the Palestinian Jews.⁶⁹ This text likely dates to very shortly after the first wave of Arab incursions into the empire's lands, likely

⁶⁶ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 58-9.

⁶⁷ *Doctrina Jacobi*, 1.2-4.

⁶⁸ *Doctrina Jacobi*, 3.16.

⁶⁹ *Doctrina Jacobi*, 3.16; Harald Suermann, 'Muhammad in Christian and Jewish Apocalyptic Expectations', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 5.1 (1994): 18.

sometime in the second half of 634 based on its own internal chronology and the fact that it presents news of the Arab attack as partly hearsay rather than established fact.⁷⁰ In that regard, its awareness of what surely must be Muhammad at such an early point is remarkable. Yet the equally remarkable ignorance displayed by many other Roman sources in subsequent years suggests that his appearance here was itself likely the result of Jewish sensitivity to rumours of prophet-like figures, rather than any widespread awareness of Muhammad's religious role as the news of the initial invasion spread. In any case, the Christian author of the work dismisses this important aspect and instead minimises the impact of the Arab attacks and the potential they might have for undoing the work to convert the baptised Jews.⁷¹

More conventional in their reactions are our two stars of the monothelete crisis, Maximos the Confessor and the newly minted patriarch of Jerusalem, Sophronios. These figures, although not without their issues with the imperial administration and its approach to the church (as we have seen), were both ultimately stakeholders in the dominant Roman cultural system and, thus, their similar reactions to the invasion were likely representative of the wider approach of elites across the empire. In a letter to Peter 'the Illustis', dated 633/4, Maximos laments recent developments in the east:

For what is more scabrous than the current circumstances in which the *oikoumene* lives, more frightening for its witnesses, more horrible and pitiable for its victims? To see a barbaric race invade a foreign land as if it were their own, our tranquil existence ravaged by wild animals with scarcely human faces.⁷²

⁷⁰ Gilbert Dagron, 'Introduction historique: Entre histoire et apocalypse', in Gilbert Dagron and Vincent Déroche, 'Juifs et Chrétiens dans l'Orient du VIIe siècle', *TM* 11 (1991): 18; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 47.

⁷¹ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 46.

⁷² Maximos the Confessor, *Epistulae*, 14. On the dating of this letter, see: Marek Jankowiak and Phil Booth, 'A New Date-List of the Works of Maximus the Confessor', in Pauline Allen and Bronwen Neil (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 44-5.

He treats the attacks by the Arabs in much the same way as one might expect to read about any earlier raid, drawing upon the image of them as monstrous apparitions that are only barely human. These are people whose motivations are not there to be understood, for they are barely people to begin with.

Echoing the *Doctrina Jacobi*, Maximos goes on to condemn the joy expressed by the Jews for the deaths of Christians at the hands of the Arabs.⁷³ No indication is given that the attacks might represent any lasting change to the empire. Maximos recommends that the Christians ought to pray to acquire “the aid of divine grace” that “fighting with us, makes us the vanquishers of hostile power by restraining us from error and ignorance.”⁷⁴ The cause of this disaster is evidently that same ‘error and ignorance’, unleashed by the loss of divine grace. God was punishing the Romans with death and destruction at the hands of the Arabs, much as He would a plague or famine, and the remedy for both is the same.

Sophronios, who had recently travelled from Rome to Jerusalem after the death of his mentor John Moschos and would later take up the mantle of patriarch, takes the same view as Maximos. Unlike Maximos however, who wrote his letters somewhere in the western regions of the empire, Sophronios would have been all too aware of the scale of the problems in Syria and Palestine and had first-hand experience of the invasion. His first comment on the nature of the Arab threat comes in the preface to the *Spiritual Meadow*. In this he details his attempt to take Moschos’ remains to Mount Sinai after the latter’s death in Rome in 634, only to be forced to alight at Ascalon and travel to Jerusalem instead “διὰ τὴν τυραννικὴν ἐπανάστασιν τῶν λεγομένων Ἀγαρηνῶν”,

⁷³ Maximos the Confessor, *Epistulae*, 14.

⁷⁴ Maximos the Confessor, *Epistulae*, 14.

which seems to have prevented travel further along the coast.⁷⁵ This initial notice is fairly innocuous and the impact of the Arab incursion not seen as anything particularly remarkable beyond causing disorder and making travel south of Ascalon too dangerous, as indicated by the choice of the word ‘ἐπανάστασις’: an uprising that would surely be put down.

Sophronios’ view on the seriousness of the situation shows a shift after his inauguration as patriarch in the autumn of 634. By the time he delivered his Christmas oration that year, the security situation in the environs of the Holy City had deteriorated such that it was impossible for the patriarch and his flock to travel the nine or so kilometres to Bethlehem to celebrate the nativity.⁷⁶ In the same homily, Sophronios pins the blame for the Arab raids on Palestine and elsewhere on the sins of the Romans, announcing that due to “countless sins and most grievous lapses” they are “restricted not by physical shackles but held captive by fear of the Saracens, kept apart from such great heavenly rejoicing and overwhelmed by a sorrow to match our wretchedness”.⁷⁷

The solution to their problems is to ensure that they cleanse themselves and their faith, restoring God’s grace; for, so he says, Christ does not now wish for gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, but instead “brilliance of faith”, “actions that are fragrant and sweet-smelling”, and “purity of soul and body, and indeed also of dogma and belief and of correct thinking in matters of faith”.⁷⁸ Only through these gifts, by “[carrying] out the will of the Father”, will they “blunt the Ishmaelite sword ... turn back the Saracen

⁷⁵ John Moschos, *Pratum Spirituale*, Pr.53-7 [“on account of the tyrannical uprising of those called Agarenes”] [= Hermann Usener, *Sonderbare Heilige. Texte und Untersuchungen I: Der heilige Tychon*, (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1907), 91-3]. On the date and location of Moschos’ death as well as the identity of Sophronios as the author of the preface, see: Henry Chadwick, ‘John Moschus and His Friend Sophronius’, *JTS* 25.1 (1974): 49-50; Andrew Louth, ‘Did John Moschus Really Die in Constantinople?’, *JTS* 49.1 (1998): 149-54.

⁷⁶ Sophronios, *Homily on the Nativity*, 8.

⁷⁷ Sophronios, *Homily on the Nativity*, 10.

⁷⁸ Sophronios, *Homily on the Nativity*, 8.

dagger ... [and] break to pieces the Hagarene bow” and thus be able to see Bethlehem again.⁷⁹ The problem, however, still seems to be at the level of banditry: the Arabs pose a threat to travellers on the roads around Jerusalem, and quite a serious threat at that, but they are not a conquering force.

That assessment had radically changed by the time of Sophronios’ homily to commemorate the celebration of Theophania in January 637.⁸⁰ Coming after successive Arab victories against Roman armies at Emesa and Yarmouk, and only a few months before Jerusalem itself would surrender, his attitude is, understandably, much gloomier and he dedicates the conclusion of his sermon to addressing the problems facing the city and the empire. In a series of rhetorical questions, he lists the various misfortunes that they had suffered in recent years: war, barbarian raids, attacks by the Saracens, plundering, bloodshed, destruction of churches, and, worst of all, blasphemy against the Cross and Christ by heathens.⁸¹ Once more he blames the sins of the Christians for having provoked God’s anger and brought down divine wrath upon them in the form of the arrogance of the “enemies of God [who] boast that they will conquer the world”.⁸² Again, the solution to this is repentance for the sins committed by the Christians, only then can God’s philanthropy be kindled and the horrors that had befallen them cease.⁸³

It is not that Sophronios did not account for potential victory by the Romans in battle against the “abominable Saracens”, but that the problem was not one that could be solved through physical means. Rather, the issue was a hamartiological one and could be resolved only by appealing to the divine. No matter how numerous the empire’s forces may be, the Arabs would still “range themselves against Roman ranks ...

⁷⁹ Sophronios, *Homily on the Nativity*, 14.

⁸⁰ Booth, *Crisis of Empire*, 248.

⁸¹ Sophronios, *Homily on the Holy Baptism*, 25.

⁸² Sophronios, *Homily on the Holy Baptism*, 25.

⁸³ Sophronios, *Homily on the Holy Baptism*, 26-7.

[and] raise trophies and add victory to victory” because that was God’s will.⁸⁴ Only once atonement has been achieved would “[we] rejoice at the downfall of our enemies the Saracens ... [and] look upon their ruin and witness their utter destruction.”⁸⁵ The Arab attacks were diagnosed as having been caused by the theological position of the empire and the wickedness of its people. The Saracens themselves have no agency of their own and their defeat will come not through understanding their motivations, since they have none besides that which God gave them, nor through conventional politics and warfare. Instead, like with the Persians before them, it is only through divine guidance and support that victory will be attained. Those can only be gained once the empire and its people returned to the path of orthodoxy.

The inability of the Romans to turn the tide against the Arabs was seen as indicative of the empire’s failure to maintain the divine support that had allowed it to achieve victory only a few years earlier. It therefore produced something of a crisis of confidence and a period of introspection and internal discussion about what the exact nature of the problem might be. The idea that the Arabs posed a serious religious threat to the empire or could offer an alternative world order does not enter the discussion and would not do so for over half a century. Instead, the fifty or so years after the first Arab incursions in the 630s were dominated by attempts to identify what had caused God’s anger towards the empire and its people on the one hand and, on the other, to maintain the belief that the Romans would eventually triumph over their enemies.

⁸⁴ Sophronios, *Homily on the Holy Baptism*, 25.

⁸⁵ Sophronios, *Homily on the Nativity*, 25.

4.6: *Debate and Denial*

This period can be seen as 'Phase One' in the process that Roman society went through in coming to terms with the conquests and Islam. It is characterised by two largely separate discourses: one was within the empire's remaining territories that stemmed from the initial interpretation of the conquests in terms of theodicy. The other was amongst the Christian populations in the conquered territories who had no choice but to reckon with the reality of a new religious group that they could not simply ignore or present as a one-dimensional; but who likewise held onto the belief that the God-given nature of the Christian empire meant that its triumph was an inevitability. We will address these two approaches in turn, the first in the remainder of the present chapter, the second in the next, before we examine 'Phase Two': this was when the passage of time, direct contact with a more self-confidently Islamic state, and the osmosis of information that had developed earlier among the Christians in the east forced a gradual reckoning within the surviving parts of the empire about the threat it faced to its identity and very existence.

The debate within the empire's remaining territories after the initial shock of the invasion centred on two interlinked elements. The first consists of discussion around the empire's specific doctrinal choices and the appropriate relationship between the political needs of the emperor and the theological needs of the Church. In the seventh century, this largely revolved around monothelism. The second element is the sensitivity of the regime to any questioning of its legitimacy to rule and of the divinely guided nature of the Roman monarchy. The rhetoric of victory against the Persians had emphasised the closeness of the relationship between emperor and God and its role in achieving victory. Such a dramatic reversal of fortune only a few years later inevitably

led to suspicions that it was the imperial government that was to blame for this, leading the Heraclian dynasty to leap on any perceived dissent and to attempt to reinforce its political-religious authority. The nature of the monothelite controversy and its importance to the relationship between imperial power and Christian orthodoxy has already been discussed in substantial detail in previous chapters and, as such, it is not necessary for us to tread the same ground here.⁸⁶ The relevance of the debate to Sophronios', Maximos', and Pope Martin's opposition to the doctrine was rooted not simply in their own religious convictions, but in the urgency of the situation in the wake of continuing Arab advances. Their belief in the divinely appointed nature of the Arab conquests translated into a need to fix what they perceived to be the main reason for God's displeasure, as we have already seen. Assuaging this displeasure, thus alleviating the punishment he had wrought upon the empire, was one of the aims of the repeated attempts to restore Chalcedonian dyothelitism and heal the schism that had developed between Rome and Constantinople. By the time the Lateran Council took place in 649, it would have been clear to all that the empire was facing serious difficulties: it had lost Syria and Palestine a decade earlier and had not only failed to retake these territories but had also lost Egypt a few years prior.⁸⁷

It is in the context of this increasingly desperate situation that one must understand a letter written by the leading bishops of the province of Africa to the emperor, Constans II, and preserved in the *Acts* of the Council.⁸⁸ They argued that, since God had appointed foreknown and predestined emperors to rule the Romans, attempts by the Devil to stir trouble against them could and must be thwarted by the actions of

⁸⁶ See 2.2 in the present work.

⁸⁷ For a detailed look at the timeline for the conquest of Egypt by the forces under the overall command of Amr ibn al-ʿĀṣ, see: Phil Booth, 'The Muslim Conquest of Egypt Reconsidered', *TM* 17 (2013): 639-70.

⁸⁸ *Acts of the Lateran Council*, 2.70-77.

the God-appointed ruler.⁸⁹ Consequently, it was incumbent on the emperor, as much as the Church, to adhere to orthodoxy and to enforce it across the empire in order to properly fight the Devil's machinations and protect the Roman people. They therefore beg Constans to compel Paul, the patriarch of Constantinople, to reject the monothelite doctrine and by the restoration of unity and orthodoxy to the faith, "May our God the Almighty, by whose power all things are directed, look down benevolently on your reign and deign by the right hand of his power to subject the pagan nations, who trust in their savagery, to your piety's most Christian authority."⁹⁰

Pope Martin himself draws a direct comparison elsewhere in the *Acts* between those he sees as having attacked the "earthly Jerusalem" (the Arabs) and those attacking the "spiritual Jerusalem, namely the catholic church", whom he accuses of imitating the former — connecting the attacks by the Arabs on the Christian community with the heretical monothelites and implying that the destruction of one would entail the destruction of both.⁹¹ Even more explicit is Martin's own letter to Constans, imploring him to accept the recommendations of the council and bring Constantinople back into communion with Rome:

... since it is always the case that the preservation of the state goes together with the flourishing of the orthodox faith. For when your serenity has correct faith in the Lord, who arms His creation to ward off the enemy, He will deservedly give aid to your authority in conquering your enemies. For He will gird your pious authority with the breastplate of righteousness and place on you as a helmet judgement with integrity, and He will bestow holiness as an invincible shield, so as to subject under your feet all the barbarian tribes that choose war [...] May grace from above protect the most pious rule of our master, and make subject to you the necks of all the nations.⁹²

⁸⁹ *Acts of the Lateran Council*, 2.75.

⁹⁰ *Acts of the Lateran Council*, 2.77.

⁹¹ *Acts of the Lateran Council*, 3.142; Booth, *Crisis of Empire*, 294.

⁹² *PL* 87.145.

Only by ending the doctrinal error instigated by Sergios and perpetuated by his successors can Constans receive God's blessing and vanquish the enemies of God and the empire.

The dyothelite camp did not have a monopoly on such discourse, of course. It was in the interests of those who opposed them to present similar arguments in favour of monothelitism — and this included the imperial government itself. In their mind, far from monothelitism being the cause of the empire's woes, it was instead the near-constant provocation by the likes of Maximos and Martin that was to blame for God's anger. Of course, the regime's opposition also had a pragmatic element to it: the authorities, facing a crisis of such magnitude, could ill-afford to tolerate movements challenging it, however well-intentioned they may have been, lest they end up forming alternative power bases or fomenting real rebellion.⁹³ There were, though, very real religious issues at stake, and those in charge in Constantinople were just as susceptible to the belief that the empire's failings had a religious cause as monks and clerics in the provinces. Preventing the "wild waves" of heresy, as Stephen of Dora called the orchestrators of monothelitism, rocking the ship of the state was the rationale behind the various successive attempts by the imperial government to shut down the debate challenging Constantinople's orthodoxy.⁹⁴ The thoroughness with which monothelitism was suppressed and erased from the official record after the return of dyothelitism in 680/1 means that the corresponding criticism of dyothelites by the monothelites is

⁹³ As indeed seems to have happened in Africa, and for which Maximos was ultimately blamed: Gregory of Resh'aina, *Life of Maximos*, 18-20 [= Sebastian Brock, 'An Early Syriac Life of Maximus the Confessor', *An.Boll.* 91 (1973): 317-8]; *Relatio Motionis*, 1.

⁹⁴ *Acts of the Lateran Council*, 2.38.

more difficult to find than the reverse, but it can be found in the text of the *Typos* preserved in the *Acts of the Lateran Council*.⁹⁵

The *Typos*, issued in the name of Constans II in 648, effectively prohibited continued discussion of the issue of Christ's will by both sides of the debate and, whilst not condemning the *Ekthesis* issued under Heraclius, had it removed from where it had been posted in the narthex of Hagia Sophia.⁹⁶ Quoted in full at the Council, the document declares that, because of the controversy, "the people of our Christ-loving society are being led into great division and strife ... and as a result society is harmed in numerous ways. Guided by God Almighty, we deem it essential to quench the flame of discord that has been ignited in this way and allow it no longer to ravage the souls of men."⁹⁷ The *Typos*, whilst ostensibly not taking a side and not explicitly blaming the dyothelites, perceived that the debate that they were fuelling was causing damage to the faith and the fabric of the empire's society. That it was God's will that this damage be stopped implied that Maximos, Martin, and their supporters were working against the Almighty and that it would only be once they ceased their opposition that divine anger against the empire would be assuaged. The same rationale behind the *Typos* is also given by the officials Troilos and Sergios Eucratas to Maximos when they came to visit him during a break in his trial.⁹⁸ In short, the emperor was turning the dyothelites' own arguments against them; that it was they, not he, who were angering God and causing the empire's problems.

Whilst the general tone emanating from the imperial centre was one of conciliation — at least until the *Typos* was anathematised at the Lateran Council — the

⁹⁵ John Haldon, *The Empire that Would Not Die: The Paradox of Eastern Roman Survival*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 115.

⁹⁶ *Acts of the Lateran Council*, 4.210.

⁹⁷ *Acts of the Lateran Council*, 4.208.

⁹⁸ *Relatio Motionis*, 7.

same cannot be said of one of the few non-official documents from a monothelite perspective that survived the purge post-681. The Syriac *Life of Maximos*, written by Gregory of Resh'aina in the mid-to-late seventh century, is more openly critical of the dyothelite, their perceived leader Maximos, and the blame that they shared for bringing the Arab invasion upon the empire. Gregory takes up the argument presented at Maximos' trial, that he had aided and abetted the Arab conquests because of his disloyalty to the emperor and adds a religious nuance to the accusation. Whereas the prosecution at the trial alleged that Maximos had convinced the exarch of Africa not to send military aid in the defence of Egypt because of Heraclius' heretical beliefs, Gregory asserts that Maximos actually took advantage of the situation with the Arabs to spread his heresy: "Because heresy is accustomed to join forces with paganism and to take strength to establish itself, as a result of some punishment [that has been] sent, this wretch [Maximos], seeing that the land was in the control of the Arabs ... manifested his fraudulence again openly".⁹⁹ Not only was Maximos emboldened by the Arab invasion, by spreading his heresy, he brought the wrath of God down upon those places that accepted his beliefs in the form of the Arabs.¹⁰⁰

Both sides of the controversy sought to blame the other for having spread heretical beliefs, caused instability in the empire's society, and thus angered God. Both sides argued that if the other would only see reason and join with them, then the troubles besetting the empire and the faith would come to an end. Although the Arab conquests rarely receive direct mention in these debates, their fingerprints can be seen marking the entire discussion. The Arab conquests were framed in religious terms, with

⁹⁹ Gregory of Resh'aina, *Life of Maximos*, 18 [= Brock, 'An Early Syriac Life', 317]; *Relatio Motionis*, 1.

¹⁰⁰ Gregory of Resh'aina, *Life of Maximos*, 23 ["After Maximos went up to Rome and the Arabs seized control of the islands of the sea, and entered Cyprus and Arvad ... they gained control of Africa and subdued virtually all the islands of the sea. For, following the wicked Maximos, the wrath of God punished every place which had accepted his error."] [= Brock, 'An Early Syriac Life', 318].

the invaders seen as evidence of God's displeasure with the empire, and they therefore added fuel to the doctrinal fire that had been raging since the end of the Persian war. Since the crisis facing the Romans was an internal religious one, of which the Arabs were simply the external manifestation, the ultimate solution could only come from reform within the empire.

4.7: Justinian II and the Cost of Ignorance

Another effect of the Arab invasions on the empire's discourse was the way in which the catastrophic military failure weakened the ideological system for promoting imperial power that had developed since the empire's Christianisation, and particularly since the reign of Heraclius.¹⁰¹ The link between empire and faith that had been assiduously cultivated over centuries as a way of legitimising imperial rule proved to be a double-edged sword once protracted crisis struck. Victory in the Persian War and the use of Christian religious rhetoric by Heraclius had further strengthened the connection between Roman success and divine favour. Moreover, the emperor's personal participation on the field of battle, for the first time in three centuries, created a model of rulership that established a direct link between the emperor's personal faith and military success and further elided the political needs of the empire with the religious needs of Christianity.¹⁰²

Rather than abandon this model in the face of repeated defeat, Heraclius' successors instead doubled down on it. The 'Heraclian model' was taken up by Constans

¹⁰¹ The most comprehensive examination of this being Gilbert Dagron, *Empereur et prêtre: étude sur le "césaropapisme" byzantin*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1996).

¹⁰² Nadine Viermann, *Herakleios, der schwitzende Kaiser: Die oströmische Monarchie in der ausgehenden Spätantike*, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 335-7.

II, who, like his grandfather, went on active campaign against the empire's enemies. His murder in Syracuse in July 668 may have been predicated on a combination of his failure to stop Arab raids on Anatolia after 662 and the arrival of news of a siege of Constantinople by the forces of Yazīd ibn Mu'āwiya — the future caliph Yazīd I (r. 680-83).¹⁰³ A case of “live by the sword, die by the washbasin”?¹⁰⁴

His son, Constantine IV, may not have gone on active campaign in the same way as his predecessors, but he certainly could claim the mantle of an emperor whose support from God resulted in divinely guided action that protected the empire. This would have been apparent from the outset, since Constantine acceded to the throne in the context of the first Arab siege of Constantinople.¹⁰⁵ He spent the siege organising the city's defence and relief came, it would have seemed, as a result of divine intervention: Yazīd's forces, unable to be resupplied, were forced to withdraw in the summer due to hunger and disease.¹⁰⁶ The Arab army may have spent the following year pillaging its way across Anatolia as it travelled back to Syria, but the imperial capital had miraculously been saved.

¹⁰³ Jankowiak, 'The first Arab siege', 309.

Jankowiak's dating of the siege to 668 can be confirmed with reference to the *Ta'rikh* of Khalīfa ibn Khayyāt and the Mozarabic *Chronicle of 741*. The *Chronicle* records that it took Yazīd two years to return to Damascus from Syria; Ibn Khayyāt, meanwhile, places Yazīd's 'raid' in AH 50 (year beginning 29th January 670), but notes both that Mu'āwiya had the Syrians pledge loyalty to Yazīd and that Yazīd led the Ḥajj in the same year (Dhū'l-Ḥijjah 50 began in December 670). Tellingly, Ibn Khayyāt fails to mention the commander of the annual 'winter expedition' in the 'land of the Romans' in AH 48 (year beginning 16th February 668), but double counts for AH 70 (naming two separate expeditions, one under Yazīd and the other under 'Abd Allah ibn 'Āmir). It seems likely then that Yazīd's expedition took place in 668 and that it is only his return in 670 that Ibn Khayyāt records. This accounts for the two-year length of the expedition given by the *Chronicle of 741*, the apparent lack of an annual raiding expedition in 668 according to Ibn Khayyāt, and gives time for Yazīd to be received in Damascus sometime in 670 and then lead the pilgrimage in December: *Chron. 741*, 29; Khalīfa ibn Khayyāt, *Ta'rikh*, 245 and 247.

¹⁰⁴ Constans II was famously rumoured to have been murdered in the bath by his *koubikouarios*, Andrew, who is said to have bashed the emperor on the head with a bucket: Theoph. *Chron.* AM 6160.351-2.

¹⁰⁵ Jankowiak notes that the death of Constans II likely took place after Yazīd had already withdrawn, but before the news could have reached Syracuse: Jankowiak, 'The first Arab siege', 309. Likewise, news of the emperor's death would have been unlikely to reach Constantinople before the siege had already been lifted.

¹⁰⁶ *Chronicle of 741*, 27; *Chronicle of 754*, 29.

After the near catastrophe of 668, the period to 680 can be characterised as one of ‘contained crisis’, followed by some genuine advances by the Romans. Arab raids on Anatolia continued and they maintained a raiding base at Cyzicus that could still threaten the environs of Constantinople, but victory at Syllaion and the destruction of an Arab fleet in 673/4 changed the relative balance of power.¹⁰⁷ After 680, the immediate threat from the Arabs to much of the empire had abated following the death of Mu‘āwiya and accession of Yazīd I in the spring of that year. Paradoxically, the accession of the man who had led the attack on Constantinople a decade earlier brought an unexpected peace for the Romans, as the caliphate descended into internecine struggle — the second *fitnah*.¹⁰⁸ Mu‘āwiya’s decision to have his son succeed him as caliph (the first such dynastic succession in the caliphate’s brief existence) provoked an angry reaction from some, centred on the twin holy cities of Mecca and Medina and on the figure of ‘Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr.¹⁰⁹ Mu‘āwiya’s death lit the touchpaper of rebellion in the Hejaz, compounded by Yazīd’s own premature death in 683 and that of his sickly son a few months later.¹¹⁰ The authority of the Umayyad caliphs in Damascus would remain under threat until the final defeat and death of al-Zubayr in 692.¹¹¹

Capitalising on the break in hostilities brought about by the victory at Syllaion, Constantine organised the Sixth Ecumenical Council (680/1), finally bringing an end to the monothelite crisis, restoring doctrinal unity between Rome and Constantinople, and

¹⁰⁷ Nikephoros, *Short History*, 34.18-37. Jankowiak, ‘The first Arab siege’, 245.

¹⁰⁸ *Chronicle of 741*, 31; *Chronicle of 754*, 33-4; al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk*, 20.467-598.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Khalīfa ibn Khayyāt, *Ta’rīkh*, 289-322; al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk*, 19.424 ff.; al-Ya‘qūbī, *Ta’rīkh*, 2.293-305.

¹¹¹ For a fuller narrative account of events during the second *fitna*, see: Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates: The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century*, (London: Routledge, 2016), 76-85.

adding to his prestige.¹¹² Finally, the need to secure the northern flank of the caliphate and focus attention on his rivals to the south and east saw the new Umayyad caliph, Marwān ibn al-Ḥakam, sign a truce with Constantine in c. 684, resulting in tribute payments to the Romans and bringing an end to the annual summer raiding expeditions.¹¹³

It was in this context of relative calm that Constantine's teenage son, Justinian, would come to the throne in 685. Constantine had brought peace to the empire through his piety, he had secured the salvation of Constantinople in 668, restored orthodox belief, and forced the Arabs to negotiate with the Romans, ushering in the first sustained period of peace on the eastern frontier in decades. God's punishment of the Romans for their sins had been abated thanks to a combination of military victory and doctrinal reform facilitated by the God-appointed and sanctioned emperor. It was a vindication of the model of Roman rule that associated military success with pious conduct on the part of the emperor and of the diagnosis of the 'Arab problem' as the result of spiritual ills within the empire.

The first reign of Justinian II (685-95) can be characterised as the culmination of these assumptions that built up over the 'first phase' of the Roman response to Islam. By continuing the progress his father had made, the divinely appointed and supported emperor would inevitably vanquish the "God-forsaking Hagarenes" like his great, great grandfather had defeated the "God-forsaking Khusrow".¹¹⁴ The belief of this young

¹¹² John Haldon, 'Constantine or Justinian? Crisis and identity in imperial propaganda in the seventh century', in Paul Magdalino (ed.), *New Constantines: the rhythm of imperial renewal in Byzantium, 4th-13th centuries*, (Ashgate: Variorum, 1994), 100.

¹¹³ Nikephoros, *Short History*, 38; Theoph. *Chron.* AM 6183. Ibn Khayyāṭ records no Arab raids on the empire between 683 and 692: Khalīfa ibn Khayyāṭ, *Ta'riḫh*, 289-344.

¹¹⁴ *Chronicon Paschale*, 706.615.21-2 ["πρὸς τὸν θεόπτωτον Χοσρόην"]; *Miracles of St Demetrios*, 2.4.232 ["πρὸς παράταξιν τῶν θεοπτῶτων Ἀγαρηνῶν ἀνθοπλιζομένης"].

emperor in the divinely inspired nature of his rule and his confidence (one might say hubris) that the Romans would be restored to their empire manifested itself in two key events.

The most well-known of these, and the one with the longest-lasting impact, was the convening of a church council in 691/2. Known variously as the Trullan Council, after the domed hall (τροῦλος) of the Imperial Palace in which it was held, or the Quinisext Council, as a follow-up to both the Fifth and Sixth Ecumenical Councils, its primary aim was to issue legal canons, which the aforementioned councils had failed to do. The need for such a council was explained on the basis both that no ecumenical council had devoted itself to the question of canon law since Chalcedon, 240 years earlier, and that this gap had allowed the moral fabric of the Church (and thus society) to degrade.¹¹⁵ The opening statement (*logos prosphonetikos*) of the Council's *Canons* presents the most complete overview of the model of imperial rule that operated in the aftermath of the Arab invasions. It makes the point that the turpitude of the Church had caused God to withdraw his support for the empire "with the result that the highwayman who is our enemy has come upon us unawares, stolen our virtue little by little, and given us evil in its place"; it was thus incumbent on the reigning emperor, as "our wise helmsman, pious emperor, and true champion" to "rescue the flock from evil and perdition".¹¹⁶ The emperor, the chosen vicegerent of Christ on earth who derives his imperial authority from God alone and who has been appointed to govern God's Chosen People, has a duty to ensure that "the 'holy nation and royal priesthood' [1 Pet. 2:9] 'for which Christ died' [Rom. 14:15]" follows God's teachings.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ *Canons of the Quinisext Council*, 1.18; Judith Herrin, "The Quinisext Council (692) as a Continuation of Chalcedon", in Richard Price and Mary Whitby (eds.), *Chalcedon in Context: Church Councils 400-700*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 148-9.

¹¹⁶ *Canons of the Quinisext Council*, 1.18-19.

¹¹⁷ *Canons of the Quinisext Council*, 1.19.

The Council therefore performed several ideological functions that tie directly into the empire's response to the Arabs. It codified the interpretation that the moral failings of the Roman people, and specifically the priesthood, were responsible for both the conquests and the Romans' inability to reverse them. It also reinforced the role of the emperor as the ultimate guardian of the Romans' faith, casting Justinian in the guise of Christ the Good Shepherd as well as drawing upon the Old Testament model of Phineas: the priest who purified the faith of the Israelites, alleviating the plague God had used to punish them, and who led a successful attack against the Midianites.¹¹⁸ This formulation of the emperor's role as an almost fully sacralised figure was pushed to the general public through a coinage reform beginning in around 690, which, for the first time, depicted the image of Christ ("Rex regnantium") on the obverse and that of the emperor ("Servus Christi") on the reverse.¹¹⁹ The divine power of Christ and the temporal power of the emperor, literally two sides of the same coin.

Along with this conscious recognition of the increasingly sacralised state of imperial rule in the late seventh century, the focus of the canons, the way they were presented, and their reception also reveal two aspects of Justinian's rule that help explain what eventually went wrong and set the stage going into the eighth century. The first is the continued blind spot in Roman discourse on the subject of Islam. The focus of the Council, as we have discussed, was on the internal moral dynamics of the Christian empire, at no point is any specific reference made to any external religious challenge and nor are Muslims referenced. This is distinct from the Arabs and the impact of their

¹¹⁸ *Canons of the Quinisext Council*, 1.19 ["In the fervour of your love for God you have surpassed the zeal of Phineas, piercing sin with the power of piety and understanding; you have set yourself to rescue the flock from evil and perdition."]; Humphreys, *Law, Power, and Imperial Ideology*, 50-2.

¹¹⁹ James Breckenridge, *The Numismatic Iconography of Justinian II (685-695, 705-711 A.D.)*, (New York: American Numismatic Society, 1959), 46-56; Mike Humphreys, 'Images of Authority? Imperial Patronage from Justinian II to Leo III', in Peter Sarris, Matthew Dal Santo, and Phil Booth (eds.), *An Age of Saints? Power, Conflict and Dissent in Early Medieval Christianity*, (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 157-9.

conquests. As has been recognised by others, several of the canons relating to clerical practices are clearly rooted in the practical implications of the Arab conquests for the functioning of the empire's institutions.¹²⁰ This is most obvious in canon 18, which stipulated that clerics who "on the pretext of a barbarian inroad or some other circumstance have emigrated" should return to their parishes as soon as the circumstances that caused them to flee subsided, on pain of excommunication.¹²¹ Canon 37 upheld the rights of bishops whose sees had "[fallen] under the control of the lawless ones" to carry out ordinations and exercise their episcopal authority.¹²² While canon 8 loosened the obligation set down at Chalcedon that bishops should hold regular synods in their dioceses, reducing the frequency of these from biannually to annually.¹²³ Each of these were in response to the chronic insecurity that plagued the empire in the period, which saw near annual Arab raids across Anatolia. None, however, goes further than referring to generic 'barbarians' and there is no theological response to, or awareness of, any specific religious challenges posed by them.

The closest to an explicit reference to Muslims in the *Canons* is canon 39, which set out the establishment of a new see of Nea Ioustinianopolis, superseding that of Cyzicus, for people who had been removed from the city of Constantia on Cyprus.¹²⁴ Nea Ioustinianopolis had been established the year before the Council opened and was a direct violation of the truce agreement Justinian had signed with 'Abd al-Malik upon his accession in 685, which had designed Cyprus as a condominium territory with tax

¹²⁰ Herrin, 'Quinisext Council', 159; Frank Trombley, 'The Council in Trullo (691-692): A Study of the Canons Relating to Paganism, Heresy, and the Invasions', *Comitatus* 9 (1978): 10.

¹²¹ *Canons of the Quinisext Council*, 2.33.

¹²² *Canons of the Quinisext Council*, 2.39.

¹²³ *Canons of the Quinisext Council*, 2.28.

¹²⁴ *Canons of the Quinisext Council*, 2.40.

revenues shared between the empire and the caliphate.¹²⁵ This decision formed one of the *casus belli* for the resumption of hostilities with the caliphate a year or so later and was made for the practical purpose of increasing imperial tax revenues and as part of a wider resettlement programme to boost manpower reserves in the region around Constantinople.¹²⁶

Of course, such mundane strategic reasoning would not have been a good enough excuse for a canon law. Consequently, in canon 39, we are given the explanation that the resettlement of the Cypriots was because of raids on the territory of Constantia and the desire of the people to live under the rule of “the most Christian state”.¹²⁷ Noteworthy is the fact that the Arabs are here called not just ‘barbarians’, but their control of Cyprus is “slavery to pagans”. This adds a religious element to the distinction between the Romans and the Arabs, whilst persisting in the inability or unwillingness to recognise the existence of an opposing religion. In the final decade of the seventh century, the highest levels of Roman society show no awareness of a distinctive religious tradition developing to their south and east. It would take further military humiliation, several coups, and another, even more serious, siege of the capital, and growing contact with Christians in the east for that to begin to change.

The second aspect of Justinian’s reign can also be seen in the *Canons*. This being his belief in the divinely ordained nature of his rule and a corresponding belief that his endeavours could therefore not fail. This was a product of wider cultural shifts over the seventh century, beginning with Heraclius, towards an increasing focus on the religious

¹²⁵ *Chronicle to 1234*, 146.292; Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, 11.15.447; Theoph. *Chron.* AM 6178 [on the treaty in 685] and AM 6183 [on the resettlement].

¹²⁶ Humphreys, ‘Images’, 156. See the settlement of Slavs in the same region: Nikephoros, *Short History*, 38; Theoph. *Chron.* AM 6180.

¹²⁷ *Canons of the Quinisext Council*, 2.40.

aspect of the emperor's role and likely also because of Justinian's own personal convictions — although the latter was obviously at least partially conditioned by the former. It is on display not just in how imperial power was represented in the *Canons*, but also by the way in which the *Canons* themselves were presented and in how they were received.

It has been traditional to frame the Quinisext Council and the canons it produced as being 'anti-Roman', in the sense of targeting and prohibiting certain practices associated with churches under Rome's jurisdiction.¹²⁸ More recently, the Council has been rehabilitated in this regard and it is now accepted that the so-called 'anti-Roman canons' were not a deliberate attempt by Constantinople to define its own practices as being separate to or 'better' than those of Rome and that the Council's initial rejection by Pope Sergios was not because of the pontiff's refusal to abandon practices that the Quinisext proscribed.¹²⁹ Once the *Canons* were eventually accepted by Pope John VII in 707, the Roman church was perfectly willing to recognise the Council as having the same authority as other ecumenical councils, whilst also continuing the practices that the Council had banned: paying lip-service was evidently all that Constantinople required.¹³⁰

Rome's rejection of the Quinisext Council was instead the result of the supreme role given to the emperor and the tone-deaf way in which the issue of Rome's claim to be the senior patriarchal see was handled in relation to this. Most obviously, unlike the Sixth Ecumenical Council, where Constantine IV had signed the subscription list last,

¹²⁸ See, for instance, the framing in: John Haldon, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century: The transformation of a culture*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 73.

¹²⁹ Herrin, 'Quinisext Council', 164; Heinz Ohme, 'The Causes of the Conflict about the Quinisext Council: New Perspectives on a Disputed Council', *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 40.1 (1995): 42.

¹³⁰ *Liber Pontificalis*, 88.5; Nicolae Dură, 'The Ecumenicity of the Council in Trullo: Witnesses of the Canonical Tradition in East and West', in George Nedungatt and Michael Featherstone (eds.), *The Council in Trullo Revisited*, (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 1995), 244.

Justinian placed his signature before the blank space left for the Pope's.¹³¹ Furthermore, the bishop of his brand-new and eponymous see of Nea Ioustinianopolis was allowed to sign before the bishop of Thessaloniki — which was still at this point under the jurisdiction of Rome and was the vicariate to the see of Rome itself.¹³² Again, this was contrary to the practice at the Sixth Ecumenical Council, where Thessaloniki had signed immediately after the five patriarchs and ahead of the archbishop of Cyprus.¹³³ To add insult to injury, the *logos prosphonētikos* and canon 1, by presenting the council as being entirely the brainchild of the emperor, glossed over the issue of whether it was even the place of an emperor to call an ecumenical council and outright eliminated the role that Rome had traditionally been accorded in convening them: a fact that must have been particularly galling since it was Rome that had maintained the 'orthodox' position at the Sixth Council in the face of the emperor's monothelite heresy.¹³⁴

If the Quinisext Council can be characterised as a monument to a renewed confidence in the ideals of Roman caesaropapism, then it was a monument built on sand. The *Canons* reveal Justinian's conviction in the divine nature of his rule and the belief that recent successes against the Arabs after 680 demonstrated that the period of penitence for the Christian empire's sins was coming to an end. Such a belief is also revealed in Justinian's attitudes towards his victories in the Balkans in 687/8.¹³⁵ An inscription he erected in Thessaloniki to commemorate this campaign directly attributes his success to the support he received from God through Demetrios.¹³⁶ The Slav prisoners captured as a result were settled in the Opsikion, across the Sea of

¹³¹ *Canons of the Quinisext Council*, 192; Ohme, 'Quinisext Council', 36; Richard Price, *The Canons of the Quinisext Council (691/2)*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), 6.

¹³² *Canons of the Quinisext Council*, 3.62-3.

¹³³ Ohme, 'Quinisext Council', 36.

¹³⁴ Ohme, 'Quinisext Council', 42.

¹³⁵ For the date and an account of the campaign, see: Theoph. *Chron.* AM 6179-80.

¹³⁶ Vasiliev, 'Edict of the Emperor Justinian II', 1-13.

Marmara from Constantinople, and the men enrolled in a special military unit dubbed the ‘Chosen People’ (περιούσιος λαός) under the command of one of their own, called Neboulos.¹³⁷ By naming this band of soldiers, whom he took into battle almost immediately as part of his campaign in the east, Justinian seems to have been aping the very notion of the Romans as God’s own ‘περιούσιος λαός’ that was expressed so clearly at the Quinisext Council: the emperor as a new Phineas, purging the latter-day Israelites of sin; the Roman empire and its Church “the holy nation and royal priesthood for which Christ died”.¹³⁸ The ‘Chosen People’ (Slav or Roman), with newly renewed faith, under the command of a ruler who clearly saw himself sitting at the very pinnacle of earthly power, where it intersected with the divine, could not possibly fail. Could they?

Like the protagonist of any good Greek tragedy, Justinian’s hubris ultimately seems to have been his downfall. By 692, he had spent the first seven years of his reign reinforcing the notion of divine Roman rule through his ideological output, coinage reforms, and military successes, as well as correcting the perceived religious wrongs that had led the empire to disaster. He had also taken practical steps to bolster Roman power by increasing tax revenues, bringing Armenia under Constantinople’s control, and neutralising the Avar-Slav-Bulgar threat in the Balkans. It would therefore seem that the time had finally arrived that God had forgiven the Romans for their failings and would grant them victory.

It is unclear whether the initial military action in 692 was taken by the Romans or the caliphate. Our two main Greek sources blame Justinian, those written outside the empire seem to suggest that it was instead ‘Abd al-Malik who ordered his half-brother,

¹³⁷ Nikephoros, *Short History*, 38; Theoph. *Chron.* AM 6184.

¹³⁸ *Canons of the Quinisext Council*, 1.19.

Muḥammad ibn Marwān, the emir of Mesopotamia, to attack Roman territory.¹³⁹ What is clear, however, is that the end of the truce was the result of deliberate provocation on Justinian's part: specifically the depopulation of Constantia and Constantinople's claim to all of Cyprus' tax revenues, in direct violation of the condominium agreement of 685.¹⁴⁰ Whether Justinian truly intended for this decision to spark a hostile reaction from the caliphate, or whether it was just a major strategic blunder, the Romans seem to have gone on the offensive to meet the Arab army close to the frontier zone. Justinian raised an army from the 'Chosen People' and the cavalry *themata* and engaged the Arab army at either Sebastopolis (modern Sulusaray), or, if one follows Michael the Syrian, Caesarea in Cappadocia.¹⁴¹ Ironically, it was the defection of large numbers of Justinian's 'Chosen People', including their commander Neboulos, to the Arab side which led to the defeat and massacre of the Roman army.¹⁴² Muḥammad ibn Marwān was thereafter left to plunder Roman territory with impunity, after which he returned to Mesopotamia.¹⁴³

The defeat at Sebastopolis was not pre-ordained and Justinian's various preparations beforehand show that he did not rely on blind faith alone. Yet, the fact that war resumed so soon after the Quinisext Council, in the context of his other actions to advertise and secure divine favour, and involved a battalion called the 'Chosen People', suggests that there was a genuine belief on the Roman side that victory would be assured.¹⁴⁴ This belief is illustrative of one aspect of the Roman relationship of Islam that we have been charting: that the issue was perceived as being entirely a matter of the internal faith of the empire. It is also demonstrative of the other quality of the

¹³⁹ Khalifa ibn Khayyāt, *Ta'rikh*, 344; Nikephoros, *Short History*, 38; al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk*, 21.853; Theoph. *Chron.* AM 6183.

¹⁴⁰ Theoph. *Chron.* AM 6183.

¹⁴¹ Nikephoros, *Short History*, 38; Theoph. *Chron.* AM 6184.

¹⁴² Nikephoros, *Short History*, 38; Theoph. *Chron.* AM 6184.

¹⁴³ Nikephoros, *Short History*, 38.26-8; Theoph. *Chron.* AM 6185.

¹⁴⁴ Humphreys, 'Images', 159.

relationship: a near-total failure to engage with the idea of the caliphate as a real and lasting strategic, political, and religious threat to the empire and its society.

The choice of 692 to either launch a conflict with, or provoke an attack by, the caliphate reveals a blindness to the internal politics of the empire's enemy that matches the approach to its religion. That year marked the definitive end of the second *fitnah*, the period of civil war in the caliphate that had begun in 680 upon the death of the first Umayyad caliph, Mu'āwiya. This period of internecine strife had been the key factor underpinning the peace between the two states, as the Umayyad government in Damascus simply did not have the resources spare to pursue attacks against the Romans and could ill-afford to be pressured on their northern frontier when their authority at home was so fragile.¹⁴⁵ By 692, however, the Umayyads had wrested the empire back from their principal rival, 'Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr, whose control had shrunk from most of the caliphate in 683, apart from the Umayyad heartlands in Syria, to only over his own power base in the Hejaz.¹⁴⁶ In the summer of 692, 'Abd al-Malik's second-in-command, Al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf, laid siege to Mecca: the city's fall in late autumn precipitated Ibn al-Zubayr's defeat and death, leaving Umayyad authority uncontested.¹⁴⁷ From a practical, realist standpoint, then, waiting until 692 to break the treaty and invite an attack was perhaps the worst possible move. However, from the perspective of the Romans, waiting until after the end of the church council that had just reaffirmed the emperor's central religious authority and corrected those moral failings that had caused the Arab invasions in the first place was the best option — the one most likely to receive God's blessing and lead him to lift the scourge he had inflicted.

¹⁴⁵ This fact was recognised even half a century later by the anonymous Andalusian author of the so-called *Mozarabic Chronicle*, although he misdates most of the events from 685-92 under the reign of Constantine IV: *Chronicle of 754*, 33.

¹⁴⁶ *Chronicle of 741*, 31.

¹⁴⁷ *Chronicle of 741*, 34; *Chronicle of 754*, 34; al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk*, 21.829-30.

4.8: *Conclusions*

The events of 692 form the first link in a chain of events that, coupled with poor treatment of potential rivals and unpopular domestic political appointments, led to the deposition, mutilation, and exile of Justinian II three years later.¹⁴⁸ The accession of Leontios in 695 heralded the Romans' own period of civil strife, which saw six emperors take to the throne in the space of twenty years (including the second reign of Justinian II), none of whom met a natural end. The revolving door in Constantinople only ceased in 717 with the accession of Leo III, who established the Isaurian dynasty that would rule in some capacity until the end of the century. This internal turmoil, in conjunction with a resurgent caliphate under the early Marwānid caliphs, fuelled a deterioration in the empire's strategic position that culminated, also in 717, with a second and even more serious Arab siege of Constantinople.

The reign of Justinian II therefore marks both the apogee and the end, or at least the beginning of the end, of 'Phase One' of the Roman response to Islam. As Mike Humphreys puts it, "whereas in the 680s the Byzantine state could live in self-denial, seeing Islam as a reversible chastisement from God, eighth-century Byzantium could not".¹⁴⁹ The collapse of the Heraclian dynasty and the puncturing of its constructed sense of divinely ordained and guided rule, combined with the significant deterioration in the empire's military situation at the beginning of the eighth century effectively forced Roman discourse to begin to engage with the very real political and theological threat that Islam posed. This then heralded the start of a reframing of Roman identity

¹⁴⁸ Nikephoros, *Short History*, 40; Theoph. *Chron.* AM 6187.

¹⁴⁹ Humphreys, 'Images', 160.

that began to take Islam into consideration, either as a model to borrow from or a threat to react against: 'Phase Two'. Before discussing this, we must first turn to the caliphate, to begin to unpick the changes it underwent that first allowed an image of Islam to develop amongst the Christian communities there and the currents of influence connecting it to the empire that allowed that image (or a version of it) to reach the Romans.

5. Creating the Islamic 'Other', Part Two: Bridging the Divide

The attitude of Romans towards the rise of Islam in the seventh century can be characterised broadly as a retreat to internal debates over the theological purity of the empire's Christianity and the relationship between good, successful rulership and the divine. This was the product of the rationalisation of the disasters that befell the Christian Roman people, which developed out of the synthesis of Roman imperial rule and Christian theology. However, the failure of Roman writers to get to grips with the challenge that Islam posed to Christianity in the first half-century after the conquests was as much a product of external factors as it was the natural tendency of those in the empire to blame its problems on internal spiritual deficiencies.

Since the Islamic tradition itself presents the religion as springing fully formed into the world through the revelation of Muḥammad, it is perhaps understandable to assume that differentiating between the two faiths would have been straightforward for people in the empire. The reality, as always, was far more complicated and the reception of Islam in Byzantium was governed by the evolution of Islam itself over the course of its first two centuries, as well as its reception amongst the Christian communities living within the caliphate who provided the main channel for communication with their coreligionists in the empire. This chapter will investigate the process of defining Islam in relation to Christianity and the consequent impact that this had on how the new religion was understood by the Christians who lived alongside its practitioners.

It was only once Islam became more easily definable that Christians could begin to engage with it as a religious movement that directly challenged their own, and it was only once Christians in the caliphate reached this understanding that similar levels of engagement began to appear in Byzantium. This engagement with the theological and

ideological challenge of Islam sparked a process of differentiation and ‘othering’ within sections of Roman society, who began to consciously define themselves and Romanness in opposition to Muslims and Islam.

5.1: *Defining the Religion, c.630-680*

Before Romans could create their own image of Islam, that image had first to be created by Muslims themselves. The circumstances surrounding the very earliest years of Islam and the Arab conquests are shrouded by the fog of a lack of reliable contemporary sources. Yet there is ample evidence to contest the traditional image put forward by Islamic writers in later centuries that Islam, in its canonical form, was created in the crucible of the Hejaz in the first decades of the seventh century and spread to the edges of the known world by Arab conquerors. Considering what limited remaining evidence there is from the first fifty years of the Islamic era that was written by Muslims, as well as the earliest testimonies produced by Christian writers in the conquered territories, it seems as though it was a far from straightforward path to a fully formed and definable Islamic theology and identity, distinct from the rest of what would come to be referred to as the *ahl al-kitāb* (‘people of the book’ — Judaism and Christianity).

The first and most important piece of evidence for the early development of Islam is the Qur’an itself. Traditional Islamic doctrine maintains that the base Arabic text of the Qur’an is the undiluted, unaltered word of God, delivered to Muḥammad through his revelations. It is thus immutable and would therefore have been accessible in its current form to the very earliest Muslims. This attitude towards the createdness of the Qur’an only became the orthodox standard in the ninth century. The ‘Abbasid caliph al-Ma’mūn (r. 813-833), for instance, is well-known for advocating the Mu’tazilite

branch of Islamic theology, which advanced the idea that the Qur'an was not co-eternal with God, but rather had been created at some point and thus was subject to alteration.¹ This dispute, however, was largely philosophical and concerned with hypothetical changes that may have been made to the word of God prior to the codification of the basic text of the Qur'an. It would have had little impact on the doctrines of the religion itself or how it was perceived by outsiders. More fundamental is the question of when that codified, so-called 'Uthmanic', text of the Qur'an, which underpins Islam and which is still used to this day, came into being.

It is theorised that the earliest Qur'ans were effectively aides-mémoires for the earliest Muslims, who were expected to have memorised the text in order to be able to recite it orally.² The need for a canonical, reproducible version of the text only became pressing once non-native Arabic speakers began converting to the faith and, according to al-Ya'qūbī, out of fear that the few who had memorised the teachings of Muḥammad might perish.³ The canonical Qur'an in use today came about, according to the Islamic historical tradition, from a standardisation programme completed in the 650s under the caliph 'Uthmān — hence the 'Uthmanic' text — that supposedly preserved the purest, undiluted version.⁴ This programme did not completely eliminate variant Qur'anic texts from circulation. No non-Uthmanic Qur'ans have survived, but their existence is confirmed by both reports of scholars possessing variant Qur'anic texts until well into

¹ The high water mark of Mu'tazilitism came towards the end of al-Ma'mūn's reign with the introduction of the so-called *miḥna* ('ordeal'), in which the caliphal government pressured Islamic scholars to declare their belief in the createdness of the Qur'an: Nimrod Hurvitz, 'Al-Ma'mūn (r. 198/813-218/833) and the Miḥna', in Sabine Schmidtke (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 649-59.

² Clare Wilde, 'Early Christian Arabic texts: evidence for non-'Uthmānic Qur'ān codices, or early approaches to the Qur'ān?', in Gabriel Said Reynolds, *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān: The Qur'ān in its historical context 2*, (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 358.

³ Al-Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rīkh*, 2.152; Wilde, 'Early Christian Arabic texts', 358.

⁴ Nikolai Sinai, 'When Did the Consonantal Skeleton of the Qur'an Reach Closure? Part 1', *BSOAS* 77.2 (2014): 273-4; Wilde, 'Early Christian Arabic Texts', 358.

the 660s and criticism of their suppression by the caliphal authorities by the ninth-century philosopher al-Kindī.⁵ Even the supposedly ‘pure’ Uthmanic codex was not without its variants. The five original copies of the Uthmanic Qur’an that were sent to major urban centres to be copied and distributed were themselves not identical and it was expected that they would be corrected by learned scholars in those cities who had already memorised the text.⁶

The very nature of the Arabic script also complicated efforts to establish a definitive version of Islam’s holy book. Arabic is an abjad, not an alphabet, meaning that the script lacks specific characters for vowels, which must instead be indicated with diacritics (*ḥarakāt*) that are often omitted. Furthermore, the original version of the script was a *scriptio defectiva*, lacking even the facility to differentiate between the many Arabic consonants that have identical, or near-identical, letter forms. For instance, the letters *bā’* (ب), *tā’* (ت), and *thā’* (ث), as well as *nūn* (ن) and *yā’* (ي) in their initial and medial forms, are indistinguishable except for the placement and number of dots (*i’jām*) on the letter stem. The creation of the *scriptio plena* is attributed to the grammarian Abū-l-’Aswad al-Du’alī (d.688), but its use spread unevenly across the caliphate.⁷

The ‘definitive’ text of the Qur’an, established by ‘Uthmān, is specifically the most basal Arabic script (*rasm*): the consonantal skeleton without *i’jām* and *ḥarakāt*. Indeed, the early manuscript tradition of the Qur’an shows that whilst the canonical *rasm* may have existed before 660 and had largely been codified by the end of the seventh century, the use of *i’jām* and *ḥarakāt* remained patchy.⁸ Understanding the text would pose little

⁵ Claude Gilliot, ‘Creation of a fixed text’, in Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur’an*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 47; Wilde, ‘Early Christian Arabic texts’, 362-3.

⁶ Gilliot, ‘Creation’, 47.

⁷ Gilliot, ‘Creation’, 48-9.

⁸ François Déroche, *Qur’ans of the Umayyads: A First Overview*, (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 135-6; Sinai, ‘Consonantal Skeleton of the Qur’an’, 275-6.

problem for native speakers who had already memorised the text, but would have been, and indeed was, a recipe for variant readings for everyone else.⁹ The foundational document for Islamic theology was thus open to a multiplicity of different interpretations for decades after the death of Muḥammad and, even after the text had officially been codified, it would take until the second half of the ninth century before a canonical reading of the Uthmanic *rasm* gained widespread acceptance.¹⁰

If the Qur'an, its variations, and different readings presented a moving target for Christian writers to pin down the religion of their new rulers, then the ambiguity with which early Islam dealt with Christianity and its practitioners would have made distinguishing the new faith even more problematic. Perhaps the earliest text speaking for Islamic attitudes towards the *ahl al-kitāb*, other than the Qur'an, is the so-called *Constitution of Medina* — a series of legal texts that supposedly represent the agreements signed between Muḥammad, the *muhajirūn*, and the people of Yathrib shortly after the Hijrah from Mecca in 622. Any documents claiming to date from this period must be treated with caution; however, the archaic language of the document and the fact that it preserves attitudes that are otherwise contradictory to later Islamic tradition makes a later invention relatively unlikely.¹¹ Those attitudes concern how different groups are defined in the documents that make up the *Constitution* and how Muḥammad and his followers envisaged the membership of their new religious group.

The opening document of the *Constitution* declares that “the *mu'minūn* [believers] and *muslimūn* of Quraysh and Yathrib, and those who follow them and join

⁹ Wilde, 'Early Christian Arabic texts', 358.

¹⁰ Gilliot, 'Creation', 48-9.

¹¹ Fred Donner, 'From Believers to Muslims: Confessional Self-Identity in the Early Islamic Community', *Al-Abhath* 50-51 (2002-2003): 29.

them and strive along with them [...] are a single *ummah* set apart from the people”.¹² The third document in the series goes on to specify that the Jewish tribe of Banu ‘Awf are “an *ummah* with the *mu’minūn*” and that the “Jews have their custom and the *muslimūn* [have] their custom”, implying that the Jews of Yathrib are to be considered part of the same *ummah* (‘community’, or ‘people’) as the *muslimūn* (literally, ‘those who submit [to God]’), even though they each have their own *dīn* (a term that can mean either ‘custom’, or ‘faith/religion’).¹³ Furthermore, the fifth document specifies that the *muslimūn* are responsible for the payment of their own financial contributions, whilst the Jews “along with the *mu’minūn*” are responsible for theirs.¹⁴

The *Constitution* sets out a series of interconnected groups that share a common overarching group identity: the *muslimūn* are distinct from the Jews, who are part of the *mu’minūn*, but both are considered part of the same *ummah*. The primary determining factor in membership of this *ummah* is established in the second document: they must believe in God and the Last Day.¹⁵ This is an ecumenical and capacious view of a religious community of believers (*mu’minūn*) that encompassed both those who follow the specific teachings of Muḥammad (*muslimūn*) and the believing members of the other Abrahamic faiths: quite different from the image presented in later, revisionist Islamic historiography that sought to backdate later divisions between Jews, Christians, and Muslims to the lifetime of the Prophet.¹⁶

¹² *Constitution of Medina*, A1-2a [=Robert Sargeant, “The “Sunnah Jāmi’ah,” Pacts with the Yathrib Jews, and the “Tahṛīm” of Yathrib: Analysis and Translation of the Documents Comprised in the So-Called ‘Constitution of Medina’, *BSOAS* 41.1 (1978): 18].

¹³ *Constitution of Medina*, C2a [=Sargeant, “The “Sunnah Jāmi’ah”, 27].

¹⁴ *Constitution of Medina*, E3a-3b [=Sargeant, “The “Sunnah Jāmi’ah”, 33].

¹⁵ *Constitution of Medina*, B3a [=Sargeant, “The “Sunnah Jāmi’ah”, 24].

¹⁶ Donner, ‘From Believers to Muslims’, 29; Stephen Shoemaker, *The Death of the Prophet: The End of Muḥammad’s Life and the Beginning of Islam*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 205-7.

Whilst the early Islamic community saw itself as being a distinct religious group from the other members of the *ahl al-kitāb*, and was seen as such by even casual observers, the theological boundaries that distinguished it from Christianity and Judaism were relatively porous. The other two faiths were recognised as being cognate with Islam and part of a common *umma* of ‘believers’ working towards a common, eschatological, goal in service of the same God.¹⁷ The difficulty in disentangling the three Abrahamic faiths from each other in the first century of the Islamic era is exemplified by ongoing discussion about the influence of Christian, particularly Syriac Christian, traditions on the early formation of the Qur’an. The most inflammatory of these modern reinterpretations has framed the Qur’an as an Aramaic Christian urtext that was subsequently misinterpreted and mistranslated by Muslim exegetes.¹⁸ Whilst this position has not been accepted, debate continues as to the influence that Syriac Christianity had on the development of the earliest Qur’anic text and, by extension, Islamic belief.¹⁹

The problem of identifying Islam as a distinct entity, rather than a variation of Judaism or Christianity, comes across in the earliest contemporary texts that refer to the conquests. The *Doctrina Jacobi* refers to the existence of a prophet among the Arabs, but it is couched entirely in terms of Jewish messianic expectations.²⁰ Likewise, seventh-century Christian apologetic literature, like the *Trophies of Damascus* or the *Dialogue of*

¹⁷ Even a visitor such as Frankish bishop Arculf, who travelled around Syria and Palestine during the reign of Mu‘āwiya (661-680) recognised a religious difference between him and the “Saracini increduli”: Adomnán, *De locis sanctis*, 28.3.

¹⁸ This view is expounded in: Christoph Luxenberg, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran: ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache*, (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 2000).

¹⁹ See: Emran Elbadawi, “The Impact of Aramaic (especially Syriac) on the Qur’ān”, *Religion Compass* 8.7 (2014): 220-228; Angelika Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren: die literarische Form des Koran, ein Zeugnis seiner Historizität?*, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007); developed in: Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike: ein europäischer Zugang*, (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2013); and Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur’an and Its Biblical Subtext*, (London: Routledge, 2010).

²⁰ *Doctrina Jacobi*, 3.16; Harald Suermann, ‘Muḥammad’, 16-18; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 410-13.

Papiscus and Philo, tend to present Christianity as being under attack from Jews, not Arabs or Muslims.²¹

An older view of such texts framed these dialogues in terms of Christians feeling unable to directly criticise the religion of their new overlords, discussing such issues as circumcision and the Muslim direction of prayer by using Judaism as a proxy for Islam.²² A more likely explanation is the fact that their Christian authors genuinely did not see Islam as a distinct entity (such as it then was), instead recognising that the Arab conquerors shared common features with the old enemy, Judaism.²³ These texts, intended to be read by co-religionists, attempt to rationalise the collapse of Christian Roman power using terms and groups that were familiar to their audience because they could not properly engage with Islam. In such places where Arabs appear in them, they do so as pagan ‘barbarians’ and are characterised using ancient ethnographic tropes dating back as far as Herodotos.²⁴ Any lack of reference to Islam was not because they were afraid or pressured into doing so, but because it was unclear to them that Islam was anything other than a sect of Christianity or Judaism.

A similar view comes across from the earliest securely dateable discussion of Muḥammad and his teachings that we possess: found in the *History* attributed to pseudo-Sebeos, written some point around 660.²⁵ Thirty years after Muḥammad’s death, the view from Armenia was that he had appeared “as if by God’s command” to the ‘sons of Ishmael’ and taught them to “recognise the God of Abraham”, saying “love sincerely only the God of Abraham”, causing them to “[abandon] their vain cults and

²¹ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 62-6.

²² Olster, *Roman Defeat*, 123-5.

²³ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 419-21.

²⁴ Olster, *Christian Defeat*, 123-5.

²⁵ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 100.

turn to the living God".²⁶ Muḥammad is also said to have legislated for them, forbidding them to eat carrion, drink wine, lie, or fornicate.²⁷ From the perspective of this Armenian author in the 660s, who likely had considerable contacts with churches throughout the nascent caliphate, 'Islam' appears to be entirely inoffensive, with no indication that it differed from Christianity in any fundamental way, nor any hint of theological conflict between Christianity and the teachings of Muḥammad.²⁸ Even some four decades later, the East Syrian author John bar Penkāyē could note, prior to the second *fitna* in the 680s, that Muslim raiding parties consisted not just of devotees of Muḥammad but of Christians and other faiths. These were allowed to join and maintain their beliefs in exchange for paying tribute — giving credence to the ecumenical and relatively inclusive nature of the Islamic religious movement in its early period.²⁹

5.2: Relationship with Christian Communities, c.630-80

Several features of the early Islamic community would have added to the confusion of Christians seeking to identify a new religion, as well as reducing the impetus to do so. Islam's acceptance of the prophethood of Jesus and of the sanctity of Christian monks and holy men seems to have posed problems in the first half-century after the conquest. An archaic form of the Islamic profession of faith, the *shahadah*, associated with 'Ubādah b. al-Ṣamad, an *anṣār* who settled in Syria under 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (r. 634-644) and died during the reign of Mu'āwiyā (661-680), confesses belief in both Jesus and Muḥammad as servants and messengers of God. It is far from the Christian

²⁶ Pseudo-Sebeos, *History*, 42.135.

²⁷ Pseudo-Sebeos, *History*, 42.135.

²⁸ On ps-Sebeos' access to information in the caliphate: James Howard-Johnston and Tim Greenwood, *The Armenian History attributed to Sebeos*, vol.2, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 238.

²⁹ John bar Penkāyē, *Ktābā d-rēsh mellē*, 15.147.

understanding of Jesus as the Son of God (the main point of departure between the two faiths), but certainly a recognition of his special place within the chain of Islamic prophets, elevating him to the same status as the religion's founding figure.³⁰

Similar respect for the sanctity of Jesus comes across from the testimony attributed to the Frankish bishop Arculf in *De locis sanctis* — an account of religious sites, predominantly in Syria and Palestine, written after 679 by Adomnán, abbot of Iona.³¹ Adomnán's interlocutor reports that the leader of the 'Saracens', Mu'āwiya, intervened in a dispute between a group of Jews and Christians over "the Lord's sudarium" (a cloth used to wipe Jesus' sweat) that had been hidden in Christ's tomb; asking for it to be handed over to him.³² Mu'āwiya, after receiving it "with great reverence", cast it into a pyre in order to determine "which part of these two bickering multitudes, Christ, saviour of the world, deemed worthy to present this so excellent a gift".³³ Arculf claimed to have witnessed this exchange first-hand, but its overall historical veracity must, inevitably, be doubted.³⁴ Nevertheless, Mu'āwiya was married to Maysūn bt. Baḥdal, a Christian Arab from the Banu Kalb: the Syrian tribe whose military and political support was vital to the power of the early Umayyads. Maysūn was the mother of Mu'āwiya's successor, Yazīd, who also went on to marry a Christian woman from the Banu Kalb. It is thus not impossible to believe that Mu'āwiya would

³⁰ Suliman Bashear, 'Jesus in an early Muslim shahada and related issues: A new perspective', in Suliman Bashear (ed.), *Studies in Early Islamic Tradition*, (Jerusalem: Max Schloessinger Memorial Foundation, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2004), 4.

³¹ On the sources of information used by Adomnán to write *De locis sanctis*, blending historical written accounts with more contemporary information from 'Arculf', see: Robert Hoyland and Sarah Waidler, 'Adomnán's *De Locis Sanctis* and the Seventh-Century Near East', *EHR* 129.539 (2014): 787-807; contra Thomas O'Loughlin, *Adomnán and the Holy Places: The Perceptions of an Insular Monk on the Locations of the Biblical Drama*, (London: T & T Clark, 2007), 50-63; and David Woods, 'Arculf's Luggage: The Sources for Adomnán's *De Locis Sanctis*', *Ériu* 52 (2002): 25-52.

³² Adomnán, *De locis sanctis*, 9.11-14.

³³ Adomnán, *De locis sanctis*, 9.15-24 ["ut sciamus cui parti horum duum exercituum contentiosorum [Christus mundi Salvator] hoc tale donum condonare dignetur."].

³⁴ Adomnán, *De locis sanctis*, 9.36.

have had a genuine interest in Christian relics.³⁵ At the very least, it would have been politically (and personally) astute for him to show acceptance towards them.

Whether the *sudarium* incident was witnessed by Arculf, whether he was reporting a story told to him during his travels, or whether he (or Adomnán) invented something that seemed plausible, the fact that the caliph could be envisaged treating a Christian relic with such reverence speaks of a more general attitude towards Christianity and its doctrines within the early caliphate. The boundaries between Islam and the other two Abrahamic faiths seem to have been much more fluid than later accounts would have us believe, making pinning down Islam and its differences from Christianity (and Judaism) even more difficult.

More widespread, or at least better attested, seems to have been the acceptance on the part of early Muslims of the sanctity of Christian holy figures. Islam, of course, was a product of a Late Antique world in which the special status of holy men was widely recognised (though not unquestioned), and their feats emulated as examples of pious ascetic life.³⁶ Sizgorich noted that Muslim writers associated individuals who represented the highest forms of Islamic piety with the monks and holy men who likewise represented the highest forms of piety in the Christianised society that Islam evolved in relation to; in particular, the idea that Islamic holy warriors fitted into the

³⁵ Fred Donner, 'Living Together: Social perceptions and changing interactions of Arabian Believers and other religious communities in the Umayyad period', in Andrew Marsham (ed.), *The Umayyad World*, (London: Routledge, 2021), 26; Joshua Mabra, *Princely Authority in the Early Marwānid State: The Life of 'Abd al-'Azīz ibn Marwān*, (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2017), 13-16.

³⁶ The literature on the late antique cult of saints is too voluminous to list even a fraction here, but the seminal work for the modern study of holy men is that of Peter Brown, 'The rise and function of the holy man in late antiquity', *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80-101. For two more recent discussions of the complex place of the holy man in the Eastern Mediterranean world in the century before the advent of Islam, see: Matthew dal Santo, 'The God-Protected Empire? Scepticism toward the Cult of Saints in Early Byzantium', in Peter Sarris, Matthew dal Santo, and Phil Booth (eds), *An Age of Saints?: Power, Conflict and Dissent in Early Medieval Christianity*, (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 129-49 and Lucy Parker, *Symeon Stylites the Younger and Late Antique Antioch: From Hagiography to History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 204-18.

same model of militant piety represented by Christian ascetics.³⁷ The continuing relevance of Christian holy men as models of piety in Islam is highlighted by the prominence of the monk Bahira in *sīrah* literature as the first figure to recognise Muḥammad's prophethood, indicative of his closeness to God and thus in general clear-sightedness of Christian religious figures.³⁸

Although most of our extant evidence for this phenomenon on the Islamic side comes from the eighth century onwards, Christian writers from the first half-century of Islam also attest to the respect shown to Christian holy men and monks by the conquerors. The East Syrian patriarch Isho'yahb III wrote sometime between 649 and 659 to Symeon, bishop of Rev Ardashir (near modern Bushehr), how, now that God had granted the Arabs dominion over the world, "not only do they not attack the Christian religion, truly they even commend our faith, honour the priests and saints of our Lord, and confer favour on churches and monasteries."³⁹ John bar Penkāyē, writing over three decades later, likewise noted that, in accordance with "the tradition of Muḥammad", Mu'āwiya had permitted Christians and monks to live as they so desired.⁴⁰

Even more striking is a story recorded by Mena of Nikiu in his biography of the miaphysite patriarch of Alexandria Isaac (r. 690-692), written around the turn of the eighth century. Mena tells us that, one day, the Muslim governor of Egypt, 'Abd al-'Azīz b. Marwān (r. 685-705), summoned the patriarch to the new provincial capital of Helwan, whereupon he took him into his palace and left him alone in one of the

³⁷ Thomas Sizgorich, 'Narrative and Community in Islamic Late Antiquity', *Past & Present* 185 (2004): 33-34.

³⁸ Michael Penn, *Envisioning Islam: Syriac Christians and the Early Muslim World*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 87; Barbara Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā: Eastern Christian apologetics and apocalyptic in response to Islam*, (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 37-44; Sizgorich, 'Narrative and Community', 27.

³⁹ Isho'yahb III, *Letters*, 14.182.1-5.

⁴⁰ John bar Penkāyē, *Ktābā d-rēsh mellē*, 15.146.

chambers. A little later, the *'amīr's* wife investigated the chamber and saw the patriarch in prayer surrounded by angels and talking to God. She went to her husband to tell him what he saw, at which point 'Abd al-'Azīz confessed, saying "I took him into the chamber on his own so that he might pray for us and our children". The *'amīr* then lets Isaac go in honour, for "he loved the Christians."⁴¹ Whether or not 'Abd al-'Azīz would have invited Isaac to his palace with the intention of having the Christian patriarch pray for him and his family is doubtful — particularly considering his anti-Christian persecutions. This sympathetic portrayal of the *'amīr* was at least partly the result of a wider social context of interconfessional conflict amongst the different Christian groups to secure protection and patronage from the 'impartial' Muslim authorities. In Syria-Palestine and Egypt, where the removal of Roman authority left Chalcedonian Christians without recourse to the power of the imperial government, we find the prominent members of the various sects jostling for position to present themselves as the 'legitimate' Christian community.

Possibly the earliest example of this comes from the so-called *Maronite Chronicle*, written in Syria not long after its conclusion in 664.⁴² The *Chronicle* tells us that in 658/9, Mu'āwiya oversaw a disputation between Maronite and Jacobite (miaphysite) bishops; the Maronites were declared victorious and the Jacobites ordered to pay 20,000 dinars annually as a result.⁴³ This payment was made lest Mu'āwiya "withdraw his protection" and allow them to be persecuted by the 'orthodox'. The Jacobites, then, seem to have secured recognition as a protected group in exchange for paying tax revenue, the implication being that the Maronites did not enjoy the same status. The

⁴¹ Mena of Nikiu, *Life of Isaac*, 69.

⁴² Palmer, *West-Syrian Chronicles*, 29.

⁴³ *Maronite Chronicle*, 70-1 [=Palmer, *West-Syrian Chronicles*, 30-1].

Chronicle attempts to spin this recognition and protection as some kind of punishment for the Jacobites, whilst presenting Mu‘āwiya as a fair judge who recognised the truth that the Maronites were orthodox Christians. The purpose of this was to encourage the author’s co-religionists to see the new government as one that recognised the correctness of their beliefs and, thus, to work with rather than against it.

A similar desire to work with the Muslim authorities to secure patronage can be read into texts written by Egyptian miaphysites, like the *Life of Isaac*. It is clear from the surviving evidence these writers were engaged in a ‘charm offensive’ directed at the new Islamic administration in order to gain patronage and protection.⁴⁴ This began to bear fruit in the 680s; the new Marwānid administration needed to assert control over a province that had initially backed Ibn Zubayr and brought in miaphysite bureaucrats from Syria to do so, whilst the Chalcedonian side had collapsed into schism after the rejection of monothelism at the Sixth Ecumenical Council.⁴⁵ It was partly in service of this desire for recognition and support that the *History of the Patriarchs* goes to such lengths to present the relationship between ‘Abd al-‘Azīz and successive patriarchs in a positive light; excusing instances of the ‘amīr interfering in ecclesiastical affairs as being in service of God’s will.⁴⁶ Likewise, the testimony of the *Life of Isaac* and other texts that ‘Abd al-‘Azīz accepted prayers from a miaphysite holy man or desired Christian relics all point towards a concerted effort of accommodation and toleration that suited the interests of both parties.⁴⁷ The Muslim authorities gained a powerful tool for maintaining social stability in Egypt, whilst the miaphysites received the official recognition and protection that they had consistently lacked under Roman rule.

⁴⁴ Papaconstantinou, ‘Making of the Coptic “Church of the Martyrs”’, 67-9.

⁴⁵ Phil Booth, ‘Debating the Faith in Early Islamic Egypt’, *JEH* 70:4 (2019): 702-5.

⁴⁶ Mabra, *Princely Authority*, 147-51.

⁴⁷ Mabra, *Princely Authority*, 147-8; Papaconstantinou, ‘Making of the Coptic “Church of the Martyrs”’, 85.

Whether this situation was a cynical ploy, or the result of a genuine lack of religious tension between the two sides, the result was the same: miaphysite writers in the last decades of the seventh century did not feel under threat from the fact that their new rulers were not Christian and so had no need to analyse or directly criticise this. Indeed, to do so would have been to undermine their new status.

Further relieving the desire or ability of Christian writers to engage with Islam was the relationship that early Muslims seem to have had with Christian holy sites. In areas like Syria and Palestine, where Muslim administrative centres were established in pre-existing, majority-Christian cities, rather than purpose-built *amṣar* like Kufa and Basra in Iraq or Fustāṭ in Egypt, sacred spaces seem to have been shared between Christians and Muslims. The best-attested example of this is the Church of John the Baptist in Damascus, where part of the cathedral was given over to a Muslim prayer hall.⁴⁸ A similar arrangement is also attested for the Church of St. John in Emesa/Homs, where the city agreed as part of its capitulation to the forces of Abū ‘Ubaydah that “one-fourth” of the church “was to be turned into a mosque”.⁴⁹ In Jerusalem, Muslims are attested worshipping alongside Christians at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Tomb of the Virgin; a practice that apparently continued down to the tenth century, when Eutychios criticised Muslims praying inside churches in Jerusalem and at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.⁵⁰ The fact that the original Muslim direction of prayer was towards the east, the same as for Christians, would have facilitated the use of Christian places of worship by Muslims, which only began to be prohibited by Islamic

⁴⁸ Adomnán, *De locis sanctis*, 28.2-3 [“In qua [civitas Damasci] Saracinarum rex adeptus eius principatum regnat. Et in honore sancti Iohannis Baptistae ibidem grandis fundata ecclesia est, et quaedam etiam Saracinarum ecclesia incredulorum et ipsa in eadem civitate quam ipsi frequentant fabricata est.”].

⁴⁹ Al-Balādhurī, *Kitāb Futūḥ al-Buldān*, 131 [Emesa/Homs]; Shoemaker, *Death of the Prophet*, 215.

⁵⁰ Suliman Bashear, ‘Qibla Musharriqa and Early Muslim Prayer in Churches’, *The Muslim World* 81.3-4 (1991): 268; Shoemaker, *Death of the Prophet*, 215.

jurists from the eighth century.⁵¹ That prohibition, much like the attempt made a century earlier by John the Almsgiver to ban Chalcedonian Christians in Egypt worshipping in miaphysite churches, simply indicates the pervasiveness of the practice and the fact that Muslims on the ground clearly saw no problem in using churches to pray in instead of mosques.⁵²

The major exception to this tendency towards shared sacred spaces in the first decades of Islam is the apparent construction of a mosque, or more likely simply a prayer hall, on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.⁵³ This predated the current al-Aqsa complex, but is possibly associated with the Dome of the Chain located in the centre of the Mount.⁵⁴ This structure seems to have been commissioned relatively soon after the conquest of Jerusalem in 637, to judge by the testimony provided in a Georgian appendix to the *Spiritual Meadow* (likely originally produced in Greek at Mar Saba) and the *History* attributed to Pseudo-Sebeos – both texts written in the 650s.⁵⁵

Other evidence for this structure suggests a later date in the 660s under Mu‘āwiya: notably the claim made in the second collection of *Narrationes* attributed to Anastasios of Sinai.⁵⁶ The seventh story in the collection was written at around the same time the Dome of the Rock was being constructed in c.691/2 and the author dismissed

⁵¹ Bashear, ‘Qibla Musharriqa’, 268 and 282.

⁵² Leontios of Neapolis, *Life of John the Almsgiver*, 49.1-48.

⁵³ On the development of the ‘mosque’ as a distinctive space representing an Islamic place of worship by the start of the eighth century, see: Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art*, 2nd ed., (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), ch.5.

⁵⁴ Suleiman Mourad, ‘Umayyad Jerusalem: from a religious capital to a religious town’, in Andrew Marsham (ed.), *The Umayyad World*, (London: Routledge, 2021), 398.

⁵⁵ Bernard Flusin, ‘L’esplanade du Temple à l’arrivée des arabes d’après deux récits byzantins’, in Julian Raby and Jeremy Johns (eds), *Bayt al-Maqdis: ‘Abd al-Malik’s Jerusalem*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), vol.1, 21; Pseudo-Sebeos, *History*, 43.139.

⁵⁶ On the question of the authorship of this collection of edifying stories, see: Bernard Flusin, ‘Démons et Sarrasins. L’auteur et le propos des *Diègèmata stèriktika* d’Anastase le Sinaïte’, *TM* 11 (1991): 381-409; and Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 99-102.

On the religious and political importance of Jerusalem to Mu‘āwiya, see: Jacob Lassner, *Medieval Jerusalem: Forging an Islamic City in Spaces Sacred to Christians and Jews*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 60-80.

those who “think and say that the Temple of God is being built now in Jerusalem” by relating the fact that “thirty years ago, [he] was dwelling in the Holy City, on the Mount of Olives, when the Capitolium was being excavated by the multitude of Egyptians”.⁵⁷ Arculf, via Adomnán, makes it clear that a fairly large, rectangular prayer hall (“orationis domus”) used by the Muslims already existed on the Temple Mount when he visited in the time of Mu‘āwiya, but gives no indication as to whether this was a recent development.⁵⁸

The appropriation of the Temple Mount for an Islamic place of worship is the exception to the general rule of cohabitation that we find elsewhere and was contested by both Christians and Jews. The objection, however, seems to have rested on the idea of building any place of worship on the site rather than the fact that this was a Muslim building. Sophronios, patriarch of Jerusalem at the time of the conquest, appears in the account in the Georgian *Spiritual Meadow* to upbraid a stonemason named John who had gone to help with the construction of the mosque, enjoining him to go and work at the Holy Sepulchre and not to help build something on “the place that Christ cursed”.⁵⁹ Neither Sophronios in the story, nor the author of the metanarrative declare that the structure should not be built because it is non-Christian, nor even because the ‘Saracens’ are building it. Indeed, the stonemason John is explicitly said to have gone to work for the Muslims willingly and later actually disobeys Sophronios to go back to work in secret — he, and others, clearly had no qualms working for their new rulers.⁶⁰

Anastasios, meanwhile, when speaking about the structure erected before the then-

⁵⁷ Anastasios of Sinai, *Narrationes*, 2.7.

⁵⁸ Adomnán, *De locis sanctis*, 1.54 [“Ceterum in illo famoso loco ubi quondam templum magnifice constructum fuerat in vicinia mura ab oriente locatum nunc Saracini quadrangulam orationis domum, quam subrectis tabulis et magnis trabibus super quasdam ruinarum reliquias construentes vili fabricati sunt opere, ipsi frequentant; quae utique domus tria hominum milia, ut fertur, capere potest.”].

⁵⁹ Flusin, ‘L’esplanade du Temple’, 21.

⁶⁰ Flusin, ‘L’esplanade du Temple’, 21.

under construction Dome of the Rock declares that, in accordance with Christ's declaration (Matt. 23:38 and Luke 13:34), no house of God could be built on the Temple Mount and that the earlier building was therefore raised "by the work of demons".⁶¹

In fact, none of the accounts of the first Islamic construction on the Temple Mount criticise it on the basis that it was a Muslim building encroaching on a Christian or Jewish site and one wonders if it would have been possible for them to identify it as such. Indeed, it may well have been that the construction project was welcomed by some Jews in Jerusalem as a fulfilment of contemporary messianic feeling.⁶² The account of Pseudo-Sebeos attributes the building work to a group of Jews in the city wanting to "rebuild the temple of Solomon"; it is this that is appropriated by the 'Ishmaelites' and used as their place of prayer.⁶³ If accurate, then the Muslims, in keeping with their attitude towards churches, had no issue utilising a Jewish place of worship as their own; if not, then such an occurrence must have been believable enough in the 650s to circulate widely enough to reach Armenia. In a similar vein, the author of the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Shenoute*, referring either to this earlier building or the Dome of the Rock, writes about it as the 'Third Temple' ushering in the End Times in accordance with Jewish prophecy.⁶⁴ Likewise, Anastasios of Sinai criticised those people who believed it was the 'Third Temple', suggesting that even in the 690s it was unclear to observers whether an Islamic place of worship was truly distinctive from a Christian or Jewish sacred space.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Anastasios of Sinai, *Narrationes*, 2.7.

⁶² Suermann, 'Muhammad', 16-18.

⁶³ Pseudo-Sebeos, *History*, 43.139.

⁶⁴ *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Shenoute*, 174 [=Stephen Shoemaker in *A Prophet Has Appeared: The Rise of Islam through Christian and Jewish Eyes* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021), 171-84].

⁶⁵ On the general significance of the Temple Mount to Jews, Christians, and Muslims, see: Cyril Mango, 'The Temple Mount, AD 614-638', in Julian Raby and Jeremy Johns (eds), *Bayt al-Maqdis: 'Abd al-Malik's Jerusalem*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), vol.1, 1-16; Mourad, 'Umayyad Jerusalem', 393-405; Nasser Rabbat, 'The Meaning of the Umayyad Dome of the Rock', *Muqarnas* 6 (1988): 13-15.

In Egypt, where the Muslim administration was based out of the garrison-settlement of Fustāṭ, rather than the old capital of Alexandria, the sources covering the early period after the conquest make it clear that the new Islamic administration did not harm Christian places of worship, at least at the outset. John of Nikiu, writing at the end of the seventh century, concedes that even though the Muslims may be the “enemies of God” and Muḥammad’s teachings “the detestable doctrine of the beast”, the leader of the conquest, ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ, “took none of the property of the churches, and he committed no act of spoliation or plunder, and he preserved them throughout all his days”.⁶⁶ A similar begrudging recognition of the fact that the earliest Muslims had respect for the sanctity of Christian holy places can be found in the contemporary *Homily* of Pseudo-Theophilos. Here, a *vaticinium ex eventu* predicts that, after God “lifts the yoke of the Romans from atop the land of Egypt”, he will “arouse a strong people that will have concern for the wellbeing of the churches of Christ and will not sin against the faith in any way”, before, paradoxically, going on to state in the next sentence that “God will punish the peoples of the land of Egypt with this nation on account of their sins.”⁶⁷ Both Mena of Nikiu, in the *Life of Isaac*, and the two main authors of the biographies from 477 to 767 in the *History of the Patriarchs* attest to the fact that ‘Abd al-‘Azīz actively encouraged the construction of new churches and monasteries in his new administrative capital of Helwan.⁶⁸ The veracity of these accounts has been confirmed by excavations at the site of Helwan that have revealed two large palace complexes, one

⁶⁶ John of Nikiu, *Chronicle*, 121.3 and 10. For a discussion of the lack of land confiscation and grants made to Arabs post-conquest and the generally co-operative relationship between the new administration and the church in Egypt, see: Petra Sijpesteijn, ‘New Rule over Old Structures: Egypt after the Muslim Conquest’, in Harriet Crawford (ed.), *Regime Change in the Ancient Near East and Egypt: from Sargon of Agade to Saddam Hussein*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 187-9.

⁶⁷ Ps-Theophilos of Alexandria, *Homily*, 392 [=Henri Fleisch, ‘Une homélie de Théophile d’Alexandrie en l’honneur de St Pierre et de St Paul’, *ROC* 30 (1935-36): 371-419].

⁶⁸ Mena of Nikiu, *Life of Isaac*, 69 [“the king honoured [patriarch Isaac] and the king built churches and monasteries for monks around his city, for he loved the Christians”]; Sawīrus ibn al-Muqaffa‘, *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, 16.22.

of which contains a basilica-plan church that could be accessed separately from what appears to be more private quarters: suggesting that the structure served as both the residence for a major figure (likely the patriarch) and as a public building servicing the Christian community in the new capital.⁶⁹

This decision to leave Christian churches untouched was, of course, a shrewd political move on the part of the conquerors to ensure the loyalty of the majority population. Considering all the other evidence, however, it also likely stemmed from a genuine recognition of the sacred nature of these spaces both to the Christians and to the Muslims as common members of the new *umma*. The relative lack of religious conflict exhibited by the earliest Muslims towards Christians meant that there was both little need and little opportunity for writers in the decades after the conquests to identify and contest points of religious difference with their new rulers. The nascent caliphate kept (largely) the same bureaucrats, the same administrative language, and the same coinage as the states it replaced; the new ruling group were few in number and concentrated in particular locations, making prolonged contact with them and their new faith unlikely for most Christians.⁷⁰ Even when interaction did take place, for the first half-century at least it would have been far from obvious that the Arabs either had a new religion or that this religion was qualitatively different to Christianity; nor, had this been recognised, would there have been much to gain by discussing it.

This is not to say that there was no conflict or resentment on the part of Christians in the caliphate for their reduced status. For educated Christian writers in the conquered territories, the Arab conquests were rationalised in much the same way that

⁶⁹ Mabra, *Princely Authority*, 143-6.

⁷⁰ This was particularly the case in Egypt, where the Arab-Muslim population was mainly restricted to the garrison at Fustāṭ and the surrounding area until towards the end of the seventh century: Sijpesteijn, 'New Rule', 185-7.

they were in the empire: as God sending a barbarian people to punish the Christians for their sins. The idea that they possessed a new religion that made claims to superiority over Christianity is absent from the very earliest testimony. Instead, where the sources do adopt a polemical tone, they tend to portray Muslims in terms of older, pre-Islamic tropes: as godless pagans or associated with Judaism. For most Christians, there seems to have been little reason to consider the conquerors as posing a new threat.

An illuminating letter written by the miaphysite patriarch of Antioch, Athanasios of Balad, to the *chorepiskopoi* of his see partly confirms this. Written between 684 and 687, the letter criticises those Christians who “take part with the pagans in their festivals” and Christian women who have “united with pagans against the law and rightful conduct”.⁷¹ The *chorepiskopoi* are instructed to warn the people against taking part in such pagan festivals and from consuming the meat sacrificed at them, to admonish those who do so, and, particularly, to endeavour to baptise any children of the women who have married pagans and ensure the mothers are not refused communion.⁷² The ‘pagans’ in Athanasios’ correspondence are clearly Muslims and the festival that the Christians took part in and ate the sacrifices from was probably Eid al-Adha, when Muslims sacrifice animals in commemoration of the ram killed by Abraham in place of Ishmael (Qur’an 37:102-112) and share the meat with family, friends, and the needy.⁷³ That Athanasios felt compelled to write such a letter is indicative of the fact that Christians in Syria, in what one must assume were rural districts, were celebrating

⁷¹ Athanasios of Balad, *Letters*, 16.167.

⁷² Athanasios of Balad, *Letters*, 16.167 [“As for the others, exhort them, rebuke them, warn them, above all the women united with such men, that they ward against the food from their sacrifices, the choked [flesh], and their illegal commerce. That they also try, with all their power, to baptise the infants that they have had from their union with them. If you can, you will not restrain those who have otherwise conducted themselves Christianly in everything from participation in the divine mysteries for the sole reason that they are united with pagans”].

⁷³ On the pre-Islamic origins of animal sacrifice in Islam: Brannon Wheeler, *Animal Sacrifice and the Origins of Islam*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

Islamic festivals with their Muslim neighbours and even marrying Muslim men without any regard for religious differences between the two groups. Moreover, where such difference was perceived, it was seen in terms of the ancient model of paganism versus Christianity: even forty years after the conquest, the most important miaphysite bishop in Syria was seemingly ignorant of the distinction between Muslims and pagans.⁷⁴

The situation for Christians living in the first fifty years of the Islamic period was one of initial violent disruption, followed by acceptance and adaptation to the presence of a new ruling power. Their relationship towards Islam, such as it existed in any recognisable form, can be summed up as *oikonomia* ('accommodation'). For those in a position to determine that the faith that the Arab conquerors possessed was distinct from Christianity, the differences were either so minimal as to not be worth dwelling on, or so elusive as to need a proxy to address them (usually Judaism). Moreover, any impulse to address the new faith's opposition to Christianity was lessened by their own need to secure the support and patronage of the new ruling group and the fact that early Islam seems to have broadly accepted Christianity under its own theological framework. Possible points of friction were therefore minimised. As for most people, the evidence from Patriarch Athanasios and of shared sacred spaces point to them being likely oblivious to any differences in belief between them and the conquerors. Given the evident confusion about the nature of Islam even amongst some of the most educated and best-connected Christians in the caliphate, it is little wonder that Romans within the empire had little to no sense that the Arab conquerors were qualitatively different from previous barbarian invaders.

⁷⁴ Although, it must be said, there is no guarantee that the Arabs that the rural Christians were interacting with were in fact Muslim. Nevertheless, if they were not, then it raises the issue of why the patriarch felt the need to raise this issue now when, presumably, such interaction and synthesis between Christians and pagan Arabs had been occurring for centuries.

5.3: *Beginnings of Conflict, c.680-720*

Amongst the Christian populations in the caliphate, a shift away from this ambivalent stance towards Islam can begin to be detected from the second half of the first Islamic century, coinciding broadly with the overthrow of the Sufyānid Umayyads and the installation of the Marwānids in 684. This shift manifests itself in the literature produced by Christians in Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and Mesopotamia in the form of an increasing awareness of the theological claims against Christianity being made by Muslims.⁷⁵ The impetus behind this was the changing nature of Islam itself, specifically a growing sense of religious group identity amongst its practitioners and a consequent desire to define the boundaries of that group vis-à-vis the other religions in the caliphate. This evolution came about because of a confluence of religious, social, and political factors.

The first of these was driven by the need to re-assess the early history of Islam itself. The original movement of the Believers had been driven by eschatological expectations that formed a common thread between them and the other two Abrahamic faiths.⁷⁶ The failure of the eschaton to materialise in the decades after Muḥammad's death inevitably provoked reflection on what the core defining principles of the faith

⁷⁵ Donner, 'From Believers to Muslims', 12; Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, 55; Gerrit Reinink, 'The Beginnings of Syriac Apologetic Literature in Response to Islam', *Oriens Christianus* 77 (1993), 182-7; Roggema, *Legend of Sergius Bahīrā*, 13.

⁷⁶ The role of the Qur'an as an eschatological text, the impact of this on early Islam, and its commonality with Christianity and Judaism are discussed in: Suliman Bashear, 'Muslim Apocalypses and the Hour: A Case-Study in Traditional Reinterpretation', *Israel Oriental Studies* 13 (1993): 75-87; Averil Cameron, 'Late Antique Apocalyptic: A Context for the Qur'an?', in Hagit Amirav, Emmanouela Grypeou, and Guy Stroumsa (eds), *Apocalypticism and Eschatology in Late Antiquity: Encounters in the Abrahamic Religions, 6th-8th Centuries*, (Leuven: Peeters, 2017), 1-20; David Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic*, (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2002), 1-9 and 269-74; and Shoemaker, *Death of a Prophet*, ch.3, esp. 158-71.

were.⁷⁷ This combined with greater access to and awareness of the teachings expressed in the Qur'an, as a result of the document's codification at around the same time, to bring about an increasing focus on the uniqueness of Muḥammad and his message as the key quality that separated Islam from the earlier faiths. It is striking that whilst many inscriptions from the early Islamic period include invocations to God, making them explicitly monotheistic, the first epigraphic record naming Muḥammad does not come until 691, in the form of an Egyptian tombstone.⁷⁸

The earliest surviving attestations for both the canonical form of the *shahādah* ('There is no god but God, Muḥammad is the messenger of God') and the use of the term 'Islam' to describe the faith of Muḥammad's followers is the monumental inscription adorning the Dome of the Rock, built at the behest of 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān in 691/2.⁷⁹ The mosaic programme commissioned for the building, as well as declaring the primacy of Muḥammad and his religion, also seems to explicitly differentiate Islam from Christianity in its choice of *sūrah* quotations and their orientation on the building.⁸⁰ Whilst the exterior of the structure was redesigned by the Ottoman sultan Suleiman I in the sixteenth century, the interior mosaics largely date back to the building's seventh-century construction.⁸¹ A section of the inscription on the inner face of the building's ambulatory, which would have the reader facing north-west towards the Church of the

⁷⁷ Bashear, 'Muslim Apocalypses', 87-92.

⁷⁸ Donner, 'From Believers to Muslims', 41.

⁷⁹ Donner, 'Living Together', 24. For the dating of the Dome of the Rock, see: Sheila Blair, 'What is the date of the Dome of the Rock?', in Julian Raby and Jeremy Johns (eds), *Bayt al-Maqdis: 'Abd al-Malik's Jerusalem*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), vol.1, 59-88; Oleg Grabar, *The Dome of the Rock*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2006), 59-63.

⁸⁰ Geoffrey King, 'Islam, Iconoclasm, and the Declaration of Doctrine', *BSOAS* 48.2 (1985): 274; Alfred-Louis de Prémare, 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwān et le Processus de Constitution du Coran', in Karl-Heinz Ohlig and Gerd-Rüdiger (eds), *Die dunklen Anfänge: Neue Forschungen zur Entstehung und frühen Geschichte des Islam*, (Berlin: Verlag Hans Schiller, 2005), 179-82.

⁸¹ Sheila Blair, 'Invoking the Prophet Muḥammad through Word, Sound, and Image: Verbal, Vocal, and Visual Images in the Religious Arts of Islam', *Religion and the Arts* 20.1-2 (2016): 30-31; Gülru Necipoğlu, 'The Dome of the Rock as Palimpsest: 'Abd al-Malik's Grand Narrative and Sultan Süleyman's Glosses', *Muqarnas* 25 (2008): 45-54.

Holy Sepulchre, contains quotations from *sūrah* 19:15 and 19:33-36, adapted to fit the requirements of the space:

وَسَلَّمَ عَلَيْهِ يَوْمَ وُلِدَ وَيَوْمَ يَمُوتُ وَيَوْمَ يُبْعَثُ حَيًّا
 ذَلِكَ عِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ ۚ قَوْلَ الْحَقِّ الَّذِي فِيهِ يَمْتَرُونَ
 مَا كَانَ لِلَّهِ أَنْ يَتَّخِذَ مِنْ وُلْدٍ ۚ سُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ ۗ إِذَا قَضَىٰ أَمْرًا فَإِنَّمَا يَقُولُ لَهُ كُنْ فَيَكُونُ
 وَإِنَّ اللَّهَ رَبِّي وَرَبُّكُمْ فَأَعْبُدُوهُ ۗ هَذَا صِرَاطٌ مُسْتَقِيمٌ

Peace be upon him the day he was born, the day he dies, and the day he will be raised up alive!
 That is Jesus, son of Mary, in word of truth, about which they are doubting.
 It is not for God to take a son. Glory be to Him. When He decrees a thing, He only says it to “Be” and it is.
 God is my Lord and your Lord, so serve Him. This is a straight path.⁸²

It is a direct rejection of several of the central claims made in Christianity about Jesus, notably denial of his resurrection (“he will be raised back to life”) and his place in the Trinity (“It is not for God to take a son”), read while facing towards the very place that Christian tradition believes Christ was resurrected.⁸³

A similar pattern can be found as part of the famous coinage reform undertaken by ‘Abd al-Malik shortly afterwards.⁸⁴ Prior to this, Islamic coins had taken the same forms as their Roman and Sasanian predecessors, absent the cross and with inscriptions recording the names of governors or caliphs followed by “in the name of God”.⁸⁵ The first coin to mention Muḥammad does not appear until 685/6, minted by the local governor of Bishapur in southern Iran: it is not until the reform of ‘Abd al-Malik, which

⁸² Blair, ‘Date of the Dome of the Rock’, 87 [translation]; for the full Arabic text of the inscription: Christel Kessler, ‘Abd al-Malik’s Inscription in the Dome of the Rock: A Reconsideration’, *JRAS* 102.1 (1970): 8-9. The text and translation of the full inscription can be found in: Marcus Milwright, *The Dome of the Rock and Its Umayyad Mosaic Inscriptions*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 67-72.

⁸³ I would like to thank Blake Lorenz for first bringing my attention to these inscriptions in his paper “The Epigraphy of the Dome of the Rock in Relation to the Sacred Landscape of Jerusalem”, presented at the *Oxford Byzantine Graduate Seminar*, 28th March 2022 [Online].

⁸⁴ On the nature and chronology of the reforms: Luke Treadwell, ‘Abd al-Malik’s Coinage Reforms: the Role of the Damascus Mint’, *Revue Numismatique* 165 (2009): 364-76.

⁸⁵ Donner, ‘From Believers to Muslims’, 40.

also gradually stripped the coinage of figural iconography, that the name of Muḥammad becomes a standard feature of Islamic numismatics, usually as part of the *shahādah*.⁸⁶ The same reform also saw the term *Dīn al-Ḥaqq* ('religion of truth') appear for the first time, making an exclusive claim for Islam teachings as the one true faith and presenting a direct challenge to the similar claims made by Jews and Christians.⁸⁷

This hardening of Islam's boundaries relative to its sister monotheisms went alongside, and was likely influenced by, corresponding growth in the awareness of Muslims of their status as a distinct social group and of their state as an Islamic one. The development of Muslim society as an elite, ruling group in which social status was determined by confessional purity and closeness to Muḥammad encouraged the creation of a more exclusive and closed interpretation of religious belonging.⁸⁸ This manifested in a gradual closing of the channels of interfaith dialogue and ecumenism that had marked the first fifty years of Islam, instead restricting elite social status to Muslims alone.

This is most clearly visible in the changes to the caliphate's administrative system that occurred towards the end of the seventh century, continuing in the eighth. Initially, the administrative system had inherited the mechanisms of its Roman and Sasanian predecessors, including the people running them. We have already noted how, when 'Abd al-'Azīz was made *'amīr* of Egypt in 685, he appointed Christian secretaries from Syria to administer the diwan; likewise, the Syrian diwan, from the reign of Mu'āwiya until some point under 'Abd al-Malik, was under the authority of a man

⁸⁶ Donner, 'From Believers to Muslims', 40; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 548 and 552; Treadwell, 'Coinage Reforms', 373-4.

⁸⁷ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 548 and 552.

⁸⁸ Peter Webb, *Imagining the Arabs: Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 135-6.

named Sarjūn b. Manṣūr al-Rūmī — a Christian and father (or possibly grandfather) of the theologian John of Damascus.⁸⁹

From ‘Abd al-Malik onwards there was a gradual replacement of Christian bureaucrats with Muslim ones and a shift from Greek to Arabic as the administrative and legal language of the formerly Roman parts of the caliphate. According to Khalīfa ibn Khayyāt, Sarjūn b. Manṣūr was replaced after his death by Sulaymān ibn Sa‘d, who “was the first to use Arabic for the records of the Syrian diwan”.⁹⁰ A more widespread change is reported by al-Balādhurī, who states that “Greek remained the language of the state registers until the reign of ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwān, who in the year 81 [=700] ordered it changed”. Balādhurī claims that the change brought sorrow to Sarjūn b. Manṣūr, who supposedly recommended his fellow Greek-speakers to seek any other profession than the bureaucracy “for God has cut it off from you”.⁹¹ Theophanes, drawing upon the common ‘eastern’ source he shares with Michael the Syrian, Agapios, and the *Chronicle to 1234*, records that it was ‘Abd al-Malik’s successor, al-Walīd (r.705-715), who “forbade that the registers of the public offices should be written in Greek; instead, they were to be expressed in Arabic”.⁹²

The more comprehensive documentary record from Egypt corroborates the picture of a gradual shift from Greek to Arabic at this time. The so-called Basileios archive, uncovered near ancient Aphrodito in Upper Egypt, contains documents sent to

⁸⁹ Khalīfa ibn Khayyāt, *Ta’rīkh*, 394; Mena of Nikiu, *Life of Isaac*, 61; Sawīrus ibn al-Muqaffa‘, *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, 15.10; al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk*, 18.205; Theoph. *Chron.* AM 6183. On the relationship between Sarjūn and John of Damascus: Theoph. *Chron.* AM 6234. Sidney Griffith, ‘The Manṣūr Family and Saint John of Damascus: Christians and Muslims in Umayyad Times’, in Antoine Borrut and Fred Donner (eds), *Christians and Others in the Umayyad State*, (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2016), 29-52.

For the argument against the more common identification of Sarjūn b. Mansūr as John’s father: Sean Anthony, ‘Fixing John Damascene’s Biography: Historical Notes on His Family Background’, *J ECS* 23.4 (2015): 612-14.

⁹⁰ Khalīfa ibn Khayyāt, *Ta’rīkh*, 394.

⁹¹ Al-Balādhurī, *Kitāb Futūḥ al-Buldān*, 193.

⁹² Theoph. *Chron.* AM 6199.

the local governor from the central authorities in Fustāṭ, as well as from local landowners and other regional administrators. The texts date predominantly from 708-711, corresponding with the rule of the *'amīr* Qurrah b. Sharīk (709-714/15), from whom the archive gets its alternative name, the Qurrah dossier.⁹³ The presence of a mixture of Greek and Arabic documents sent from the Fustāṭ chancery to Aphrodito attests to the introduction of Arabic in the chancery at the turn of the eighth century, with its use likely a deliberate choice intended to send a message about the Islamic nature of the administration and the elite status of their sacred tongue. Few in Upper Egypt at this time would have understood Arabic, even amongst the local elites, so its appearance was clearly for symbolic rather than practical purposes.

The Arabic letters also begin with the Islamic *basmalah* and utilise hijri dates.⁹⁴ By contrast, the Greek correspondence sent from Fustāṭ uses generic monotheistic formulae and the same mix of Egyptian calendar and indictional dates found in the contemporary sections of the *History of the Patriarchs*.⁹⁵ This suggests a bi-level administrative system consisting of practical documents written in a locally-understood lingua franca, using a recognisable dating system, that existed alongside 'statement' documents written in a prestige language, incomprehensible to most, and which used a religious dating system that would have been meaningless to non-Muslims. The Arabic documents were an intrusion from the centre into the old administrative apparatus of the province, declaring the changed reality of the age of Islam.

Other evidence for the changing nature of government in Egypt at this time can be found in our literary sources. According to the *History of the Patriarchs*, in 704/5,

⁹³ Tonio Sebastian Richter, 'Language Choice in the Qurra Dossier', in Arietta Papaconstantinou, *The Multilingual Experience in Egypt, from the Ptolemies to the 'Abbāsids* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 195-6.

⁹⁴ Sebastian Richter, 'Language Choice', 198 and 214-15.

⁹⁵ Sebastian Richter, 'Language Choice', 199; Sawīrus ibn al-Muqaffa', *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, 17.66 — for example.

‘Abd al-‘Azīz’s son, al-Aṣḅagh, forced several local governors to convert to Islam..⁹⁶

Immediately afterwards, the text reports that the “believer and lover of Christ”

Athanasios was dismissed as head of the Egyptian diwan, connecting this to the arrival of ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abd al-Malik as governor of the province.⁹⁷ In reality, Athanasios had been replaced by Ibn Yarbū’ al-Fazarī as head of the diwan before ‘Abd Allāh’s arrival as *’amīr* — so perhaps the author of this section of the *History* can be forgiven for confusing the replacement of the two most important officials in Egypt in short order.⁹⁸

In 719, the Christian local governors are said to have been replaced by Muslim ones, which likely belies the lament in the *History* at around this time that “Christians were oppressed by the governors and the local authorities and the Muslims in every place”.⁹⁹

As for the shift towards Arabic, after Qurrah b. Sharīk’s death in 715, the new caliph, Sulaymān b. ‘Abd al-Malik, sent a new *’amīr* to Egypt named Usāmah, who immediately commissioned a survey of the boundaries of the provinces of Egypt in Arabic.¹⁰⁰ Usāmah is also said to have ordered that all monks in Egypt be branded with an identifying mark with the date “according to the era of Islam”, heralding the first appearance of hijra dating in the *History*, rather than the Egyptian calendar, the Diocletianic era, or indictional dates.¹⁰¹ This passage, in some ways, encapsulates the changing character of Islamic rule in Egypt and elsewhere, beginning as it does by informing us that these events took place “in the year 431 of Diocletian, in the thirteenth

⁹⁶ Sawīrus ibn al-Muqaffa’, *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, 17.49-50.

⁹⁷ Sawīrus ibn al-Muqaffa’, *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, 17.52.

⁹⁸ Petra Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim State: the world of a mid-eighth-century Egyptian official*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 102.

⁹⁹ Sawīrus ibn al-Muqaffa’, *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, 17.70; Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim State*, 103.

¹⁰⁰ Sawīrus ibn al-Muqaffa’, *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, 17.66. The text attributes the appointment of Usamah in 715 to al-Walīd, but since he died in late 714/early 715, it is more likely to have been his successor Sulaymān.

¹⁰¹ Sawīrus ibn al-Muqaffa’, *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, 17.66.

year of the indiction” and ending with “thus there was, in year ninety-six of the Hijra, trouble among the monks and oppression of the faithful”, echoing the bilingualism of the Basileios archive and pointing towards a future where Islam, whether it be its chronology or its language, would be impossible to ignore.¹⁰²

As the administration became more overtly Islamic, so too did the urban fabric of major cities. We have already noted the construction of the Dome of the Rock by ‘Abd al-Malik in 692 as an example of Christian (and Jewish) sacred space being definitively claimed for Islam — the same thing happened with the Church of John the Baptist in Damascus. This building, which had hitherto been shared between Christians and Muslims as a place of prayer, was demolished on the orders of al-Walīd not long after his accession in 705 and replaced by the structure that still stands in its place to this day — the Great (Umayyad) Mosque of Damascus.¹⁰³ Likewise, other Christian spaces that had been accepted and maintained by the original conquerors began to fall victim to this Islamisation of the caliphate. The *History of the Patriarchs* records several instances of intolerance towards Christian sacred spaces and symbols perpetrated by various governors. The first of these occurred during the episcopate of Isaac (690-92), with an order from ‘Abd al-‘Azīz to destroy crosses throughout Egypt and set up inscriptions on the doors of churches in Lower Egypt and Fustāṭ declaring “Muḥammad is the great Apostle of God, and Jesus also is the Apostle of God. But verily God is not begotten and does not beget”.¹⁰⁴ It is not coincidental that such declarations against Christ’s divinity should have been put up in Egypt at almost the same time as the similar inscriptions in the Dome of the Rock — the two are indicative of the same processes of differentiation

¹⁰² Sawīrus ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, 17.66.

¹⁰³ Al-Balādhurī, *Kitāb Futūḥ al-Buldān*, 125; Khalīfa ibn Khayyāṭ, *Taʾrīkh*, 397; al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk*, 23.1271; Theoph. *Chron.* AM 6199.

¹⁰⁴ Sawīrus ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, 16.23.

between Christianity and Islam and claiming ownership of the former's sacred space for the latter.

The final example of the gradual Islamisation of the caliphate's administration and the dissociation of Islam and Muslims from Christianity comes in the form of legal and fiscal changes that explicitly discriminated between Christians and Muslims. Studies of the early Islamic taxation system in Egypt have demonstrated that the earliest form of poll tax implemented by the new administration made no distinction between different religious groups within the province: the division was between the conquered population and their new overlords, irrespective of faith.¹⁰⁵

The *Chronicle of Zuqnin* reports that in 692, once he had restored Umayyad control over the entire caliphate with the defeat of Ibn al-Zubayr, 'Abd al-Malik began a tax reform and issued a census.¹⁰⁶ This census allowed the authorities to implement a more rigorous capitation tax; a development that the author of the *Chronicle*, writing in the last quarter of the eighth century, identified as the moment that the "Sons of Hagar [Muslims] began to reduce the sons of Aram [Christians] to Egyptian slavery".¹⁰⁷ There is no way of knowing the particularities of this tax, but the evidence seems to point towards a fiscal measure that was predominantly aimed at, or was at least perceived to be aimed at, the conquered.

The evidence from Egypt of similar tax measures discriminating against Christians is more fulsome. John of Nikiu, writing in the 690s, whilst lamenting the tax burden placed upon the population because of the conquest, gives no indication that

¹⁰⁵ Jean Gascou, 'Arabic Taxation in the Mid-Seventh-Century Greek Papyri', *TM* 17 (2013): 676-7; Marie Legendre, 'Aspects of Umayyad Administration', in Andrew Marsham (ed.), *The Umayyad World*, (London: Routledge, 2021), 138; Arietta Papaconstantinou, 'Administering the Early Islamic Empire', in John Haldon (ed.), *Money, Power, and Politics in Early Islamic Syria: a review of current debates*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 58-64.

¹⁰⁶ *Chronicle of Zuqnin*, 154.

¹⁰⁷ *Chronicle of Zuqnin*, 154.

Christians were singled out for special punishment by the authorities. Rather, the administration instituted by ʿAmr b. al-ʿĀṣ, “took none of the property of the churches, and he committed no act of spoliation or plunder, and he preserved them”.¹⁰⁸ John’s lack of comment on this issue echoes other contemporary Egyptian works, like the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Shenoute*, and suggests that their authors were unaware of any religious differentiation in taxes at the end of the seventh century.¹⁰⁹

As in Syria, the picture began to change after the 690s, with financial exactions perceived as specifically targeting Christian groups appearing in the *History of the Patriarchs* during and after the governorship of ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz.¹¹⁰ In 704/5, al-Aṣḅagh, in addition to mutilating monks, imposed “a poll-tax upon them of one dinar from each individual”, described as “the first poll tax paid by the monks”, in addition to the land taxes that monasteries had been obliged to pay even in pre-Islamic times.¹¹¹ Al-Aṣḅagh then applied an annual charge of 2,000 dinars on the bishops of Egypt.¹¹² ʿAbd Allāh is criticised in the *History* for continuing the same exploitative tax policies as al-Aṣḅagh, while Usāmah’s later decision to brand Egyptian monks with the names of their monasteries and the hijri date was partly to ensure that they and their monasteries paid the correct taxes.¹¹³

Perhaps the most decisive indication that Christians and Muslims did not occupy the same legal or fiscal position came during the rule of ʿUmar II (son of the ʿamīr ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz) (717-20). ʿUmar changed the basis by which the poll tax was levied, specifying

¹⁰⁸ John of Nikiu, *Chronicle*, 121.3.

¹⁰⁹ Papaconstantinou, ‘Administering the Early Islamic Empire’, 71-2; Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim State*, 91-2 and 100.

¹¹⁰ Sawīrus ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, 15.14-15.

¹¹¹ Sawīrus ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, 17.49; Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim State*, 99.

¹¹² Sawīrus ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, 17.49.

¹¹³ Sawīrus ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, 17.54; Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim State*, 96.

that converts to Islam would be exempted from the tax; whereas, previously, only those born Arab (and thus, by extension, Muslim) were exempted.¹¹⁴ The legal distinction became clearly based on religious differences; between Muslim and non-Muslim, rather than between Arab and everyone else. This definition of the different financial obligations of the two religious communities was disseminated across the caliphate and so gained wide traction. It was picked up by the so-called ‘eastern source’ for Theophanes, who claims that “[‘Umar] set about forcing the Christians to become converted: those that converted, he exempted from tax”, as well as the *History of the Patriarchs*.¹¹⁵ ‘Umar is also charged in the ‘eastern source’ with having reformed the legal system so that the weight of Christian testimony was valued less than that of Muslims; a reform that is attributed to his successor Yazīd II by the *Chronicle of Zuqnin*, along with an edict that set the value of a Muslim at twice that of a “Syrian” (that is, a Christian).¹¹⁶

With this, any illusion that Christians in the caliphate could be considered equal in rights or status to Muslims would have been dispelled. It represents something of a conclusion, at the very end of the first Islamic century, of the process of differentiation between the two religious communities that accelerated after c.690. Of course, some examples of these various processes can be found prior to this period: the papyrological data from Egypt in particular sheds light on isolated examples, such as the use of Arabic in administrative documents before 690.¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, the scale and pace of change

¹¹⁴ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk*, 24.1367. Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, 64.

¹¹⁵ Sawīrus ibn al-Muqaffa’, *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, 17.69-70; Theoph. *Chron.* AM 6210.

¹¹⁶ *Chronicle of Zuqnin*, 163-4 [“Then [Yazīd] ordered that the testimony of a Syrian against an Arab not be accepted, and he set the value of an Arab at 12,000 dirham and that of a Syrian at 6,000”]; Theoph. *Chron.* AM 6120 [“[‘Umar] also decreed that a Christian’s testimony against a Saracen should not be accepted”].

¹¹⁷ Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim State*, 92, for examples of Arabic papyri from 662/3 and 676/7.

escalated dramatically in the second half of the first Islamic century, such that it began to be reflected in Christian sources in a way that it had not before.

5.4: *Answering Criticism — Disputations in Egypt*

Conscious differentiation between the Christian and Muslim communities in nominally ‘secular’ areas, like the administrative and legal system, went together with an awareness of the theological differences between the faiths. As Islamic identity became increasingly distinctive and tangible to outsiders, so too did Islam’s implicit criticism of Christianity become more obvious to both sides. From the 690s we begin to see Christian texts with an awareness of Islam as a distinct faith and written in response to Muslim theological challenges. The most notable of these concerned the status of Christ. The position established in the Qur’an, writ large in the mosaics of the Dome of the Rock, was that God has no companions and did not beget a son with Mary, that he should be worshipped in isolation, and, moreover, that Jesus was neither crucified nor was he resurrected (Qur’an 4:157). Perhaps the earliest surviving Christian writer to recognise that this was the Christological position taken by Islam, and that Muslims were actively attacking Christians as ‘associators’ or ‘dualists’ for claiming Jesus’ divinity, was Anastasios of Sinai. Anastasios addressed Islamic theology and Muslim criticisms of Christianity in two works attributed to him. One, the *Narrationes*, we have already encountered and consisted of various apophthegmata in the style of the *Spiritual Meadow*; the second, the *Hodegos*, is a guidebook to a proper Christian life. Both date from the years around 690, with final recension of the latter able to be dated

more precisely to between 686 and 692.¹¹⁸ Anastasios was born in Cyprus before 650 and, to judge by the settings of the stories in the *Narrationes*, spent many years travelling around Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, before settling in Sinai, where he wrote or rewrote much of the extensive literary output attributed to him.¹¹⁹ This history of travel and engagement with religious communities throughout the Mediterranean areas of the caliphate would have primed him to pick up on the growing conflict between the existing Christian population and a growing Muslim one that was increasingly defining itself in religious terms.

The *Hodegos* opens by rebutting what were some of the main points of criticism concerning the status of Christ:

Before any sort of discussion, we must condemn all false assumptions that our opponent presumes about us, such as when we are about to have a discussion with the Arabs, we must first condemn anyone who says that there are two gods, or anyone who says that God has carnally begotten a son, or anyone who worships any sort of created thing, either in heaven or on earth, as God...¹²⁰

As well as the direct rebuttal of the “false assumptions” made by Muslims when debating Christians, Anastasios gives us some indication of what those assumptions were. These represent the most frequent accusations made against Christians in later apologetic literature: that the doctrine of the Trinity ‘associates’ God the Father with other divine entities, implying the existence of multiple gods, and that Christ’s

¹¹⁸ On the date and authorship of the ‘second collection’ of the *Narrationes* attributed to Anastasios: Bernard Flusin, ‘Démions et Sarrasins. L’auteur et le propos des *Diègèmata stèriktika* d’Anastase le Sinaïte’, *TM* 11 (1991): 390-6.

On the *Hodegos*: Karl-Heinz Uthemann, *Anastasios Sinaites: Byzantinisches Christentum in den ersten Jahrzehnten unter arabischer Herrschaft*, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 22-4.

¹¹⁹ Flusin, ‘Démions et Sarrasins’, 390-2; Karl-Heinz Uthemann, ‘Anastasios the Sinaite’, in Angelo Di Berardino (ed.), *Patrology: the Eastern Fathers from the Council of Chalcedon (451) to John of Damascus (†750)*, trans. Adrian Walford, (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2006), 313.

¹²⁰ Anastasios of Sinai, *Hodegos*, 1.1.

incarnation insinuates that God had intercourse with Mary.¹²¹ The reference to those who worship “any sort of created thing” is possibly in connection to the accusation made by Muslims that Christian veneration of the symbol of the cross was idol worship; or else it might be a direct criticism of Islamic practices, specifically the veneration at Mecca of the Black Stone in the Ka‘bah.¹²² Anastasios demonstrates his awareness of Muslim veneration of the Black Stone in the *Narrationes* and it seems that it was around this time in the 680s/690s that the importance of the Ka‘bah as a specifically Islamic ritual site, embedded in an Arabian context distinct from Judaism or Christianity, became more significant in Islamic teaching.¹²³

In one story from the *Narrationes*, Anastasios presents us with his understanding of Islamic theology. In a small community in Egypt, a man named Moses is assaulted by a demon whenever he accepts Christianity — the demon comes to him and warns him: “Do not venerate Christ, and I will not attack you! Do not confess him as God and the Son of God, and I will not come near you! Do not receive Communion, and I will not vex you! Do not make the sign of the Cross, and I will be content with you!”¹²⁴ Anastasios makes it clear his belief that this demon was attempting to get Moses to apostatise from Christianity and adopt Islam, using this story to validate an earlier claim made by a man named Sartabias that he was likewise menaced by a demon that “called the Arabs his

¹²¹ David Bertaina, *Christian and Muslim Dialogues: The Religious Uses of a Literary Form in the Early Islamic Middle East*, (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2011), 85-7; Sidney Griffith, ‘Disputes with Muslims in Christian Syriac texts. From Patriarch John (d. 648) to Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286)’, in Bernard Lewis and Friedrich Niewöhner (eds), *Religionsgespräche im Mittelalter*, (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1992), 254-5.

¹²² On this criticism of Christian belief: Sidney Griffith, ‘Theodore Abū Qurrah’s Arabic Tract on the Christian Practice of Venerating Images’, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 105.1 (1985): 62-5; King, ‘Islam’, 269-71; Mark Swanson, ‘The Cross of Christ in the earliest Arabic Melkite apologies’, in Samir Khalil Samir and Jorgen Nielsen (eds), *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750-1258)*, (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 115-145.

¹²³ Anastasios of Sinai, *Narrationes*, 2.11 [“a few years ago a Christian man was present at the place where those who hold us in slavery have *the stone and object of their worship*”] [emphasis added]. Gerald Hawting, ‘Ibn al-Zubayr, the Ka‘ba, and the Dome of the Rock’, in Andrew Marsham (ed.), *The Umayyad World*, (London: Routledge, 2021), 384-7.

¹²⁴ Anastasios of Sinai, *Narrationes*, 2.13.

allies.”¹²⁵ This is, other than the Qur’an, the earliest surviving full-length description of specific aspects of Islamic belief: Muslims do not worship Jesus as the Son of God, they reject the concept of the Trinity, they do not take communion, and they reject the sign of the cross. Indeed, on that last point, Anastasios goes on to lament that “the children of Jews and infidels [...] those who do not confess Christ is God” are worse than the demons, since they “insult Christ even more than the demons: demon fear the cross of Christ, but these demons in the flesh mock the cross.”¹²⁶

The fact it took until the 690s for such a clear description of some aspects of Islamic belief (or at least those aspects that directly contradict Christianity) to emerge is indicative of the long process of identity formation amongst Muslims that took place in the initial post-conquest period. As Islam became more self-defined, it became less tolerant of the theological claims made by Christianity that contradicted it; moreover, it became easier for Christians to attack it as a set of beliefs distinct from their own. Anastasios clearly felt the need and ability to write at this time defending Christianity and attacking Islam, precisely because he and other Christians were being challenged by a group that now saw itself (and was seen by them) as religiously separate. As the Christian century ended and the Islamic century passed its halfway point, attacks on Christians would become more confident, heralding the acts of persecution based on their faith that we see in later decades.

That the 690s represent something of a turning point in how Christians engaged with Islam is shown by the growing number of writers, particularly in Egypt, joining Anastasios in defending Christian theology against criticism from Muslims. The *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Shenoute*, written around the time of the construction of the Dome

¹²⁵ Anastasios of Sinai, *Narrationes*, 2.13.

¹²⁶ *ibid.*

of the Rock, speaks about “the sons of Ishmael and the sons of Esau” who “will build the Temple in Jerusalem”, before declaring that “they are those who reject the pains that [Christ] received on the Cross”.¹²⁷ Another late-seventh century Egyptian text, the *Homily* of Pseudo-Theophilos is, as we have noted, somewhat ambivalent about the impact of the Muslim conquest on the status of Christians in Egypt (saying both that they will “not sin against the faith in any way”; yet, “God will punish the peoples of the land of Egypt with this people”).¹²⁸ Nevertheless, the writer does demonstrate an awareness of Islamic doctrine. In a section of the homily in which Theophilos has a vision of speaking with St. Paul, he asks the apostle to “let me know, on the subject of peoples who serve God and do not accept the Son nor the Holy Spirit, are not baptised in His name, [and] do not receive the holy mysteries; when they leave their bodies, will they enter the kingdom of the heavens or not?”¹²⁹ Paul replies with an emphatic “No! Since those who are not born from the water and the Spirit will not enter the kingdom of the heavens. Whosoever does not believe in the Son of God has no life.”¹³⁰

The context for these texts, as outlined above, was a more self-consciously Islamic administration in the province that was using Arabic more, relying less on Christian bureaucrats, showing less respect for Christian holy sites, and which was (at least in the eyes of contemporary writers) punishing Christians with punitive taxes. Alongside these longer-term developments, there is also evidence of a more direct and immediate challenge posed by the Islamic authorities to Christian beliefs that forced Christian writers to engage with the specific differences between the two faiths to defend their own. The earliest instance of such direct challenge comes in the form of a

¹²⁷ *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Shenoute*, 174 [=Shoemaker, *A Prophet Has Appeared*, 171-84].

¹²⁸ Pseudo-Theophilos, *Homily*, 392 [=Fleisch, ‘Une homélie’, 371-419].

¹²⁹ *ibid.*

¹³⁰ Pseudo-Theophilos, *Homily*, 392 [=Fleisch, ‘Une homélie’, 371-419].

disputation between Patriarch John III and ‘Abd al-‘Azīz. The dialogue is part of a wider discussion involving a Jew and a Chalcedonian Christian that survives in several later fragments in Coptic and Arabic.¹³¹

The text must have been written after 715, as it refers to construction of a nilometer by Usāmah that took place in that year; but the disputation itself could only have occurred in 685/6, assuming its historicity, since these are the only years both figures were in office.¹³² A case has been made for an eleventh-century date, on the basis of possible references to a tenth-century pseudepigraphic work and the claim made by the Jew in the dialogue that God had granted the Christians eucharist for “a thousand years”.¹³³ This argument, however, fails to address why an eleventh-century author would choose to write such a dialogue involving John III, when there were much more plausible later candidates to choose from, as well as the fact that the knowledge of Islam displayed is entirely in-keeping with that shown by other late-seventh/early-eighth century Egyptian texts.¹³⁴ Indeed, the proponents of the eleventh-century date themselves raise the possibility that later material could have been interpolated into the Arabic redaction of the Coptic original.¹³⁵

It is the third extant fragment of the dialogue that contains the relevant discussion between the patriarch and the *ʿamīr*. In it, the patriarch asks questions of the *ʿamīr* concerning the nature of Christ’s divinity, attempting to convince him of the correctness of the Christian position. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz responds by stating that, as it is

¹³¹ Mabra, *Princely Authority*, 147-8.

¹³² Harald Suermann, ‘Copts and the Islam of the Seventh Century’, in Emmanouela Grypeou, Mark Swanson, and David Thomas (eds), *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*, (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 104.

¹³³ Stephen Davis, Bilal Orfali, and Samuel Noble, *A Disputation over a Fragment of the Cross: A Medieval Arabic Text from the History of Christian-Jewish-Muslim Relations in Egypt*, (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 2012), 9-10.

¹³⁴ Suermann, ‘Copts’, 105.

¹³⁵ Davis, Orfali, and Noble, *Disputation*, 10.

“written in [his] Law”, “God does not take a woman, nor does He beget”, that Christ was not crucified by the Jews but “God took Him up into Heaven” beforehand — “[a man] was exchanged for Him, and the Jews supposed that it was Jesus whom they crucified.”¹³⁶ If we accept that the text is a record of a genuine exchange between John and ‘Abd al-‘Azīz in 685/6, then this would be a clear demonstration of the growing sense of division and alienation between the two religious communities at the end of the seventh century. If, however, it was invented by a monk writing in the early eighth century, then it is equally significant as testimony for the dissemination of Islamic theology amongst Egyptian Christians, since the putative monastic writer was able to accurately represent several key passages from the Qur’an regarding the status of Christ. Notably *sūrah* 112, “Say, O Prophet, “He is Allah — One and Indivisible | Allah — the Sustainer needed by all | He has never had offspring, nor was He born | And there is none comparable to Him”; and *sūrah* 4:157, “and for boasting, ‘We killed the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, the messenger of Allah.’ But they neither killed nor crucified him — it was only made to appear so”.¹³⁷

Evidence for increasing conflict in Egypt over Christological issues in this period can be found in the *History of the Patriarchs* during the episcopates of John’s successors. In 695, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ordered that Christian liturgies be banned, “For the Muslims claimed that the Christians were in error, giving God a wife and a son”.¹³⁸ The earlier edict by the *‘amīr* that had ordered the destruction of crosses had also entailed putting up inscriptions on the doors of churches stating that “God is not begotten, nor does he

¹³⁶ *Disputation of John*, n.3.

¹³⁷ Qur’an, 4:157 and 112:1-4.

¹³⁸ Sawīrus ibn al-Muqaffa’, *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, 16.33.

beget”¹³⁹ The specific targeting of the symbol of the cross was also directly connected to Islamic opposition to Christian claims about Christ’s divinity. As the emblem of his crucifixion and ascension, it was deemed particularly offensive and its public display subject to increasing restrictions as Islamic identity became more clearly defined.¹⁴⁰

5.5: *Answering Criticism — Disputations in Syria-Palestine*

The same reaction to the growth of Islamic identity can be found amongst Christian writers in Syria-Palestine, although the earliest surviving examples seem to mostly post-date those from Egypt by a few decades. From these regions we have testimonials from a variety of different religious and linguistic groups: Syriac-speaking Nestorian, Syriac-speaking miaphysite, and Greek-speaking Chalcedonian. All, however, provide evidence for the same phenomenon taking place at roughly the same time, demonstrating a need for Christians in the early eighth century to engage with direct and specific accusations being made against them and their beliefs by Muslims. The coherency of the issues addressed by these writers speaks to a widespread current of ideas circulating amongst Christians throughout the region in response to the common threat posed by Islam’s development as a universalist faith distinct from and irreconcilable with Christianity.¹⁴¹

The earliest unequivocal evidence for Christian engagement with Islam as a distinct religious tradition outside of Egypt comes in the letters of Jacob of Edessa,

¹³⁹ Sawirus ibn al-Muqaffa’, *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, 16.23. The historicity of this edict is confirmed by the *Life of Isaac*, which is usually sympathetic towards ‘Abd al-‘Azīz: Mena of Nikiu, *Life of Isaac*, 61.

¹⁴⁰ Sidney Griffith, ‘Christians, Muslims, and the Image of the One God: Iconophilia and Iconophobia in the World of Islam in Umayyad and Early Abbasid Times’, in Brigitte Groneberg and Hermann Spieckermann (eds), *Die Welt der Götterbilder*, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007), 355-60; King, ‘Islam’, 269.

¹⁴¹ Griffith, ‘Christian Disputes with Muslims’, 255-6; Roggema, *Legend of Sergius Bahīrā*, 110-12.

bishop of that city c.684-8 and then again shortly before his death in 708.¹⁴² The letters themselves are impossible to accurately date, but those to John of Litarba were likely written in the final decade or so of Jacob's life.¹⁴³ The first of Jacob's letters to John of Litarba was in response to a question about whether it was necessary to rebaptise a Christian who had "become a Hagarene or a pagan" and subsequently repented.¹⁴⁴ The same formulation appears in one of Jacob's replies to the monk Addai, in which he states that it is acceptable to offer ablution to a dying person if they are "Hagarene or pagan".¹⁴⁵ The clearest example of Jacob's awareness of Islam as a distinct religious tradition comes in the third letter to John, regarding Christ's descent from David:

the Hagarenes also who — although they do not recognise [Christ] as God and as the son of God, the true Messiah who has come and who is recognised by Christians — confess without hesitation that he is the true Messiah who was to come and was predicted by the prophets; they have no quarrel with us on this topic, but rather with the Jews.¹⁴⁶

Jacob and his interlocutors were clearly attuned to the fact that there was a particular religious identity connected to the Arab conquerors that was not pagan and was distinct from either Judaism or Christianity.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴² Alison Salvesen, 'Jacob of Edessa's Life and Work: A Biographical Sketch', in Bas ter Haar Romeny (ed.), *Jacob of Edessa and the Syriac Culture of His Day*, (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 1-4.

¹⁴³ Jan van Ginkel, 'Greeting to a Virtuous Man: The Correspondence of Jacob of Edessa', in Bas ter Haar Romeny (ed.), *Jacob of Edessa and the Syriac Culture of His Day*, (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 73.

¹⁴⁴ Jacob of Edessa, *Canons*, 49.15 [=Arthur Vööbus, *The Synodicon in the West Syrian Tradition*, vol.2 (Leuven: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1975), 253 (Syriac)/231 (English)]; Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, 67.

¹⁴⁵ Jacob of Edessa, *Canons*, 52.21 [=Vööbus, *Synodicon*, vol.2, 261 (Syriac)/238 (English)].

¹⁴⁶ François Nau, 'Lettre de Jacques d'Édesse sur la généalogie de la Sainte Vierge', *ROC* 4 (1901): 524.

¹⁴⁷ A possible contender for the title of 'earliest West-Syrian text that discusses Islam' is the so-called 'Disputation of John and the Emir', the internal evidence of which would suggest a date of 639 or 644, some half a century before our next earliest material. However, analysis of the content of the discussion, its language, and a comparison with later texts in the same genre indicates that the text as we have it is much more likely a product of the turn of the eighth century: Michael Penn, 'John and the Emir: A New Introduction, Edition, and Translation', *Le Muséon* 121.1-2 (2008): 69-77; Reinink, 'Syriac Apologetic Literature', 171-82.

Our next witness is the text known as the *Disputation of Bet Hale*, which records an exchange between a monk at the East Syrian monastery of Bet Hale (either near Mosul or al-Hirah) and an unidentified Muslim, who is described as part of the entourage of ‘Maslamah’ — probably the general and governor Maslamah b. ‘Abd al-Malik.¹⁴⁸ Due to the late nature of the manuscripts containing it, dating the text is complex; however, its use of an Umayyad official, rather than an ‘Abbasid one, indicates it was written before 750. Furthermore, the fact that the Muslim is associated with Maslamah suggests a date before the latter’s death in 738.¹⁴⁹ If the Bet Hale monastery in question was that in Mosul, then the likely *terminus post quem* is Maslamah’s appointment as governor of Mesopotamia in 710; if it is the monastery in al-Hirah, then a date in the 720s, when Maslamah was governor of Iraq, is more plausible.¹⁵⁰ In any case, the text is most likely a product of the first quarter or third of the eighth century.¹⁵¹

The third point of contention between the monk and the Muslim concerns the Trinity and Christ’s status as the Son of God; the fifth point is about Christian worship of the Cross and the bones of saints.¹⁵² These sections of the *Disputation* reveal both the usual topics of disputation between the faiths at this time and the fact that the Christian author had a familiarity with the Qur’an. The monk asks about the relationship between Christ and “the one who is called by you ‘Īsā ibn Maryam” (or, more properly, “Īsā bar

¹⁴⁸ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 364.

¹⁴⁹ *ibid.* 368-9.

¹⁵⁰ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 368-9.

¹⁵¹ This consensus has recently been challenged, however, with a proposed redating to the late eighth or early ninth century: David Taylor, ‘The Disputation between a Muslim and a Monk of Bēt Ḥālē: Syriac Text and Annotated English Translation’, in Sven Grebenstein and Sidney Griffith (eds), *Christsein in der islamischen Welt: Festschrift für Martin Tamcke zum 60. Geburtstag*, (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2015), 187-97.

¹⁵² Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 365.

Maryam' in Syriac), the same manner by which the Qur'an refers to Jesus.¹⁵³ When defending Christian worship of the Cross, the monk refers to the Qur'an and to *sūrah* al-Baqarah directly — treating the latter as a separate text to the Qur'an, a situation that has some support from Islamic sources.¹⁵⁴

Better-known than any of these, however, and with a much greater and longer-lasting impact on how Islam was understood by Christians, is the chapter devoted to the “superstition of the Ishmaelites” in John of Damascus' *De Haeresibus*.¹⁵⁵ A handbook for identifying and combating various heresies that drew much inspiration and material from the fourth-century *Panarion* of Epiphanius of Salamis, *De Haeresibus* formed part of a much wider encyclopaedic effort to compile information necessary for the reader to live a good, orthodox, Christian life.¹⁵⁶

The chapter on Islam is substantially longer than all of the others and is one of only three written by John *ex nihilo*; it also differs from them in the sense of immediacy it brings, particularly in those places where the presentation of the heretical doctrine slips into dialectic — likely reflecting John's, or his interlocutors', own lived-experience engaging with Islam and its practitioners.¹⁵⁷ As the son of one of the foremost bureaucrats in the early Umayyad period, Sarjūn b. Manṣūr, who would have grown up in the caliphal capital, John would have had substantial experience interacting with Muslims on a day-to-day basis and, one must assume, have had at least a working knowledge of Arabic to go along with his native Greek. This experience, combined with his scholarly bent and access to what seems to have been a substantial library at Mar

¹⁵³ *ibid.* 367.

¹⁵⁴ *ibid.* 368.

¹⁵⁵ John of Damascus, *De Haeresibus*, 133 [=PG, 94.764].

¹⁵⁶ Daniel Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: The “Heresy of the Ishmaelites”*, (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 58.

¹⁵⁷ Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 59; Peter Schadler, *John of Damascus and Islam: Christian Heresiology and the Intellectual Background to Earliest Christian-Muslim Relations*, (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 101.

Saba, led to *De Haeresibus* being the most comprehensive surviving treatment of Islamic belief produced by a Christian in the first century and a half of Islam.¹⁵⁸

The introduction describes Islam as a doctrine developed by a man named “Mamed”, who taught that “there exists one God, maker of all, who was neither begot nor has begotten” and that Christ is the Word of God born “without seed” of Mary, sister of Moses and Aaron.¹⁵⁹ The description goes on to note that Muslims teach that Jesus was neither crucified by the Jews, nor did he die, but was taken up to heaven by God on account of his love for him.¹⁶⁰ The more dialectical portion of the text claims that the Muslims call Christians “Associators” because they have introduced an associate for God by calling Christ his son, and they accuse Christians of idolatry because they worship the Cross, “which they despise”. This argument can, according to John, be countered by pointing out that Muslims themselves venerate a stone by rubbing and kissing it.¹⁶¹

As well as these aspects of Islamic belief, picked up and commented on by earlier Christian writers, John goes on to give examples of the various ‘discourses’ (γραφή) attributed to Muḥammad, such as the “discourse of the Women” (*sūrah* 4) and the “discourse of the Camel of God” (either *sūrah* 26 or 91).¹⁶² To the “discourse of the Women”, he attributes Islamic polygamy and divorce, the latter of which he claims was introduced by Muḥammad because he desired Zaynab bint Jaḥsh, who was already married to Muḥammad’s adoptive son Zayd (Qur’an 33:36-37). Discussing the “discourse of the Camel”, John gives a version of Islamic paradise, noting that it has

¹⁵⁸ The exact date of *De Haeresibus* is open to debate and the text itself provides no dateable references. It must, however, have been written at some point after John had left Damascus for a monastic life in Palestine after c.700, but before his presumed death some point between 742 and 754: Theoph. *Chron.* AM 6234.417; *Acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council*, 6.782.

¹⁵⁹ John of Damascus, *De Haeresibus*, 133 [=PG, 94.765]. On the Quranic basis for Mary as the typological ‘sister’ of Moses and Aaron, see: Qur’an, 19.27-28 [“They said in shock, ‘O Mary! You have certainly done a horrible thing! O sister of Aaron!’”].

¹⁶⁰ John of Damascus, *De Haeresibus*, 133 [=PG, 94.765].

¹⁶¹ John of Damascus, *De Haeresibus*, 137 [=PG, 94.768-9].

¹⁶² John of Damascus, *De Haeresibus*, 139 [=PG, 94.769-72]; Sahas, *John of Damascus*, 92.

three rivers, of milk, water, and wine, echoing the Qur'an.¹⁶³ John also references the “discourse of the Table” (*sūrah* 5) and the “discourse of the Heifer” (*sūrah* 2, the aforementioned al-Baqarah) and hints at his knowledge of other *suwar*, but dismisses them as “other idle tales worthy of laughter, which because of their number, I think that I should skip.”¹⁶⁴ The chapter concludes with a list of laws implemented by Muḥammad that the Muslims follow: their women are circumcised, they do not observe the Sabbath, they are not baptised, and they are forbidden from drinking wine, amongst others.¹⁶⁵

The wealth of (generally) accurate information on Islamic doctrine that John possessed is indicative of not just his own experience speaking to and interacting with Muslims, but also of a wider dissemination of knowledge on Islam that took place amongst Christian communities at the time. The Greek-speaking monastic communities of Palestine, of which John was a part, seem to have had a particularly good grasp on the beliefs that differentiated Christianity and Islam, beyond those that appeared in the earlier traditions. This was at least in part because they had the benefit of figures like John of Damascus, Greek-speakers who had either served in or were otherwise connected to the Umayyad chancery, but also likely due to the high level of multilingualism in these communities and their relatively early adoption of Arabic.¹⁶⁶ This would have facilitated access to Islamic doctrine ‘at the source’ and encouraged greater and earlier awareness of the religion than comparable Syriac- and Coptic-speaking monastic communities. This fact is illustrated by our next-best Christian

¹⁶³ John of Damascus, *De Haeresibus*, 139 [=PG, 94.769-72]; Qur'an 33:36-7 and 47:15 [“The description of the Paradise promised to the righteous is that in it are rivers of fresh water, rivers of milk that never change taste, rivers of wine delicious to drink, and rivers of pure honey.”].

¹⁶⁴ John of Damascus, *De Haeresibus*, 141 [=PG, 94.772]

¹⁶⁵ John of Damascus, *De Haeresibus*, 141 [=PG, 94.773]

¹⁶⁶ Sidney Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 48-50; Schadler, *John of Damascus*, 106.

witness to Islamic belief and the last text we will examine: the corpus of texts that comprise the so-called correspondence between Leo III and ‘Umar II.

The Leo-‘Umar correspondence comprises a suite of at least five different redactions of a common work that claims to be the correspondence between the emperor Leo III (r. 717-741) and ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (r. 717-720), in which the emperor and caliph discussed Christian and Islamic doctrine. The ‘Leo’ letter appears in full alongside an abridged version of the ‘Umar’ letter in a late-eighth-century Armenian chronicle attributed to Ghevond; a second redaction appears in a late-ninth/early-tenth-century Arabic manuscript held at St. Catherine’s, Sinai; a third is found in a sixteenth-century Latin translation from “Chaldaean”, which the text claims was itself translated from Greek.¹⁶⁷ The full text of the ‘Umar’ letter is found in an aljamiado text (Spanish written in Arabic script) dated to the late ninth century, as well as an Arabic pamphlet also dated to the ninth century.¹⁶⁸ The most convincing and comprehensive explanation for the origins of these texts traces them back to an eighth-century urtext, written in either Greek or Arabic within the context of Chalcedonian monastic communities of Syria-Palestine.¹⁶⁹

The date of the text is confirmed by cross-referencing the issues it raises regarding Islamic divorce practices with contemporary hadith literature, as well as the simple fact that it chose Leo III to be the figure defending Christianity: the emperor would be condemned at the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787 for his support for

¹⁶⁷ Symphorien Champier, *De triplici disciplina: cuius partes sunt Philosophia naturalis, Medicina, Theologia, Moralis philosophia*, (Lyon: 1508) [=PG, 107.315-24] [“Epistola Leonis imperatoris ad Amaro regem saracenorum directa. Translata est haec epistola de graeco in chaldaeum sermonem. Nunc vo deo favete de chaldaeo eloquio iuxta proprietatem sermonis vertimus in Latinum”]; Ps-Ghevond, *History* 13.70-14.105 [Armenian version]; Cecilia Palombo, “The “correspondence” of Leo III and ‘Umar II: traces of an early Christian Arabic apologetic work’, *Millennium* 12.1 (2015): 241 and 258.

¹⁶⁸ Jean-Marie Gaudeul, ‘The correspondence between Leo and ‘Umar: ‘Umar’s letter rediscovered?’, *Islamochristiana* 10 (1984): 109-57 [aljamiado version]; Dominique Sourdel, ‘Un pamphlet musulman anonyme d’époque ‘abbāsīde contre les Chrétiens’, *RÉI* 34 (1966): 1-34 [Arabic version].

¹⁶⁹ Palombo, ‘The “correspondence” of Leo III and ‘Umar II’, 259-60.

iconoclasm, meaning that the urtext was likely written prior to this.¹⁷⁰ A date in the early eighth century is preferable in this regard, since the image of Leo as *fidei defensor* would have been more impactful the closer to 718 the text was written: that being the year when the new emperor had repulsed the forces of Maslamah besieging Constantinople.¹⁷¹ Indeed, since the chronological overlap between the emperor and the caliph was 717-20, it makes most sense that a text claiming to preserve their correspondence would have been written relatively close to this time period — otherwise, why choose ‘Umar and not Yazīd II (r. 720-724) or Hishām (724-743)? A Syrian-Palestinian context is suggested by the fact that the *isnād* preserved in the aljamiado text goes back to Homs/Emesa in central Syria.¹⁷² Furthermore, the only testimony in Greek to the existence of this correspondence is found in Theophanes’ *Chronographia*, which mentions the ‘Umar letter but not Leo’s response. The complete absence of the correspondence from Michael the Syrian and the *Chronicle to 1234* implies that it was also missing from the common ‘eastern source’. Thus, knowledge of the correspondence would have come from other material brought by George Synkellos when he migrated from Syria-Palestine to Constantinople in around 783.¹⁷³

With regards to the contents of the correspondence, it reveals a similar view of Islamic doctrine and its conflict with Christianity that can be found in *De Haeresibus*. The version of the ‘Umar letter in ps-Ghevond criticises several aspects of Christian belief, asking:

¹⁷⁰ Palombo, ‘The “correspondence” of Leo III and ‘Umar II’, 251-2.

¹⁷¹ *ibid.* 263.

¹⁷² *ibid.* 244.

¹⁷³ Cyril Mango, ‘Who Wrote the Chronicle of Theophanes?’, *Zbornik radova Vizantološkog instituta* 18 (1978): 12-14; Jesse Torgerson, *The Chronographia of George the Synkellos and Theophanes: The Ends of Time in Ninth-Century Constantinople*, (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 79-83; Warren Treadgold, ‘The Life and Wider Significance of George Syncellus’, *TM* 19 (2015): 11-16.

Why have you made [Jesus] the associate and equal of the unique and all-powerful God? Why do you profess three gods and arbitrarily change all the laws, such as that of circumcision into baptism, sacrifice into eucharist, and Saturday into Sunday? Is it possible that God could have dwelt in flesh and blood, and in the unclean entrails of a woman? Why do you adore the bones of Apostles and Prophets, as well as pictures and signs of the Cross, the latter having served, according to the law, as an instrument of torture?¹⁷⁴

The ability of the Christian author to construct an argument against his own faith based on sound Islamic principles reveals the degree to which they were engaged with Islam. It is indicative either of genuine criticism made by Muslims that the Christian author, or their contemporaries, had encountered, or of a knowledge of Islamic doctrine that would allow them to craft such an indictment of Christianity.

In response to these accusations, the letter attributed to Leo, in addition to defending against the specific criticisms raised by ‘Umar’, follows *De Haeresibus* by going on the offensive and attacking specific aspects of Islamic belief. The writer accuses the Muslims of falsely claiming that their scriptures were sent down by God, of introducing innovation to the divine law by praying towards a “pagan altar of sacrifice that you call the House of Abraham” when “as a matter of fact Abraham never saw any such arid desert even in his dream”.¹⁷⁵ Islamic practices of circumcision are called a “shameful act” applied to girls in contravention of “the ancient law”, criticism that Christianity changed the holy day from Saturday to Sunday is rebutted by pointing out that Islam treats Friday as “the day for assembly”, while other Islamic practices, like venerating the Black Stone of the Ka’bah, are deemed “ridiculous superstitions”.¹⁷⁶ Islam is also criticised for being fundamentally immoral in its acceptance of polygamy (“the abominable authorisation given by [their] legislator”) and its focus on the carnal

¹⁷⁴ Gaudeul, ‘Correspondence’, 134-52; Ps-Ghevond, *History*, 13.71; Sourdel, ‘Un pamphlet musulman’, 13-16.

¹⁷⁵ Ps-Ghevond, *History*, 14.79, 92, and 100.

¹⁷⁶ Ps-Ghevond, *History*, 14.96 and 100-1.

pleasures that await believers in Paradise, in which Muslims “have the same faith ... as the pagans, whose abominable debaucheries are familiar to you”.¹⁷⁷

One may be tempted in to consider the two texts, both being a product of the same religious community at around the same time, might have had some influence on each other; although, if so, the choice of Leo as the spokesperson to defend Christianity sits uneasily with John of Damascus’ famously anti-iconoclast disposition. In fact, whilst they latch onto the same general points, they focus on different specifics to illustrate their dismissal of Islamic beliefs. *De Haeresibus*, for instance, in its criticism of the veneration of the Black Stone, focuses on it as an expression of idolatry in order to excuse Christian veneration of the Cross; the Leo-‘Umar correspondence, however, identifies it as an innovation, an ancient pre-Islamic practice that was adopted by Muḥammad and given a gloss of legitimacy by falsely claiming a connection with Abraham. Likewise, Islamic ideas of Paradise are dismissed by John of Damascus for being simply unbelievable in their absurdity, whilst the Leo-‘Umar correspondence instead focuses on the immorality of having an afterlife “given over to carnal vices” — a belief system in which “the kingdom of heaven is of no account if it is not peopled with [women]”.¹⁷⁸

Similarly, whilst both texts demonstrate a clear and (accounting for obvious polemical distortions) largely accurate knowledge of Islamic beliefs and practices, they derive this information from different sources. For John of Damascus, although he had an internalised awareness of Islamic doctrine, illustrated by his slip into dialectic and change of narrative voice to embody a Muslim criticising Christianity, his discussion of Islamic beliefs on their own terms (as opposed to in the context of their relationship to

¹⁷⁷ Ps-Ghevond, *History*, 14.101 and 104.

¹⁷⁸ Ps-Ghevond, *History*, 14.104.

Christian doctrine) focuses heavily on Islamic scripture and the ‘discourses’ that preserve Muḥammad’s teachings. By contrast, the Leo-‘Umar correspondence makes no reference to Islamic scripture, but instead shows an internalised awareness of Islamic beliefs and practices, expressed by a greater use of terms derived from Arabic. For instance, by referring to Friday as the Islamic “day for assembly”, the author is clearly aware of the etymology of the Arabic for ‘Friday’ (*yawm al-Jumu‘ah*), which derives from the root ‘جمع’ (*j-m-ʿ*) meaning ‘to gather’.¹⁷⁹

To summarise: both John of Damascus and the author of the Leo-‘Umar correspondence likely derived their information from a combination of direct access to Islamic literature and personal experience engaging with Muslims, or, at the very least, through access to individuals who did have such experience. Whilst both criticise the same elements of Islamic doctrine, they do so from different angles and by drawing upon different aspects of their common source base. It thus seems likely that, despite superficial similarities, the two texts bear little relation to each other.

5.6: *Conclusions*

Both texts are products of a discourse amongst the Chalcedonian Christian monastic communities of Syria-Palestine at the end of the first Islamic century. This discourse, like those among Christian communities throughout the caliphate, was a reaction to the growing self-confidence of Islam and shaped future Christian responses to it. Christians were forced to respond as Islam became more reified as a belief system, distinct from and competing with Christianity, and its followers and political system increasingly

¹⁷⁹ Ps-Ghevond, *History*, 14.96.

identified as Muslim first and foremost. The first aspect of this response was to formulate defences of their own beliefs against growing criticism levelled by Muslims; the second required Christian writers to identify and engage with Islamic beliefs on their own terms, both as a means by which to understand how Christian doctrines were being challenged and to go on the offensive and undercut the legitimacy of Islamic beliefs.

It is unsurprising that the earliest examples of Christians criticising Islam directly come from the Chalcedonian communities of Syria-Palestine, since these communities were both the most exposed to Islam and the most readily threatened by it. In the first instance, the early reliance on the existing Roman bureaucracy meant that much of the Greek-speaking elite within the region would have had direct experience working with Muslims. The region was at the centre of the Umayyad polity, with Damascus as its political capital, Jerusalem as one of its early religious centres, and rural areas punctuated with the so-called 'desert castles' of the ruling elite.¹⁸⁰ This proximity to the heart of the caliphate was likely partly responsible for the relatively quick adoption of Arabic amongst the Syro-Palestinian Christians: a further facilitator of engagement with Islam.¹⁸¹ Moreover, the loss of Roman rule came with the loss of its primary protector and patron. Unlike the other Christian communities, Chalcedonians in Syria-Palestine had become accustomed to being the default 'orthodoxy' accepted and promoted by Constantinople (with exceptions) — now they were just one group among many.

¹⁸⁰ On the importance of the region in the political geography of the seventh- and eighth-century caliphate, see: Christian Sahner, 'The First Iconoclasm in Islam: A New History of the Edict of Yazīd II (AH 104/AD 723)', *Der Islam*, 94:1 (2017): 36-42.

¹⁸¹ Sidney Griffith, 'The Monks of Palestine and the Growth of Christian Literature in Arabic', *The Muslim World* 78.1 (1988): 13-22.

The combination of heightened exposure to Islam and the peculiar crisis of confidence that the collapse of Roman rule entailed for this community lies at the root of why it, before the others, produced detailed discussions of Islamic belief and reacted so negatively towards the new religion. John of Damascus and the Leo-ʿUmar correspondence did not act simply as apologists for Christianity, but actively sought to identify and then undermine Islamic beliefs and practices. Thanks to linguistic and lingering cultural ties, it would be this form of engagement with Islam that would make its way to what remained of the Roman empire in the eighth century and shape how Romans began to see their 'barbarian' opponents. We shall now turn to the question of how and when this transmission of knowledge took place.

6. The Islamic 'Other'

It is only after a clear picture of Islam as a separate belief system to Christianity developed amongst the Christian communities with the greatest interaction with Muslims that we can expect to find evidence of Roman writers engaging with Islam in a way beyond pigeonholing the Arabs as a barbarian manifestation of God's wrath. This chapter will examine the transfer of information between the two cultural spheres in terms of both identifiable texts and the individuals and groups that moved across the boundary separating them. We will then analyse the precise 'image' of Islam that developed in the empire as a result. Roman knowledge of Islam merged with the pre-existing impression of the Arabs to create a powerful synthesis in which Islam became an absolute 'Other'; an alternate identity constructed in such a way as to heighten ideas of Romanness.

6.1: *Islam in Roman Discourse before 787*

Possibly the earliest surviving text written in the empire that engaged with specific aspects of Islamic belief is a letter from Patriarch Germanos I to a bishop in Bithynia, Thomas of Claudiopolis. The letter is dated to the first half of the 720s, but only preserved as one of the documents cited by the *Acts* of the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787.¹ In it, Germanos chides Thomas for having removed icons from his churches,

¹ *Acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council*, 1.340-2. For a discussion of the authenticity and date of the letter, see: Paul Magdalino, 'The Other Image at the Palace Gate and the Visual Propaganda of Leo III', in Denis Sullivan, Elizabeth Fisher, and Eustratios Papaioannou (eds), *Byzantine Religious Culture: studies in honor of Alice-Mary Talbot*, (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 141-2; *contra* Paul Speck, 'Ein weiterer interpolierter Text In den Akten des Konzils von 787. Der Brief des Patriarchen Germanos an Thomas von Klaudiupolis', in Anna Avramea, Angeliki Laiou, and Evangelos Chrysos (eds), *Βυζάντιο: κράτος και κοινωνία — Μνήμη Νίκου Οικονομίδη*, (Athens: Institute for Byzantine Studies, 2003), 481-90.

which the patriarch sees as an acceptance of the criticisms of Christian icon-worship made by the Jews and ‘Saracens’.² The latter, he goes on to say, have no right to criticise Christians as idolaters, since they are the “real devotees of idolatry” who “right up to this day perform prayers in the desert to a lifeless stone [...] and other frivolous mysteries that make up the futile practises there”.³ The presence of this specific criticism made by Muslims, and the fact that Germanos refers to “their invocation of the so-called Khobar”, makes it tempting to attribute the patriarch’s knowledge to the early circulation of *De Haeresibus*.⁴ However, the absence of Islam or any knowledge of John of Damascus in Germanos’ own heresiography casts some doubt on this hypothesis.⁵

As for when *De Haeresibus* may have arrived in Byzantium, the *terminus ante quem* must be the same as the work of Theodore of Stoudios that draws upon it: Theodore’s death in 826. In all likelihood, however, the text arrived much earlier. John’s iconophile texts clearly circulated in the empire in the years prior to the iconoclast Council of Hieria in 754, since the *Horos* of that council anathematised John as a “worshipper of images and writer of falsities”.⁶ In any case, only in his second and third orations in favour of images does John reference Leo III, Germanos, or any relevance that his arguments might have for the Constantinopolitan church.⁷ Given that the second

² *Acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council*, 1.340-2.

³ *Acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council*, 1.341-2.

⁴ *Acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council*, 1.342; cf. John of Damascus, *De Haeresibus*, 137 [=PG, 94.769]. Although the different spellings used by the two authors may cast some doubt on whether they are referring to the same deity as part of Islamic worship: John of Damascus clearly uses ‘Khabar’ to denote the Arabic name for the goddess Aphrodite, whilst Germanos does not make such a connection. Indeed, his reference to ‘Khobar’ is made only in connection to cult practices in Mecca, it thus seems more likely that Germanos’ ‘Khobar’ is John of Damascus’ ‘Khabathan’, or else a Hellenisation of the name of the pre-Islamic deity ‘Hubal’, whom Ibn al-Kalbī claims was the most important deity worshipped at the Ka’bah: Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-’Aṣnām*, 27-8.

⁵ Germanos, *Narratio de haeresibus et synodis ad Anthimum diaconum* [=PG, 98.40-88].

⁶ *Acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council*, 2.540; Theoph. *Chron.* AM 6245.

⁷ The earliest direct reference to any of these is: John of Damascus, *On Divine Images*, 2.11-12. Sidney Griffith, ‘Christians, Muslims, and the image of the One God. Iconophilia and iconophobia in the world of Islam in Umayyad and early Abbasid times’, in Brigitte Groneberg and Hermann Spiekermann (eds), *Die Welt der Götterbilder*, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007), 360.

oration was written shortly after Germanos' deposition as patriarch in 730, it seems unlikely that the first — which was a response to circumstances in the caliphate, not Byzantium — would have had much traction in the empire at the time Germanos' wrote his letter.⁸ It seems equally unlikely that *De Haeresibus* would have made its way there before John achieved prominence thanks to his opposition to Iconoclasm.

If Germanos' knowledge of Islam did not come from John of Damascus, then we are left with three possible options. The first is that Germanos drew upon unspecified texts about the Ka'bah: Anastasios of Sinai wrote that Muslims venerated a stone at their cult site as early as c.690.⁹ The second option is that he was reliant on knowledge of pre-Islamic practices of stone-worship.¹⁰ This would make sense of the comment that the Saracens' stone-worship continued "right up to this day" and that it was "transmitted by their ancestors".¹¹ The third option is that Germanos' comments are an interpolation inserted at some later date prior to its inclusion in the *Acts* of 787.¹² Most recent scholarship has pushed back against the latter option, preferring to see the letter (or at least the relevant section) as a genuine document from the 720s and any later interpolation being in the following section.¹³ The reality was likely a mixture of options one and two, with a limited awareness of current practices acting as the germ for the

⁸ Richard Price, 'Acta, Treatises, and Hagiography', in Mike Humphreys (ed.), *A Companion to Byzantine Iconoclasm*, (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 238.

⁹ Anastasios of Sinai, *Narrationes*. 2.11.

¹⁰ Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-'Aṣnām*, 16. Adel-Théodore Khoury, *Polémique byzantine contre l'Islam*, 2nd ed., (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 275.

¹¹ *Acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council*, 1.341-2.

¹² Paul Speck, 'Ein weiterer interpolierter Text in den Akten des Konzils von 787. Der Brief des Patriarchen Germanos an Thomas von Klaudiupolis', in Anna Avramea, Angeliki Laiou, and Evangelos Chrysos (eds.), *Βυζάντιο: κράτος και κοινωνία — Μνήμη Νίκου Οικονομίδη*, (Athens: Institute for Byzantine Studies, 2003), 487-90.

¹³ Mike Humphreys, 'First Iconoclasm, ca. 700-780', in Mike Humphreys (ed.), *A Companion to Byzantine Iconoclasm*, (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 332-333; Paul Magdalino, 'The Other Image at the Palace Gate and the Visual Propaganda of Leo III', in Denis Sullivan, Elizabeth Fisher, and Eustratios Papaioannou (eds.), *Byzantine Religious Culture: Studies in honor of Alice-Mary Talbot*, (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 141-2.

accretion of knowledge about pre-Islamic practices, as well as simple misinformation. This is a pattern that we will see repeated in later Roman accounts about Islam.

Another text written by Germanos at around the same time is rather more illuminating of a gradual shift in Roman attitudes towards Islam, its practitioners, and the caliphate. This text is a homily celebrating the successful defence of Constantinople in 717/18 against the Muslim army led by Maslama b. ‘Abd al-Malik. The oldest manuscript containing the homily is relatively late, dating from the end of the thirteenth century, and the text was initially attributed to Patriarch Germanos II (d. 1240), so one ought to be somewhat wary of assuming specific language choices are wholly representative of the original eighth-century version.¹⁴ Indeed, the much-commented-on absence of any reference to the actions of Leo III during the siege suggests that it was either composed or partially revised at a time after Germanos’ deposition.¹⁵ Nevertheless, it is striking that the text depicts the Arab army in terms that hint at Islam’s Christological stance. They are called “enemies of the confession that proclaims the glory of Christ”, whilst the anger of the Virgin Mary is stirred up to defend her city because of “the insult and blasphemy against Christ” committed by them.¹⁶ Their aim by attacking Constantinople was “not so much the intention of seizing the reigning city”, but rather “hoping to overthrow the royal majesty of Christ”.¹⁷ Later they are compared in their treatment of Christ to the refusal of the Egyptians in Exodus to believe Moses, “saying about Christ ‘I do not know the Lord’”.¹⁸

¹⁴ Venance Grumel, ‘Homélie de saint Germain sur la délivrance de Constantinople’, *RÉB* 16 (1958): 184-7.

¹⁵ Grumel, ‘Homélie de saint Germain’, 188.

¹⁶ Germanos, *Homily*, 9 and 10 [“σαρακηνοῖς τοῖς ἀντιτασσομένοις τῇ ὁμολογίᾳ τῆς δόξης [Χριστοῦ]” and “τὴν κατὰ τοῦ Χριστοῦ ὕβριν τε καὶ βλασφημίαν”].

¹⁷ *ibid.* 11 [“οἱ ἀλάστορες οὐ τοσοῦτον βασιλίδα πόλιν αἰρήσειν προθέμενοι ὅσον τὸ τοῦ Χριστοῦ βασιλεῖον καταστρέψασθαι σέβας ἐλπίζοντες”].

¹⁸ *ibid.* 14 [“περὶ Χριστοῦ λέγοντες οὐκ οἶδα τὸν Κύριον”].

The Arabs are depicted by Germanos as not just enemies of the faith, but enemies who specifically refuse to accept the Christian interpretation of Christ as the Son of God: precisely the point of contention that had dominated Christian-Muslim relations in the caliphate in the preceding decades. In this respect, the homily represents a significant change in the attitude of Romans towards the Arabs, or, more properly now, Muslims. They are no longer here just savage barbarians whose purpose is to be an instrument for God's punishment of Christians. True, the ultimate cause of the siege is still laid at the feet of sinful Christians, but the opposing side has now been given an agency and intent of their own that would (the patriarch might hope) strike fear at the heart of those listening to the sermon.¹⁹ The nature of this characterisation of the Muslims is in contrast to that of the Avars in Theodore Synkellos' homily on the 626 siege. The two texts share several similarities, their subjects, foremost, but also their focus on the significance of the Virgin as the defender of Constantinople and use of the Exodus story as a metaphor for the conflict.²⁰ The Avars, however, are presented as little more than rapacious, mindless barbarians bent on destruction: the same role traditionally given to the Arabs.²¹ By contrast, the Muslims in 717/18 are depicted in a similar fashion to the Persians in the literature produced by the Heraclian regime. They are a specifically anti-Christian foe that sought to wipe out the Roman empire because it was the Christian empire above all else.

By recognising the religious threat that the Muslim army posed, the homily represents the first step towards the creation of an image of Islam and of Muslims in direct opposition to the collective identity of its Roman audience. That it was composed

¹⁹ See the comment, "our sins which had armed our enemies": Germanos, *Homily*, 9.

²⁰ Theodore Synkellos, *Homily*, 15.

²¹ Theodore Synkellos, *Homily*, 9-10.

to emphasise a sense of belonging amongst its listeners is clear from its insistence that the Muslim attack on Constantinople was recognised as a threat by “all the *oikoumene* to its furthest reaches, wherever the Christian name is synonymous with being a citizen”; tying the population of the imperial city to a wider Christian identity, whilst also emphasising later that the capital of the Roman empire represented the “royal majesty of Christ”.²² This is, of course, a fairly conceited view and would probably have raised a few eyebrows in Rome, but it was entirely in-keeping with the idea that Romanness was synonymous with Christianity and that the fall of the Roman empire would be the fall of the Christian empire. One could replace every instance of ‘us’ or ‘Christian’ in the text with ‘Roman’ and the meaning would have been entirely the same for the Constantinopolitan audience.

The continued importance of this core aspect of Roman identity and the direct threat that Islam posed to it is encapsulated in the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodios*; or rather the Greek translation of the original Syriac text that was almost certainly produced in Constantinople around the same time as the siege.²³ The Greek translation largely presents the same image of the Arabs as the Syriac and adds relatively little to our knowledge of what information about Islam was available in the empire. The ‘sons of Hagar’ are presented in classic terms as an external, uncontrollable force unleashed by God to be “a fire of testing” for “the race of the Christians”, and their victory the result of Christian sin and lawlessness.²⁴ In some ways, the Greek version is even more derogatory than the original. It rejects the original’s description of the Arabs as

²² Germanos, *Homily*, 9 [“μᾶλλον δὲ καὶ τῆς οἰκουμένης ὅλης τὰ πέρατα, ἐν οἷς τὸ τῶν χριστιανῶν ὄνομα πολιτεύεται”] and 14.

²³ Christopher Bonura, ‘A Forgotten Translation of Pseudo-Methodios in Eighth-Century Constantinople: New Evidence for the Dispersal of the Greek *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodios* during the Dark Age Crisis’, in Nicholas Matheou, Theophili Kampaniaki, and Lorenzo Bondioli (eds), *From Constantinople to the Frontier: The City and the Cities*, (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 263-5.

²⁴ *Greek Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodios*, 11.5 and 11.18.

“barbarian tyrants”, in favour of calling them simply “children of the desert” who do not even rule as tyrants do but are purely destructive, murdering pregnant women and slaughtering children.²⁵ Some limited recognition of the fact that this enemy had a religion with specific beliefs in opposition to Christianity is present in the section lamenting Christian converts, who deny the “true faith and the life-giving cross and the holy mysteries” and “will deny Christ and follow the apostates”, hinting at some awareness of Islam’s rejection of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection.²⁶

The greatest appeal of this text for a Roman audience, however, is its conviction in the eventual supremacy of the empire and its ruler over the ‘Ishmaelites’. Its relatively quick spread to the empire, even as a Syriac text, its rapid translation into Greek, and then its proliferation within the empire point to its continued relevance in the eighth century. Indeed, far more Greek versions survive than Syriac, an unusual situation for a seventh-century text.²⁷ The Greek translation goes to some lengths to emphasise even further the connection between the empire and Christianity. Whereas the Syriac text uses ‘Christian’, ‘Roman’, and ‘Greek’ interchangeably, the Greek version uses only ‘Christian’ and ‘Roman’. In places where it quotes verbatim from the Syriac, using “kingdom of the Greeks”, it is always followed by “which is that of the Romans”.²⁸

More subtly, the Greek edition places greater emphasis on the fact that the ‘kingdom of the Romans’ and the ‘kingdom of the Christians’ are one and the same thing. In a long explanatory passage that interweaves references to 2 Thessalonians and 1

²⁵ *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodios*, 10.17; *Greek Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodios*, 11.17.

²⁶ *Greek Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodios*, 12.3.

²⁷ Bonura, ‘Forgotten Translation’, 263.

²⁸ *Greek Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodios*, 9.7 [“τοῖνον ἡ βασιλεία τῶν Ἑλλήνων, ἥτις ἐστὶ τῶν Ῥωμαίων”], versus: *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodios*, 9-10. I would like to thank Paul Ulishney for very kindly checking the Syriac text for me to make sure that it does indeed refer to ‘Greeks’ and ‘Romans’ as distinct terms and that it was not simply a choice on the part of the translators to use ‘Greek’ where the text says ‘Roman’ — as is often the case in even very recent translations.

Corinthians, the original version envisages a “kingdom of the Christians” that holds back the Antichrist (2 Thess. 2:7) that will prevail over all kingdoms of the earth and be handed over to God (1 Cor. 15:24).²⁹ Only after this does it clarify that the “kingdom of the Greeks” is the final “sovereign or power in the whole earth” that will be surrendered to God, before switching back to referring to the “kingdom of the Christians”.³⁰ By contrast, the Greek edition of the same passage skips straight to stating that the “kingdom of the Romans” is the one holding back the Antichrist.³¹ It even does this with a rhetorical question, asking “which, then, is [this kingdom], if not the kingdom of the Romans?”, since manifestly “all rule and authority of this world are rendered null and void apart from her”.³² After extolling the superiority of the “kingdom of the Romans” over all others, only then does the text clarify “what manner of kingdom? Quite clearly that of the Christians”.³³

The shift in emphasis is slight, but what is important is less the nature of the change but the fact that any change was made in the first place. That it was part of the original Greek edition can be deduced from the fact that it was carried forward in the Latin versions of the *Apocalypse*, which all derive from a translation of the Greek text made shortly after it was written.³⁴ While it is possible that the change had already appeared in the Syriac version that formed the basis for the Greek translation, the fact that it seems not to have been carried forward in the (admittedly limited) Syriac

²⁹ 1 Cor. 15:24 [“the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power”]; 2 Thess. 2:7 [“the one who now holds it back will continue to do so”]; *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodios*, 10.

³⁰ *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodios*, 10.

³¹ *Greek Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodios*, 10.2.

³² *ibid.*

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ *Latin Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodios*, 10.2-3 [“Quis igitur e medio nisi Romanorum imperium? Omnis enim principatus et potestas huius modi distruetur absque hunc”; “Qualem regnum? Scilicet Christianorum”]; Bonura, ‘Forgotten Translation’, 264-5.

manuscript tradition makes it more likely that the change occurred as part of the translation process. The Greek edition of the *Apocalypse* is thus more than simply a translation, but a reworking of the original that took entirely for granted that its audience would automatically recognise that the “kingdom of the Romans” and that “of the Christians” were one and the same.

The popularity of the text’s message that the Romans and their ruler, as the true Christian state, had a special place in God’s plan that would see them triumph over adversity speaks to the continued strength in the early eighth century of the close identification between Christianity and Romanness. The fact that the text was translated into Greek at around the same time as the capital city miraculously survived yet another Arab siege can be read as something approaching a confidence-booster: a reaffirmation of Roman self-belief that may have taken a hit of late. It is also important to note that, while the *Apocalypse* tells us little about how Islam itself was perceived in the empire at the time, its framing of the Arabs as the ultimate cosmic enemy of Christians and Romans (in perfect unity) points the way to later developments that positioned Islam and its practitioners as not just ‘non-Roman’, but inherently ‘anti-Roman’.

6.2: *Islam in Roman Discourse to c.850*

Tracing attitudes towards Islam in the empire over the rest of the eighth century and the early part of the ninth is made more difficult by the shadow of iconoclasm, the debate over which monopolises the discourse of many of the texts that we otherwise might expect to comment on the relationship between the empire and the caliphate. The actual debate over icons in the empire is of relatively little importance for piecing together the development of the Roman image of Islam. The older interpretation of

iconoclasm, which traced its origins to the Islamic world and saw it as the adoption of Islamic iconophobia, has long been contested and is generally rejected as the proximate cause of iconoclasm in the empire.³⁵ There was plenty of fuel in Roman society for a debate over icon-worship in the eighth century without needing external influence and, in any case, there is little trace of any comparable trend in the Islamic world.³⁶ Indeed, as we have seen, Muslim hostility towards Christian images at the turn of the century was mostly directed towards the cross, the religious symbol that Byzantine iconoclasm sought to emphasise.³⁷ If there was a connection between the development of iconoclasm and Islam, it was only an indirect one in the form of the social trauma inflicted by repeated defeats at the hands of Islamic armies after the resumption of hostilities in 692.³⁸

More important for the 'othering' of Islam is the interpretation that later writers gave to its origins. An 'iconoclast legend' grew up around events in the first decades of the eighth century, recorded by iconodule writers who sought to explain the origins of what they saw as a perversion of the true faith. The totemic status that iconoclasm developed in later centuries as the heresy *par excellence* meant giving it a particularly pernicious origin story. Whilst later writers could direct their ire towards the two emperors most closely identified with the doctrine, Leo III and Constantine V, those writing whilst the Isaurian dynasty was still in power would have found it safer to

³⁵ Leslie Brubaker and John Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era, c.680-850: A History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 106-17; Humphreys, 'First Iconoclasm', 348-9; King, 'Islam', 266-8; *contra* Patricia Crone, 'Islam, Judaeo-Christianity and Byzantine Iconoclasm', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 2 (1980): 59-95; and Christian Sahner, 'Images and Iconoclasm in Islam, ca. 600-850', in Mike Humphreys, *A Companion to Byzantine Iconoclasm*, (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 536-7.

³⁶ King, 'Islam', 266-8.

³⁷ Specific hostility to the symbol of the Cross is one of the major features of Christian discourse about Islam at the time that Iconoclasm was beginning in the empire, see: Anastasios of Sinai, *Narrationes*, 2.13; Sawirus ibn al-Muqaffa', *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, 16.23.

³⁸ Humphreys, 'Images of Authority?', 160-1.

blame external factors for having led the empire astray. The earliest surviving explanation of the origins of Iconoclasm is found in the so-called *Narratio* attributed to the shadowy 'John of Jerusalem', which originated in an iconophile anthology from 774/5 and which is preserved in the *Acts of Nicaea II*.³⁹ The *Narratio* blames a Jewish soothsayer from Tiberias, named Serantapechos, who spoke to the caliph Yazīd II and predicted that he would rule for thirty years if he destroyed the images in churches.⁴⁰ This was later adopted by Constantine, bishop of Nakoleia, and others who "imitated the lawless Jews and the impious Arabs and committed outrages against the churches of God".⁴¹

The inclusion of the Muslims in the earliest 'blame-narrative' is illustrative of the status that Islam was beginning to adopt in Roman discourse. Blaming a malicious Jewish influence as its source would have been more than enough to tarnish Iconoclasm. Adding an influence from the caliphate is indicative of both the fact that the "impious Arabs" were perceived as being equal to the Jews as 'enemies of Christianity', and that associating iconoclasm with Islam was seen as worthwhile for iconodule polemicists by the middle of the eighth century. As this 'origin story' developed in the empire, the focus seems to have shifted over the course of the eighth century to emphasise the Islamic influence.

Possibly the two most influential later accounts of the origins of Iconoclasm, Theophanes' *Chronographia* and the *Life of Stephen the Younger* by Stephen the Deacon (both written in the first decades of the ninth century), tend to focus on this aspect of

³⁹ *Acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council*, 5.591-4. On the nature of this text, see: Leslie Brubaker and John Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era (c.680-850): the sources: an annotated survey*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2016), 264.

⁴⁰ *Acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council*, 1.592-4. This episode of 'Islamic' iconoclasm has been extensively discussed, with its historicity and extent repeatedly questioned, see: King, 'Islam', 266-8; and Sahnner, 'Images and Iconoclasm', 506-515.

⁴¹ *Acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council*, 1.594.

the controversy. Theophanes reproduces the *Narratio*'s account of the Jewish soothsayer and Yazīd in his entry for 722/3, adding that Leo III “partook of the same error” as the caliph.⁴² Whilst the ultimate origin of the heresy is a Jew, the blame in the text lies firmly with the influence that ‘Saracens’ had on the emperor and his followers. The entry for the previous year, 721/2, refers to Leo’s forced baptism of Jews in the empire — rather undermining any argument that the emperor had sympathy for their beliefs.⁴³ After recording this initial story, the *Chronographia* consistently refers to Iconoclasm as connected to “Arab doctrines”. Leo’s partner-in-crime, Beser, is someone who “had abjured the Christian faith and become imbued with Arab doctrines” and the emperor himself is later said to have exceeded even “his mentors the Arabs”.⁴⁴ As for the *Life of Stephen the Younger*, it does away with the Jewish magician altogether, instead blaming Leo “of Syrian origin” alone for inventing Iconoclasm.⁴⁵ The devil, who had seen that “the flock of the Lord easily triumphed over His enemies” (which one can only assume refers to the defeat of the Muslims in 717/18) used a magician able to deceive men as the tool for his schemes. That magician is not Jewish, as in other versions, but rather Leo himself, “who took his race and his mentality from the land of Syria”.⁴⁶

Both Theophanes (rather, George Synkellos) and Stephen the Deacon drew upon a variety of existing stories about the origins of Iconoclasm that were swirling around educated Roman discourse around the turn of the ninth century and which were often interpolated into earlier texts to provide satisfactory explanations for why the heresy

⁴² Theoph. *Chron.* AM 6215.

⁴³ *ibid.* AM 6214.

⁴⁴ *ibid.* AM 6215 and 6224.

⁴⁵ Stephen the Deacon, *Life of Stephen the Younger*, 9.

⁴⁶ Stephen the Deacon, *Life of Stephen the Younger*, 23.

arose.⁴⁷ The fact that both these authors chose to emphasise the Islamic side of the ‘Iconoclast legend’ over the Jewish aspect, or any other narrative, is illustrative of an image of Islam in the empire that depicted it as the antithesis of being Roman. The accounts of Theophanes and Stephen the Deacon both acted to shape that discourse going forward, perpetuating an image of the Islamic ‘Other’ as an enemy of good Christians and, hence, good Romans too.

The clearest example of this is the creation of the term ‘σαρακηνόφρων’ (‘Saracen-minded’), used in both texts to refer to Leo and his supporters.⁴⁸ This neologism first appears in the written record as part of the *Horos* of the Council of Hieria, originally written in 754 but preserved in the *Acts* of Nicaea II. In the *Horos*, however, it is applied to the definitively anti-iconoclast John of Damascus, who was anathematised as “Mansur, the ill-named and Saracen-minded”.⁴⁹ Although ‘Saracen-minded’ is usually taken as a derogatory synonym for ‘iconoclast’ and certainly had that meaning by the ninth century, its use by iconoclasts against John of Damascus points to a more general association between ‘Saracen-ness’ and heresy. It is, in this regard, similar to the older, and more common, ‘Ιουδαϊόφρων’ (‘Jewish-minded’), or even accusations of Manichaeism.⁵⁰ ‘Jewish-mindedness’ could also be used in accusations of both image-worship and iconoclasm — at least in earlier discourse — due to the assertion that Jews were ‘simpler’ than Christians; they were thus drawn to physical manifestations of faith and yet unable to distinguish venerating of the idea of the divine

⁴⁷ Marie-France Auzépy, ‘L’*Adversus Constantinum Caballinum* et Jean de Jérusalem’, *Byzantinoslavica* 5 (1995): 334-6; Paul Speck, *Ich bin’s nicht, Kaiser Konstantin ist es gewesen: Die legenden vom Einfluß des Teufels, des Juden und des Moslem auf den Ikonoklasmus*, (Bonn: Rudolf Habelt, 1990), 701-3.

⁴⁸ Stephen the Deacon, *Life of Stephen the Younger*, 42 [for ‘Masaras’]; Theoph. *Chron.* AM 6218 [for Leo] and 6233 [for Beser].

⁴⁹ *Acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council*, 2.539-40. On the association of the name ‘Mansur’ with John of Damascus, see: Theoph. *Chron.* AM 6234.

⁵⁰ On Manichaeism as a generic insult, see for instance: Stephen the Deacon, *Life of Stephen the Younger*, 9 [“the new Balthazar injected into the Church a new Manichaean heresy, so to speak”].

from worshipping the object itself.⁵¹ This confused notion about the Jewish attitude on images, which has far more to do with Roman perceptions of Jews than it does with Judaism itself, is paralleled in the way that 'Saracen-minded' is used by both iconoclasts and iconodules to denigrate each other. Whilst its initial use by the iconoclast camp could possibly be tied to an awareness of Islamic practices involving the Ka'bah — which Germanos had identified as idolatrous — the reverse cannot be said for its use by the iconodules, since there is no evidence for sustained Islamic iconophobia in this period outside of Yazīd II's supposed 'iconoclast edict' — the repeal of which immediately after his death speaks to it being an aberration.⁵² The appropriation of the term by the iconodules was more likely due it being perceived as a derogatory term to use for religious enemies — like 'Jewish-minded' — rather than because of any awareness of specific beliefs practised by the 'Saracens'.

Believing like a Saracen, as with being a Jew, had become embedded in Roman discourse by the end of the eighth century as signifying being against orthodox Christian belief, however one defined it. Its use was predicated less on genuine points of comparison between the beliefs of the individual concerned and the group they are 'minded' towards, rather as a signifier for otherness. It is also another demonstration of an awareness that the 'Saracens' had a belief system of their own that stood in distinction from that of Romans, pagans, and, whilst it was comparable, Jews as well. This aspect of the term is brought to the fore in the *Chronicle* of George the Monk, written around the middle of the ninth century. George, or whatever text he was drawing from, substituted 'σαρακηνόφρων' for 'σαρακηνόπιστος' when referring to

⁵¹ John Merrington, 'Jewish Carnality and the Five Senses in Late Antique Thought', paper presented at the *Late Roman Seminar*, Corpus Christi College, University of Oxford, 9th February 2023.

⁵² *Acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council*, 1.341-2. Sahnner, 'Images and Iconoclasm', 513-14.

Constantine V — a change that was carried through into tenth-century excerpts on that emperor in the *Suda* lexicon and the *Excerpta Constantiniana*.⁵³ ‘Πίστις’ has a much stronger emphasis on belief in something (or someone) than ‘φρήν’, which is better thought of in this context as *mentalité*. Whether this choice was a deliberate one, it helps illuminate the gradual development of Roman attitudes towards Islam and its adherents as a specific hostile religious group, rather than the ‘Saracens’ as nonspecific barbarians.

Another text attributed to Stephen the Deacon, the *Life of Bacchus the Younger*, sheds further light on the way in which the attitude of Romans (at least in Constantinople) had begun to change by the turn of the ninth century. Although the *Life* is more restrained in its treatment of Islam than other neo-martyr narratives set in Palestine, it is unique among them as an interpretation of a story from the Islamic world by a Roman author; rather than a story written by someone living in the caliphate that made its way to the empire.⁵⁴ When the *Life* refers to Islam, it is quite clear that Stephen the Deacon perceived it as a distinct religious tradition comparable — but antithetical — to his own. Islam is first identified as “ἡ μισαρά τῶν Ἀγαρηνῶν θρησκεία” in the passage narrating the conversion of Bacchus’ siblings and father, an event that is the result of them being ensnared and led astray by the devil.⁵⁵ Along with “θρησκεία”, which is used twice, Islam is also called “τὸ [τῶν ἔθνῶν θεοστυγῶν] μισαρὸν δόγμα” and “ἡ ἄθεος ἀίρεσις”, whilst its character is described by Bacchus as “στυγηρὸν καὶ μισόθειον”.⁵⁶ The Arabs themselves do not escape criticism (they are “οἱ ἄθεοι”), but the focus of the text is very much on their beliefs; which Stephen clearly recognises as

⁵³ Constantine VII, *De virtutibus et vitiis*, 1.36.155.15; George the Monk, *Chronicon*, 751.18; *Suda*, kappa, 2286.20.

⁵⁴ Binggeli and Efthymiadis, *Les nouveaux martyrs à Byzance*, 57; On the other neo-martyr narratives: Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 270-87.

⁵⁵ Stephen the Deacon, *Life of Bacchus the Younger*, 2 [“the loathsome religion of the Hagarenes”].

⁵⁶ *ibid.* 4 [“abominable and God-hating”], 11 [“the loathsome dogma [of the people hateful to God]”, and 15 [“the godless heresy”].

having some definable element, even if he gives little indication that he knew what that was beyond being somehow denying God (which the Islamic view of Christ could certainly be characterised as by a Christian).⁵⁷

The fact that Stephen is more interested in Islam as a belief system and its opposition to Christians represents quite a significant shift in focus away from the Arabs themselves being dehumanised agents of God or the Devil. Bacchus' death is signposted as the result of the Arabs believing in their "abominable dogma", rather than them being 'barbarians' and naturally opposed to Romans. This is likely a consequence of the story having been related to Stephen by one of the monks fleeing Palestine in the late eighth/early ninth century, who certainly would have recognised that Bacchus' 'crime' was specifically apostasy from Islam and his refusal to relinquish the 'true' Christian faith. Nevertheless, its transference into a text written by a thoroughly Roman writer for a primarily Roman audience makes it an important milestone in the process of recognising Islam as a distinctive belief system associated with the 'Hagarenes'. The development of the insult 'Saracen-minded' as an all-purpose indication of heretical belief (as discussed above) is part of this shift in attitude. It can be characterised as a synthesis of the older model of the Arabs as lawless 'barbarians' with a growing awareness that this enemy of the Christian empire had a competing religious identity as well. This placed Islam in a similar category to Judaism as a threat to the spiritual foundations of the empire; likewise, Muslims occupied the same role as Jews as an easily identifiable 'Other' against which to define Christian/Roman identity.

Unlike Judaism, however Islam existed as an external power to the Roman empire and its practitioners were not at the mercy of the imperial government: its

⁵⁷ Stephen the Deacon, *Life of Bacchus the Younger*, 11 ["the godless ones"].

externality, strength (politically, militarily, and spiritually), and constant negative interaction with the empire and its people made it a much greater threat and thus made it much easier to construct as wholly alien. The final piece of the puzzle concerning how the Roman image of Islam developed comes in the middle of the ninth century with the writings of Niketas Byzantios. Writing under Michael III sometime in the 860s, Niketas was the author of three texts attacking Islamic beliefs and defending Christian ones.⁵⁸ The first two of these take the form of letters commissioned by Michael in response to anti-Christian polemics sent to him by the 'Abbāsīd caliph. The third is a full-blooded polemic against Islamic belief that incorporates much of the material in the letters and is commonly known by its Latin title: *Confutatio falsi libri*. Niketas' letters fit into wider patterns of intellectual development in both the empire and the caliphate in the ninth century, particularly the growing interest in ancient philosophical principles: the texts draw heavily on philosophical treatises in order to critique specific elements of Islamic belief.⁵⁹ They also form part of a current of intellectual exchange between the courts in Constantinople and Baghdad in the first half of the ninth century, for which we have far better documentation than for earlier periods and which undoubtedly facilitated better awareness of Islam as a belief system at least amongst the Roman elite.⁶⁰

More significant is the fact that Niketas' works demonstrate a detailed understanding of the Qur'an. Indeed, the *Confutatio's* structure is predicated on following the Qur'an and its *suwar*, with each individual refutation dealing with a

⁵⁸ Dirk Krausmüller, 'Killing at God's command: Niketas Byzantios' polemic against Islam and the Christian tradition of divinely sanctioned murder', *Al-Masaq* 16:1 (2004): 164.

⁵⁹ Benjamin de Lee, 'Letters, Diplomacy, and Religious Polemic in Ninth-Century Byzantium: Niketas Byzantios and the Problem of Islam', (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2011), 210-12.

⁶⁰ For an example of this exchange as it pertains to theological discussion, see: Hadi Eid, *Lettre du calife Hârûn al-Rašîd à l'empereur Constantin VI*, (Paris: Cariscript, 1993).

For the exchange in general: Paul Magdalino, 'The road to Baghdad in the thought-world of ninth century Byzantium', in Leslie Brubaker (ed.), *Byzantium in the Ninth Century: Dead or Alive?*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), 195-214.

different *sūrah*, or selection of *suwar*, in turn. The *Confutatio* contains some 82 fragments of Quranic text in Greek, several of which preserve the same word-order as the original Arabic.⁶¹ Niketas clearly had access to a pre-existing Greek translation of the Qur'an that had likely been produced in the empire by a Syriac-speaker with proficiency in Arabic and Greek: the errors in interpreting the meaning of both the Arabic and Greek suggest that the translator was a native speaker of neither.⁶² No evidence other than Niketas' texts exists for this ninth-century Greek Qur'an, which suggests that access to it was limited to a small circle in the imperial court (understandable for a heretical treatise) and thus Niketas' polemical tract and his interpretation of the Islamic holy text acted as a gatekeeper for later writers. Niketas, therefore, represents something of a terminus for the evolution of Roman knowledge about Islam, the last point at which information from the Islamic world itself can be seen to directly influence the discourse in the empire. Henceforth, later texts that discuss specific elements of Islam drew on Niketas' presentation of the Qur'an and Islam, rather than attempting to update the picture with more accurate information. Indeed, the *Confutatio* remained the definitive Greek polemic against Islam down to the reign of Manuel I Komnenos in the twelfth century.⁶³

By the middle of the ninth century, then, the discourse amongst Roman elites had reached a point where Islam was recognised as a fully-fledged belief system in opposition to key elements of Christianity. It had its own prophet in the shape of

⁶¹ Christian Høgel, 'The Greek Qur'an: Scholarship and evaluations', *Orientalia Suecana* 61 suppl. (2012): 173-5.

⁶² Kees Versteegh, 'Greek Translations of the Qur'an in Christian Polemics (9th century A.D.)', *ZDMG* 141 (1991): 62-4.

⁶³ Reinhold Gleis, 'John Damascene on Islam: a Long-Term History in Byzantium', in *Negotiating Co-existence: Communities, Cultures, and Convivencia in Byzantine Society*, eds. Barbara Crostini and Sergio La Porta (Trier: Wissenschaftlichen Verlag, 2013), 40; John Meyendorff, 'Byzantine Views of Islam', *DOP* 18 (1964), 124.

Muhammad, whose teachings were codified in a holy book, the Qur'an, that directly contradicted and even re-interpreted the Christian Bible. It was a distinct religion that proclaimed itself to be the successor to Christianity, backed by a powerful neighbouring state whose elite were beginning to make claims to the intellectual inheritance of the classical Graeco-Roman past.⁶⁴ The fact that Niketas' polemical attack on the religion, its prophet, and its holy text remained current in the empire for two centuries points to the gradual fossilisation of a particular idea about Islam in the empire, where attempting any rapprochement was pointless and would undermine the identity of the Roman state and those who identified themselves with it.

6.3: *The Islamic 'Other'*

The 'othering' of Islam as everything 'not Roman' came about through a process of internal negotiation that had little to do with understanding the religion on its own terms. The character of this internalised discussion on the nature of the Islam presented it as unapproachable and irreconcilable with Christian, Roman, belief. This aspect can be most clearly seen through the disconnect between the ninth-century literature produced in Byzantium dealing with Islam and that produced in those areas of the Islamic world with significant Christian populations. Both groups of Christians needed to deal with ultimately the same problem, defending their own beliefs against Islam, yet the quality and types of arguments put forward between them diverged significantly.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ For a detailed discussion of this process of appropriation of the classical past in the Islam world, see: Nadia Maria El Cheikh, *Byzantium Viewed by the Arabs*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 100-11. See also the nature of the discussions between Romans and Muslims reported in the *Life of Constantine-Cyril* and the chronicles of Theophanes Continuatus and the Logothete, discussed in 7.1 in the present work.

⁶⁵ For the evolution of this difference from the perspective of Christians in the Islamic world, see: Sidney Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

The prolific writings in Arabic and Greek of Theodore Abū Qurrah, bishop of Harran in the early ninth century, give a glimpse at this. Abū Qurrah's literary production was largely intended to be read by an audience of Christians and Muslims within the Islamic world and, consequently, the tone and style of his output is generally apologetic and defensive.⁶⁶ Even the most inflammatory work against Islam commonly attributed to him foregoes much of the rhetorical venom that one finds in the likes of Niketas Byzantios.⁶⁷ Islam is incorrect and heretical, but it and its followers are not fundamentally evil, in fact the religion is accorded at least a modicum of respect and much of the debate is in the form of demonstrating the correctness of Christianity rather than pointing out the flaws of Islam.⁶⁸ Muḥammad is indeed referred to as “the insane false prophet of the Agarenes” spouting “boastful and lying remarks” about the need for Muslims to kill or tax Christians, but this is about the extent of the polemical nature of the work.⁶⁹

The nature of the divergence between the two discourses can be summed up as the result of a general fossilisation of the debate in Byzantium, exemplified by the persistence of certain tropes and lines of criticism that either never existed or no longer appeared elsewhere. This fossilisation is indicative of an unwillingness, or inability, of writers in the empire to reconcile themselves and their identity as Romans to Islam, instead constructing an unchanging image of Islam as an ‘Other’ to Romanness.

⁶⁶ Griffith, ‘Byzantium and the Christians’, 253-7; Sidney Griffith, ‘What has Constantinople to do with Jerusalem? Palestine in the ninth century: Byzantine orthodoxy in the world of Islam’, in *Byzantium in the Ninth Century: Dead or Alive?*, ed. Leslie Brubaker (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), 186; John Lamoreaux, *Theodore Abū Qurrah* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), xviii.

⁶⁷ On the disputed authorship of much of Theodore's Greek output, see: John Lamoreaux, ‘Theodore Abū Qurrah and John the Deacon’, *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 42.4 (2001): 361-86.

⁶⁸ Griffith, ‘What has Constantinople to do with Jerusalem?’, 189; Lamoreaux, *Theodore Abū Qurrah*, 211-227.

⁶⁹ Lamoreaux, *Theodore Abū Qurrah*, 224-5.

Perhaps the most egregious example of this process is the persistence of a belief in Byzantium that Islam was somehow connected to the pagan goddess Aphrodite. The origin of this misconception seems to have been a synthesis of pre-Islamic pagan religion with contemporary Islamic practices, particularly Hajj ceremonies involving the Ka‘bah and the Black Stone.⁷⁰ The shift to Islamic worship at the same, or similar, site and of the Black Stone seems to have filtered through imperfectly to a Christian audience. We have already noted that Anastasios of Sinai was aware that the Muslims had a cult site where, he believed, they worshipped a stone and that this information makes its first appearance in a Roman text in Germanos’ letter to Thomas of Claudiopolis: in which we are told that the stone was worshipped as part of “their invocation of the so-called Khobar”.⁷¹

John of Damascus tells us that “[the Arabs] were idolaters and they venerated the morning star and Aphrodite, whom notably they call ‘Khabar’ in their language, which means ‘great’; therefore, until the times of Heraclius, they were, undoubtedly, idolaters”, until Muḥammad appeared and taught them their new ‘heresy’.⁷² In the later dialectic section of the work, he questions his imagined Muslim interlocutor, asking “How is it that you rub yourselves up against a stone by your Khabathan [Χαβαθαὶν], and you express your adoration to the stone by kissing it?”.⁷³ This stone is identified by John as the head of a statue of Aphrodite, “whom they used to venerate, [and] whom they call Khobar”, and which retains an inscription identifying it as such. Whilst he retells the

⁷⁰ On the syncretism of various pagan Graeco-Roman gods with the variety of pre-Islamic deities worshipped at the Ka‘bah, see: Michael Macdonald and Laila Nehmé, ‘al-‘Uzzah’, in Peri Bearman, Thierry Bianquist *et al.* (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Susanne Krone, *Die altarabische Gottheit al-Lāt*, (Frankfurt: Peter Land, 1992), 320 ff.; Gernot Rotter, ‘Der *veneris dies* im vorislamischen Mekka, eine neue Deutung des Names “Europa” und eine Erklärung für *kobar* = Venus’, *Der Islam* 70 (1993): 112-32.

⁷¹ Anastasios of Sinai, *Narrationes*, 2.11; *Acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council*, 1.341-2.

⁷² John of Damascus, *De Haeresibus*, 133 [=PG 94.764].

⁷³ John of Damascus, *De Haeresibus*, 100.78-82.

story about pre-Islamic worship of Aphrodite, John does make it clear that this old ritual practice and belief had been superseded by a new one that retained the same location (the Khabathan/Ka'bah) and the stone head but was otherwise not connected to Aphrodite/Khabar/Hubal. The Leo-ʿUmar correspondence, for its part, criticises the Islamic belief that the Ka'bah was the house of Abraham, as well as the practice of worshipping and kissing a stone there, but makes no mention of a deity called 'Khabar' or Aphrodite.⁷⁴

As one might expect, Christian writers in Palestine in the first half of the eighth century had developed a relatively accurate picture of Islamic practices. The Ka'bah and the Black Stone were current ritual sites for the Arabs that had pre-Islamic origins connected to a deity syncretised as Aphrodite/Venus, and, whilst the location and idol had remained the same, the Arabs no longer worshipped the former deity but followed the teachings of Muḥammad. George Synkellos, who derived his knowledge of Islam from personal experience and from textual materials he gathered in Palestine before journeying to Constantinople, naturally reproduces this more accurate image in the *Chronographia*. Indeed, there is no mention whatsoever of the Muslims worshipping Aphrodite/Khabar in the text.

One might then expect that the story of Khabar in Byzantium would end here as a curious aspect of pre-Islamic paganism repurposed into Islam, but this is not the case. Two of the most influential writers of the ninth century, Niketas Byzantios and George the Monk, picked up the legend and cemented it as an aspect of Roman discourse on Islam. It is unclear where George got his information, but the first part of the section on Khoubar is clearly related to *De Haeresibus*:

⁷⁴ Ps-Ghevond, *History*, 100-1.

πάλαι μὲν γὰρ εἰδωλολατροῦντες καὶ τῆ παρ' Ἑλλησιν Ἀφροδίτη λεγομένη, τοῦτ' ἔστι τῆ ἡδονῆ, προσκυνοῦντες καὶ τὸν ἄστερα, ταύτης γὰρ εἶναι τὸν ἑωσφόρον μυθολογοῦσιν, ἦν δὴ καὶ Κουβάρ τῆ ἑαυτῶν κακεμφάτω ἐπονομάσαντες γλώσση.⁷⁵

After this, however, he diverges from John's account by stating that "διέμειναν ἕως ἄρτι τὴν Ἀφροδίτην θεὸν ὀνομάζοντες".⁷⁶ Whereas *De Haeresibus* makes it clear that the Arabs had stopped worshipping Aphrodite/Khoubar after Muḥammad, even if they maintained the same cult site; George makes it seem that they still worship a pagan deity. He compounds this by giving an erroneous etymology for the Islamic *takbīr* (*Allāhu 'akbar*; 'God is greatest') that confuses 'akbar' with 'Khoubar'.⁷⁷ The origins of this confusion are unclear. A similar false etymology appears in Champier's Latin translation of the Leo portion of the Leo-'Umar correspondence, but this is absent from the much earlier version in Ps-Ghevond and it is uncertain how old the redaction of the text that Champier translated might have been.⁷⁸ Wherever the etymology came from, it persisted at least into the middle of the tenth century in the empire as evidence for the ridiculousness and contradictory nature of Islam. George's version was repeated practically verbatim by Constantine VII in *De Administrando Imperio*, as well as in an anonymous polemic against Muḥammad that likely originated in the late tenth or early eleventh century.⁷⁹

George the Monk can hardly be called the most discerning of compilers, so his inclusion of information that (to us) is patently absurd is more likely the result of

⁷⁵ George the Monk, *Chron.* 705.22-706.17 ["For they formerly worshipped idols and the one called Aphrodite in Greek (that is 'pleasure'), worshipping the star [Venus], for they told tales about it: that it was the morning-star, which they called 'Koubar' in their ill-sounding language, meaning 'great'"].

⁷⁶ *ibid.* ["they persist to the present calling Aphrodite a god"].

⁷⁷ *ibid.* [ἔχει δὲ ἡ λέξις τῆς μυσσαρᾶς αὐτῶν καὶ παμβεβήλου προσευχῆς οὕτως : Ἀλλά, Ἀλλά, Οὐά, Κουβάρ, Ἀλλά. καὶ τὸ μὲν Ἀλλά, Ἀλλά ἐρμηνεύεται ὁ θεός, ὁ θεός, τὸ δὲ Οὐά μείζων, τὸ δὲ Κουβάρ μεγάλη ἦτοι σελήνη καὶ Ἀφροδίτη"].

⁷⁸ Champier, *De triplici disciplina*, 5 ["Miores horum dicebantur aleubre [al-Hubal?], unde et sermo iste derivatur Alacuiber [*Allāhu 'akbar*]"].

⁷⁹ Constantine VII, *De administrando imperio*, 14.31-36; *Kata Mōamed* = PG, 104.1453.6.

ignorance and of the sources available to him than deliberate distortion. The same excuse cannot be given for Niketas Byzantios, who had access to a Greek translation of the Qur'an as well as the full range of information on Islam available at the imperial court. The nature of Niketas' treatment of the 'Khoubar legend' indeed reveals the way in which it was used by Roman authors, in the face of all evidence, as a polemical tool to paint Islam and its practitioners as hypocrites and adherents to a perverse faith.

In Niketas' *Confutatio*, the 'legend' appears initially in the first refutation (derived from his first letter) in much the same guise as in John of Damascus. Niketas notes that, according to reports from Christians, Muslims circumambulate around a stone statue at the centre of their cult site, saying "I suppose this to be that idol, as they would say, of Aphrodite".⁸⁰ Note that Niketas does not state that Muslims worshipped Aphrodite, simply that their current practice involved walking around and revering a stone idol that he believes is the statue of Aphrodite he (and others) knew from elsewhere. This is a largely accurate description of events at the Ka'bah and whilst Muslims would dispute the description of the Black Stone as an 'idol' in any sense, that is a question of perception.

Niketas returns to the issue later in the *Confutatio*. Unlike the first refutation, which was originally part of a letter written in response to one from the caliph, the later refutations were composed specifically for this polemical text and were aimed squarely at a Christian, Roman audience.⁸¹ In refutation twenty-six, it is stated outright that "[Muḥammad] worships Khoubar, a very ancient idol in the desert of Ethribos and in Makakh [Μάκαχ], which is said to be engraved in the image of Aphrodite".⁸² This is then

⁸⁰ Niketas Byzantios, *Confutatio*, 1.12.318-25 ["Τοῦτο οἶμαι ἐκεῖνο εἶναι τὸ εἶδωλον, ὡς αὐτοὶ φαῖεν, τῆς Ἀφροδίτης"].

⁸¹ de Lee, 'Letters, Diplomacy, and Religious Polemic', 258.

⁸² Niketas Byzantios, *Confutatio*, 26.26-32.

used as proof that the ‘Agarenes’ do not solely worship the God of Abraham, as they claim, but rather they worship him alongside Khoubar and Muḥammad.⁸³ This is developed further in the following refutation, where Niketas claims that it was a commandment from Muḥammad to “prostrate yourselves before Khoubar as God, who is an idol and a representation of Aphrodite”.⁸⁴ This is clearly a deliberate distortion by Niketas, given that at the start of the same work it is made clear that the Muslims do not in fact worship Aphrodite/Khoubar. This distortion is in keeping with the broader tone and aims of the *Confutatio*, where the *suwar* are initially described as ‘λόγοι’, only later to become ‘μύθοι’. Niketas also focuses on increasingly outlandish criticisms of Islam as the text goes on, returning only in the last refutation to the key difference between Islam and Christianity: their attitude towards Christ.⁸⁵

As a polemical text, the *Confutatio* had a vested interest in painting Islam in the worst possible light and, as such, the acceptance and perpetuation of the ‘Khoubar legend’ is unlikely to be representative of wider beliefs and attitudes in the empire. However, there are several later texts for which this cannot be said. We have already noted *De Administrando Imperio* and the *Contra Muhammad*, but there also exists a so-called ‘ritual of abjuration’ dated to the second half of the ninth century that also accepts the ‘Khoubar legend’ as an element Islamic belief.⁸⁶ This text was intended to have a practical purpose and contains a series of statements that Muslims would be called upon to read out and renounce in preparation for converting to Christianity. In this regard, it reflects what at least some Roman clergy understood genuine Islamic belief to

⁸³ *ibid.* 26.40-3 [“Μάτην ἄρα θεὸν αὐτῶν Ἀγαρηνοὶ λέγουσι τὸν θεὸν τοῦ Ἀβραάμ· ἐφάνησαν γὰρ ψευδόμενοι. Εἰ γὰρ καὶ ἦν αὐτῶν ποτε θεός, ἀλλὰ νῦν μετὰ τοῦ Χουβάρ καὶ τοῦ Μωάμετ οὐκ ἔστιν αὐτῶν θεός”].

⁸⁴ *ibid.* 27.33-6.

⁸⁵ Niketas Byzantios, *Confutatio*, 30.

⁸⁶ Edouard Montet, ‘Un rituel d’abjuration des Musulmans dans l’église grecque’, *Revue de l’Histoire des Religions* 53.2 (1906): 145-63.

be — otherwise the renunciation would be ineffective, and any baptism would likely result in crypto-Muslims. It asks its readers to declare:

I anathematise this house of prayer of Mecca itself, in which there is said to be in the middle a large stone with a relief of Aphrodite, a stone which they venerate because on it Abraham would have ‘commerce’ with Hagar; or else because he would have tied his camel to it when he was preparing to sacrifice Isaac. Those who go there to pray to her stretch out one of their hands towards the stone, and with the other they hold their own ear, and so they go around in circles, until they fall dizzy...

and “I anathematise the worshipers of the morning star, that is, Lucifer and Aphrodite, who are called in the language of the Arabs ‘Khabar’, meaning great”.⁸⁷ It reflects the degree to which polemical depictions of Islam were adopted in the empire as reflective of the religion’s genuine beliefs; no longer the truth twisted for rhetorical purposes, but part of the perception of Islam within wider society.

The fact that this story continued to be perpetuated in the empire in the face of increasing contact with Muslims and despite some, like Niketas, knowing it to be false is indicative of the broader trends that shaped the image that Islam and Muslims had in the empire by the ninth century. Furthermore, the rapid disappearance of the ‘Khoubar legend’ from Christian discourse in the Islamic world (it is absent entirely from the canon of Abū Qurrah, for instance) reflects the divergent attitudes found amongst the two Christian societies. One had little choice but to find a way to accommodate the existence of Islam and to live alongside it; the other did not, and in fact suffered centuries of depredation at the hands of those who claimed allegiance to the Arabs, identified as the originators and practitioners of this new faith. This difference in attitude did not stem from Islam’s status as a heresy, which was equally applicable in

⁸⁷ Montet, ‘Rituel d’abjuration’, 153-4. Cf. Niketas Byzantios, *Confutatio*, 1.12.318-25.

both cases. Rather, the reason must be sought in the cultural and political circumstances that produced the texts.

In the case of the empire, the hostile attitude of Roman writers derived precisely from the fact that their collective identity was predicated on the intimate association with the imperial state and its overwhelmingly Christian ethos. Islam and the states associated with it threatened both qualities.⁸⁸ As a result, the image of Islam was constructed in opposition to Christianity and the empire, filling a role that is termed in ethnographic and anthropological studies as the ‘radical other’ or ‘radical alterity’ — in which the opposing identity is seen as so different that no point of comparison can be made between it and the individual’s own group beyond fascination and fear.⁸⁹ The ‘radical other’ requires a response that categorises and reduces it to an object that can be loaded with associated meanings that are as much a reflection of the self as whatever the reality of the other might be. Through this, a constructed opposition is created that serves as a shorthand for everything that the self and its associated identities are not.⁹⁰ It is this which one finds in the discourse surrounding Islam in the empire: a total refusal to engage fully with the ‘other’ beyond polemics that serve the purpose of creating an antithesis to define the ‘in-group’. It is this wider social context that underlies the failure of Roman writers to even attempt to move past or work out misunderstandings or to search for any common ground.⁹¹ That tenth-century

⁸⁸ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 24-6; Kaldellis, *Ethnography*, 75-77.

⁸⁹ Pierre Buhler, ‘Foreignness as a focal point of otherness’, in Ulrich Schmiedel and James Matarazzo Jr. (eds), *Dynamics of Difference: Christianity and Alterity*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 155.

⁹⁰ Anne-Louise Eriksson, ‘The other on the Cross’, in *Dynamics of Difference: Christianity and Alterity*, eds. Ulrich Schmiedel and James M. Matarazzo Jr. (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 177; Bernhard Leistle, ‘Anthropology and Alterity — Responding to the Other: Introduction’, in *Anthropology and Alterity: Responding to the Other*, ed. Bernhard Leistle (London: Routledge, 2016), 2.

⁹¹ See especially the particularly venomous attacks made by ‘Arethas’ in a letter supposedly sent to a Muslim emir in Damascus: Abel, ‘La lettre polémique’, 356-68. Dirk Krausmüller, ‘Killing at God’s

compilers were still repeating George the Monk's false etymologies a century after they had been written, and that Niketas Byzantios' *Confutatio* formed the basis for Roman polemics against Islam for almost four centuries, is entirely reflective of this unwillingness to move past a caricature of Islam as antithetical to everything that being a Roman meant.⁹²

Before moving on, it is important to note that for most people, most of the time, the notion of Islam or Muslims as a 'radical' other in antithesis to the Romans and their empire would have meant very little and had even less of an impact on pragmatic day-to-day relations.⁹³ It is only when forced to confront the differences between the two, to define Romanness in relation to this 'radical' other that flattening and categorisation occurs. It is at these moments of crystallisation that Roman group identity became reified and its relationship relative to Islam functionally relevant: in the same way that one does not usually consider one's own group identity as a matter of course in daily life — it only becomes relevant in certain contexts. When this did happen, however, texts from the middle of the ninth century onward demonstrate the extent to which an image of Islam had developed across social strata that synthesised older, pre-Islamic views of the Arabs as 'barbarians' with an awareness of their new religion. An awareness that itself was only a partial impression deliberately constructed to maximise points of

command: Niketas Byzantios' polemic against Islam and the Christian tradition of divinely sanctioned murder', *Al-Masaq* 16:1 (2004), 167.

⁹² Reinhold Gleis, 'John Damascene on Islam', 40; Meyendorff, 'Byzantine Views', 124-5; Versteegh, 'Greek Translations of the Qur'an', 55.

⁹³ Evidence of the quotidian existence of Muslims within the empire in the ninth and tenth centuries is indicative of this. See, for example, the mosque that may have been built in Constantinople and the archaeological evidence for cultural and artistic exchange in Athens and the wider Aegean: George Miles, 'Byzantium and the Arabs: Relations in Crete and the Aegean Sea', *DOP* 18 (1964): 3-32; Silvia Pedone and Valentina Cantone, 'The pseudo-kufic ornament and the problem of cross-cultural relationships between Byzantium and Islam', *Opuscula Historiae Artium* 62 (2013): 120-36; David Woods, 'Maslama and the Alleged Construction of the First Mosque in Constantinople, c.718', in Barbara Crostini and Sergio La Porta (eds), *Negotiating Co-Existence: Communities, Cultures and Convivencia in Byzantine Society*, (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2013), 19-30.

conflict. Muslims existed in Roman discourse in the ninth and tenth centuries as definitionally 'anti-Roman': their faith 'anti-Christian', their state 'anti-empire'. The significance this had for Romans who interacted with Islam and for groups and individuals that crossed the boundaries separating the two worlds in these centuries will form the final part of our study. It will reveal the extent of the othering of Islam in the empire, the continued strength and importance of ideas of Romanness, and the impact these both had on the empire's society, politics, and history.

7. Crossing Boundaries

The fundamental qualities of ‘otherness’ that defined the relationship between the denizens of the empire and the Islamic world, at least in broad conceptual terms if not necessarily always in practical relations, created an interplay between the two that heightened awareness of Roman identity. This manifested in particular circumstances when the otherwise implicit collective identity became functionally relevant: crystallising it and creating more definite expressions of groupness. These moments of crystallisation reveal the practical implications of the collective understanding of Romanness, its continued strength in the ninth and tenth centuries, and the degree to which the image of the Islamic ‘Other’ was an internalised aspect of it. Examining them is best achieved by breaking down the myriad instances of interaction between these two cultural spheres into two general groups of individual cases, distinguished by how they deal with the issue of Roman identity vis-à-vis Islam.

The first of these is perhaps the most common and consists of such instances where putatively ‘Roman’ individuals or groups crossed the physical boundary separating the two worlds, whilst ultimately remaining ‘Roman’ — either in their own eyes or in those of other Romans in the empire. These include ambassadors and embassies, in addition to prisoners of war held in Muslim lands. The second is less well-attested and consists of those individuals or groups who were perceived to have ‘crossed’ a hypothetical boundary separating Roman from Islamic (or, indeed, any other) identity. This ‘crossing’ can be in either direction; that is, either ‘becoming’ Roman or ‘rejecting’ Romanness: converts from Islam or other faiths to Christianity from outside the empire, and apostates from the Christian faith or defectors from the empire who went over to the Islamic world. The sheer volume and complexity of

interactions between Romans and Muslims over just the period from the mid-ninth to the mid-tenth century entails that this study can only be partial, but the intention from the following examples is to demonstrate the practical operation of the more theoretical outline of Romanness in relation to the constructed image of Islam and the Arabs as the 'radical' other.

7.1: *Romans Among the 'Other' and the 'Other' Among the Romans*

The number and frequency of embassies sent between the empire, the caliphate, and its various successor states, increased substantially in the ninth and tenth centuries, or at least are better attested.¹ The practice of gift giving characterised many of these official diplomatic interactions. Whilst the exchange of gifts and the 'cultural competition' that it engendered, with each power seeking to outdo the other in the lavishness of their offerings, is interesting from the point of view of the general culture of competition for prestige and recognition from the competing power, more significant are such times that we know the particulars of what gifts were given by Roman ambassadors to the caliph.²

One of the better-reported of these gift exchanges, one which is revealing of the signals it was apparently intended to send about Romanness, took place in Baghdad in

¹ Hugh Kennedy, 'Byzantine-Arab diplomacy in the Near East from the Islamic conquests to the mid eleventh century', in Jonathan Shepard and Simon Franklin (eds), *Byzantine Diplomacy*, (Ashgate: Variorum, 1992), 136-42.

² An example of this competition can be seen from an embassy of Michael III to al-Mutawakkil in 856 recorded by Al-Ya'qūbī: Aleksandr Vasiliev, *Byzance et les Arabes I*, trans. Henri Grégoire and Marius Canard (Brussels: Institut de Philologie et d'Histoire, 1935), 276. Nicolas Drocourt, 'Quelques aspects du rôle des ambassadeurs dans les transferts culturels entre Byzance et ses voisins (VIIe-XIIIe siècle)', in *Acteurs des transferts culturels en Méditerranée médiévale*, eds. Rania Abdellatif, Yassir Benhima, Daniel König, and Elisabeth Ruchaud (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2012), 32-33; Alicia Walker, *The Emperor and the World: Exotic Elements and the Imaging of Middle Byzantine Imperial Power, Ninth to Thirteenth Centuries C.E.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 89.

July 938 between ambassadors of the emperor Romanos I Lekapenos and the caliph al-Rāḍī. The embassy is not mentioned in extant sources from the empire and its exact purpose is not stated in our Arabic or Syriac sources, but they do provide extensive descriptions of the gifts presented to the caliph. Al-Ṣūlī states, rather inexactly, that the ambassadors presented “a number of presents, among which were pieces of silver plate, brocade fabrics, woollen fabrics with designs on them and some magnificently plated gold vases”; more important are the accounts preserved in the chronicle of Bar Hebraeus and the *Kitāb hadāyā wa-l-tuḥaf* (Book of Gifts and Rarities), a compendium of various such items likely compiled in the eleventh century.³ Both texts, alongside the lavish items recorded by al-Ṣūlī, record that the ambassadors brought a letter from the emperor written in the ‘Roman’ language (that is, Greek) using gold ink with an accompanying Arabic translation written in silver below.

This neat little episode, in which the intended message of Roman superiority is clear to us even a millennium later, illustrates one of the key principles governing relations between the two states on an ideological level that also served to express notions of collective identity. That is, those men — and they are exclusively so — sent by the empire to the caliphate on official business were ambassadors for the Romans both literally and figuratively. They not only served their practical diplomatic function, negotiating agreements, signing treaties and the like, but also as agents of cultural exposition: expressing through their deeds, appearance, and gifts the values of the state and its people. This situation was recognised implicitly and explicitly by those within the respective communities as well as by the ambassadors themselves. For the Romans, the encounter with the Islamic world necessitated expressions of cultural and moral

³ Aleksandr Vasiliev, *Byzance et les Arabes II.2*, trans. Marius Canard (Brussels: Institut de Philologie et d’Histoire, 1950), 29; Bar Hebraeus, *Chronicle*, 10.178; Ibn al-Zubayr, *Kitāb hadāyā wa-l-tuḥaf*, 1.73.

superiority; of greater intellectual achievement and the higher level of morality to be found in the Christian empire among its people. This need to uphold the intrinsic superiority of Romanness relative to Islam can be seen in many accounts of embassies, both real and fictitious.

From the Arabic side, one finds an account of an interrogation conducted by a vizier of al-Mu‘taṣim of an ambassador coming from Byzantium in a tenth-century handbook for diplomats the *Kitāb rusul al-mulūk* (Book of Messengers and Kings), written by Ibn al-Farrā'.⁴ Whilst the purpose of this passage was ostensibly to demonstrate in practical terms the conduct of a 'good' diplomat, it also shows the rhetoric that may have been used by Roman ambassadors in the caliphate. The envoy, when quizzed about the conduct of the emperor and the popular reception of him, replies with a veritable checklist of Christian virtues:

[he has] shown benevolence and he has downed his sword, thus filling all hearts with love and affection. He does not oppress his army and does not embarrass his people. He is liberal in giving, harsh in punishment and holds both hope and fear in his hand.⁵

The peace-loving and just rule of the emperor thus leads to the people of the empire being happy in his rule and as such they “lower their eyes for him” — a complex of interlinking assertions that serve to express a certain quality of Romanness and of imperial rule: the emperor’s Christian virtues lead to his rule being perceived of as legitimate and him receiving the respect of the Roman people.⁶ Although, for obvious reasons, no direct comparison is attempted here between just, Christian, Roman rule and unjust, Muslim, Arab rule, the association of moral and ethical qualities with the

⁴ Ibn al-Farrā', *Kitāb rusul al-mulūk*, 18.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*

Christian faith, the imperial state, and the Roman people that were integral to both can also be found in diplomatic discourse from the Roman side and, as we have seen, was a key element of anti-Islamic writing within the empire itself.⁷

Similar examples of ambassadors perpetuating an image of Romanness inherently superior to Islam can be found in sources produced for an audience within the empire. These generally take the form of demonstrating a greater scientific or greater theological knowledge in the empire and among its subjects, reflecting a particularly elite conception of Romanness tied to certain cultural traits deriving from educational attainment. Likely the most widely circulated of these portraits of Romans in a foreign land showing their intellectual superiority is the *Life of Constantine-Cyril*, written in the mid to late ninth century. The twenty-four year old Constantine, having been sent on an embassy to Baghdad to respond to a blasphemous letter received from the caliph, proceeded at dinner to refute the theological claims of his hosts, concluding the discussion by responding to their incredulity that he should be so well-versed in these matters with the statement: “All arts have come from us”.⁸ The ‘us’ in question was the Roman people, whose knowledge in all matters supersedes the Muslims, despite the fact that, earlier in the *Life*, they had been described charitably as “a wise people, well-versed in scholarship, geometry, astronomy, and other sciences”.⁹

As well as Constantine’s embassy, we find Roman intellectual prowess touted as representative of the empire in the account of the exchanges between the caliph al-Ma’mūn, Leo the Mathematician, his supposed pupil, and the emperor Theophilos;

⁷ See, for instance: Nicholas Mystikos, *Letters*, 1.67-8 and 102.26-40.

⁸ *Life of Constantine-Cyril*, 6. The timing of this embassy, the contents of Constantine’s refutation, and its particular context — taking place in response to a letter condemning Christianity from the caliph — has led to it being tentatively associated with the letters against Islam written by Niketas Byzantios, see: Kees Versteegh, ‘Greek Translations of the Qur’an in Christian Polemics (9th century A.D.)’, *ZDMG* 141 (1991): 65-66.

⁹ *Life of Constantine-Cyril*, 6.

although it is the circumstances surrounding this episode that make it even more revealing of general attitudes among elites in the empire connecting education and knowledge with Romanness. This episode is complex in its layering of what appears to have been the historical reality of the situation and how an elite Roman audience in the tenth century wished to see themselves and be seen by others. In a very long section contained within the book on Michael III, the writer or compiler of Theophanes Continuatus inserted a digression on the rise to prominence of Leo the Mathematician under the reign of Michael's father Theophilus.¹⁰

It begins with a pupil of Leo's "captured somehow by the Hagarenes" and enslaved during the time of al-Ma'mūn.¹¹ In a rather strange twist of fate, this anonymous captive ended up being summoned to the presence of the caliph on account of the latter hearing about his knowledge of geometry. He then proceeded to dazzle the assembled Muslim notables and the caliph with his superior grasp of the subject, causing them to wonder how many more such men might be among the Romans.¹² Hearing that the teacher of the pupil, Leo the Mathematician, was still alive, al-Ma'mūn wrote to him, asking him to abandon "the land of the Romans" and come to Baghdad to teach him. Leo gave the letter to a member of the court, bringing him to the attention of Theophilus, who himself subsequently received a letter from the caliph beseeching him to send Leo to Baghdad. The emperor's response was negative, since he deemed it to be "unreasonable to give one's own advantage to others and hand over to foreigners what is known, whereby the *genos* of the Romans is admired and honoured by all".¹³ This

¹⁰ Theoph.Cont. 4.27-9.

¹¹ Theoph.Cont. 4.27.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Theoph.Cont. 6.103-111 ["ἀλλ' ὁ Θεόφιλος ἀνταποκρίνας καὶ ἄλογον τὸ οἰκεῖον δοῦναι ἐτέροις καλὸν καὶ τὴν τῶν ὄντων γνῶσιν ἔκδοτον ποιῆσαι τοῖς ἔθνεσι, δι' ἧς τὸ τῶν Ῥωμαίων γένος θαυμάζεται τε καὶ τιμᾶται παρὰ πᾶσιν"].

episode, odd though it may be, demonstrates a view of Romanness defined by superior knowledge, albeit entirely from an elite perspective. There is, however, much more to this than meets the eye. A very similar account is to be found in the tenth-century *Logothete Chronicle*, which preserves the basic outline of the story but identifies Leo's pupil as the man who predicted and facilitated the fall and sack of Amorion by writing to the besieging army, led by the caliph. The man then apostatised, and events proceeded at Baghdad as in Theophanes Continuatus.¹⁴

The two accounts are mutually exclusive in their timing and identification of the pupil. The siege of Amorion was carried out by al-Mu'tašim, the successor to al-Ma'mūn, making it impossible for this to be the same person in both stories. Paul Magdalino managed to reconcile the accounts by establishing the veracity of the Logothete's identification of the pupil with the betrayer of Amorion, drawing a connection between this individual and the man recorded in Arabic sources who delivered the city to al-Mu'tašim. He is identified, variously, as either a convert to Christianity living in the city who then returned to Islam, or a *patrikios* named Leo — this last account being similar to that of the Judas-esque officer who betrays the Forty-two Martyrs of Amorion in one version of their hagiography.¹⁵ The story, at least the version in Theophanes Continuatus, thus appears to be a highly fictionalised account of a real event that manages to turn the apostasy and treason of a Roman military officer and pupil of Leo the Mathematician into a meditation, à la *Life of Constantine-Cyril*, on the contrast

¹⁴ *Logothete Chronicle*, 130.33-35.

¹⁵ Paul Magdalino, 'The road to Baghdad in the thought-world of ninth century Byzantium', in Leslie Brubaker (ed.), *Byzantium in the Ninth Century: Dead or Alive?*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), 201; Vasiliev, *Byzance et les Arabes I*, 332; al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk*, 23.1245; 'Passion inédit des Quarante-deux martyrs d'Amorium', 2-3, in *Hagiologie byzantine*, ed. and trans. François Halkin (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1986), 152-169 [henceforth *42 Martyrs*].

between upstart Muslims who believe themselves to be educated and pious and the real wellsprings of knowledge and faith — the Romans.¹⁶

The above examples necessarily represent a rather rarefied and remote view of Romanness that would have meant very little to most people in the empire. The question of defining Roman identity according to access to education and awareness of certain subjects is one that would have preoccupied elites and is one which, as with Constantine VII writing about Romanos Lekapenos' boorishness in *De Administrando Imperio*, could be used to limit Romanness purely to this elite group.¹⁷ However, when placed in relation to the Islamic world, the 'educatedness' of the Roman people could be broadened to encompass the entire population of the empire indiscriminately: the 'us' of Constantine-Cyril and the "Ρωμαίων γένος" of Theophilos.¹⁸

The final sub-category of those who would find themselves directly facing the 'other' outside of the empire whilst maintaining their Romanness, perceived or otherwise, is that of prisoners of war. Potentially the best-known representations of Roman prisoners of war in the caliphate, most accessible to the wider population, and most directly concerned with elements of Romanness are the various accounts of the Forty-two Martyrs of Amorion. This instance of collective martyrdom received an exceptionally widespread audience in the empire, appearing in no less than nine extant versions from two different recensions, in addition to one in the *menologion* of Symeon Metaphrastes and a version in Theophanes Continuatus.¹⁹ The exact circulation of the

¹⁶ Magdalino, 'The road to Baghdad', 201-2.

¹⁷ *De administrando imperio*, 13.122-146.

¹⁸ *Life of Constantine-Cyril*, 6; Theoph.Cont. 4.27.110.

¹⁹ Alexander Kazhdan, 'Hagiographical notes', *Byzantion* 56 (1986): 151-160; Athina Kolia-Dermizaki, 'The Execution of the Forty-two Martyrs of Amorion: Proposing an interpretation', *Al-Masaq* 14:2 (2002): 44; Koutrakou, 'The Arabs through Byzantine eyes', 44; Theoph. Cont. 3.35-36.

texts is unknown, but the number of different editions, their chronological distribution, and the possibility that they originated as an oral tradition also suggests a relatively wide distribution beyond the literate circles that dominate our picture.²⁰

The particulars of the martyrdom differ from version to version, but the general outline and message on Romanness remains the same; here was a group of pious, loyal, officers (τοὺς τῶν Ῥωμαίων) who were not simply made prisoners-of-war by the Muslims but held captive for seven years and subjected to appalling conditions, before then being pressed to convert to Islam and executed once they refused.²¹ The strength of its affirmation of what being a good Roman meant is clear: from the fact that the martyrs were captured while defending the city and its people in the service of the empire, that they suffered at the hands of their captors and yet refused to compromise on their Christian principles, and that they eventually died for their cause.²² In one version of the story, the set-up is one between a wholly alien and cruel foreign power and the dignity of the Roman martyrs and their compatriots who had been led into slavery. Drawing upon imagery of the Romans as the Biblical chosen people, they, “the children of the freewoman”, beloved of God, are directly contrasted with the Muslims, the sons of Hagar: having been “reduced into slavery by the slave, the enemy, the rejected one”.²³ In another version, one of the martyrs, Theodore Krateros, refers to his companion Constantine as “soldier of Christ, you who have received the foremost place before the emperor on earth, be also the first to receive the crown of martyrdom”.²⁴

²⁰ Kazhdan, ‘Hagiographical notes’, 159.

²¹ *42 Martyrs*, 13.

²² For example: *42 Martyrs*, 10-15 and 25.

²³ *42 Martyrs*, 5. Hagar, being the supposed progenitor of the Arabs through Ishmael, was banished to the desert along with her son after having been handmaiden to Abraham and Sarah (progenitors of the Israelites, the ‘chosen people’, through Isaac), hence the reference to the Muslims being slaves and rejected: Gen. 21:9-13; Qur’an, 14:37.

²⁴ Theoph.Cont. 3.36.24-26.

The parallels between the righteous Romans, pious and in service of the empire, and their treatment at the hands of the Muslims mirrors the prevailing Roman discourse and projected a sense of difference, of ‘otherness’ and of collective solidarity against it, that would have appealed throughout the social strata of the empire. The martyrdoms were all the more powerful thanks to the unusual circumstances of the executions, given that high-ranking prisoners of war on both sides were normally not mistreated in this period and could be expected to be ransomed back to their country during one of the periodic prisoner exchanges that took place between the empire and the caliphate. Instead, these prisoners were publicly executed mere months before a prisoner exchange took place.²⁵ The unusual nature of this is not a coincidence, since the story is likely fictional and was devised *ab initio* in the empire: adding to its importance as an expression of widespread Roman identity, the values attached to that, and the use of Islam as a mirror to it.²⁶ The proliferation of the martyrdom stories can thus be seen as perpetuating a pre-existing narrative regarding the cruelty and barbarism of Islam and its hostility to Christianity, setting up a direct contrast between it and the Roman people of the empire, crystallised and reified through the events of the story: pious, loyal Romans²⁷

The phenomena of taking prisoners and then exchanging them is one which seems to characterise much of the direct interaction between the empire and the Islamic world in the ninth and tenth centuries and has important implications for how different peoples were understood.²⁸ Indeed, even the category of ‘prisoner of war’ is

²⁵ al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk*, 34.1351-6.

²⁶ An analysis of the fictive aspects of the story can be found in: Yannis Stouraitis, ‘Historicity, agency, and ideology: the story of the sack of Amorion between reality and fiction’, in Nikos Tsivikis (ed.), *Byzantine Medieval Cities: Amorium and the Middle Byzantine Provincial Capitals*, (Berlin: De Gruyter, forthcoming).

²⁷ Haldon, ‘Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Views’, 481.

²⁸ For discussion of this within the caliphate, see: Tannous, *Making*, 477-90.

one whose origins are intimately connected to the impact of Islam on the Roman state. As Youval Rotman noted, the very notion that one could be taken in battle and then returned to their state of origin with little change in their legal status is one which simply did not exist in classical Roman law — those taken prisoner in war were generally reduced to slavery and there was no institutional mechanism to allow for their return and emancipation as a group.²⁹ The empire, as the direct inheritor of the Roman legal canon, by default adopted this position, with piecemeal additions and alterations being made over the course of the sixth century.³⁰

It would only be with the rise of Islam as a major power threatening the empire and routinely taking its people prisoner that the institution of ransoming back those taken captive in war and restoring them to their previous free status became a legal reality. The *Ekloga*, the legal code produced by Leo III in 726, was the first to state explicitly that prisoners of war could be ransomed back to the empire and be returned to their free status one way or another.³¹ This represents the product of a clear shift in the conception of those deemed to be part of the empire; the notion that one may possess a legal status that remains valid even when we are no longer subject to the laws of one's country of origin may seem obvious to us in our world of nation states, but this development in Roman law represented something new. Certain individuals, not just diplomats, could be seen as 'belonging' to the state and its associated legal system and, as such, maintain that connection even if they were no longer subject to its power. The

²⁹ Youval Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery and the Mediterranean World*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 29-30.

³⁰ Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery*, 32-33.

³¹ *Ekloga*, 8.2 ["Anyone who ransoms a free man captured in war by the enemy, and brings them into their own house, then if the man has the means to pay the price agreed between them, he shall be released as a free man. But if he does not have the means, the ransomer shall keep him as a hired labourer until he has paid what was agreed, with a clearly determined amount owed each year instead of wages to the ransomed to be calculated by the adjudicating magistrates."]; Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery*, 36.

Ekloga did not specify the identity of those to whom this law applied beyond people who were not slaves to begin with. However, the implication from other legislation in the same code is that those rightly 'belonging' in the Roman state ought to be both loyal to the empire and to the Christian faith, irrespective of whether they were originally free or not.

For instance, even slaves who were taken in war who then return to the empire (although they are not to be actively ransomed back) should be freed either immediately or after five years, depending on circumstances; by contrast, civilians who willingly join the enemy, and so abrogate their loyalty to the imperial state, but then return, will be enslaved (deserters from the army would be executed instead).³² Those taken prisoner by the enemy who then apostatise would be given over to the Church and the state to do as they see fit.³³ According to the law, then, which by its very nature needed to be as widely applicable as possible, those who deserved to be a part of the empire — either by being actively ransomed back or otherwise emancipated — consisted of those who both maintained their loyalty to the state by neither defecting nor deserting and maintained their Christian faith.

Exactly who, on the ground, was perceived as rightly belonging within the empire — of being Roman — was more subjective than the law codes would imply, however. In fact, the perception of which groups deserved to be Roman appears to have been restricted to Christians who had been part of the empire. During the prisoner exchange in which those taken captive at Amorion were ransomed back to the empire,

³² *Ekloga*, 8.4.1 [slaves returning freely], 8.4.2 [defectors], and 17.53 [deserters].

³³ *Ekloga*, 17.6.

we hear from the Muslim side that the Romans ransomed back to them some 500 *dhimmi* prisoners of war alongside the main Muslim contingent.³⁴

These *dhimmi* prisoners may well have been Jewish or even Zoroastrian, but it seems much more likely that they would have been Christians of some denomination, making it perplexing as to why they seem to have been kept as prisoners and then ransomed back in the same way as their Muslim counterparts. According to Roman law they could well have resided in the empire if freed and, whilst it is entirely possible that they would not have wanted to stay there, it remains that they were ransomed back to the Muslims rather than simply released. That the Roman authorities might have ‘ran out’ of Muslims to ransom also seems somewhat improbable given that, by any estimation, this was the first such prisoner exchange to have taken place for fifteen years and the Romans apparently had more than four times the number of Muslim prisoners available to ransom just ten years later (around 4,100 ransomed in 845 against 20,000 in captivity in 855).³⁵

The exact reasons for them being ransomed rather than freed cannot be discerned, but this episode does illustrate that the imperial authorities were willing to actively differentiate between the Christian population within the empire, who could rightly be considered Roman and worthy of protecting and bringing back, and those from outside the empire who could be rejected alongside the Muslim prisoners. Further complicating matters are those Muslims in Byzantine custody who converted to Christianity and were accepted into the empire; however, these are more properly dealt with under the rubric of those who were seen as actually, or potentially, changing their ethnic identity and status.

³⁴ al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk*, 34.1351-6.

³⁵ al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk*, 34.1351-6 and 1426-7; Frank Trombley, ‘The Arabs in Anatolia and the Islamic law of war (*fiqh al-jihād*)’, *Al-Masaq* 16:1 (2004), 153-55.

The general theme the examples discussed thus far has been the maintenance and even heightening of perceived differences between Romans on the one hand and Muslims on the other. Whether this be on an official, elite level, as seen through the lens of the cultural and intellectual competition expressed via official embassies between the two states, the more populist and broad-based presentation of the Forty-two Martyrs, in which the courageous Christian defenders of the empire meet their doom at the hands of the impious barbarians, or the legal and practical understanding of prisoners of war, painting certain groups of people as rightfully belonging within the empire and others worthy of rejection. Yet, as we shall see, the envisaged boundary between what or who could and could not be seen as Roman was not so impermeable as these examples would suggest. It is by examining those that crossed this boundary, both physically and conceptually, that the markers of Romanness and the use of Islam as a 'radical other' become even more apparent. It is to such cases that we now turn.

7.2: Becoming Roman?

The first of these are people or groups that either became Romans in the eyes of those in the empire, or who were at least in the process of being accepted as such. One of the more interesting and well-attested examples regards that of the Khurramite forces who migrated into the empire during the reign of Theophilos. The Khurramites, who are consistently referred to as 'Persians' in the Greek sources, were a religious-political movement, likely Zoroastrian in origin, who inhabited the areas known in Islamic sources as al-Jibāl and Azerbaijan (in what is now northwestern Iran) and who were led in several rebellions in the 820s and 830s by two leaders: Naṣr in al-Jibāl and Babek in

Azerbaijan.³⁶ At the instigation of the latter, a group of several thousand appear to have abandoned their rebellion against Baghdad and fled to the empire; Naṣr then likely converted to Christianity and his followers were enrolled into the Roman army and converted as well.³⁷ Naṣr seems to have had a son, named Theophobos, who was taken to Constantinople as a hostage and raised in the palace at the behest of Theophilos.³⁸

Reconstructing the sequence of events leading up to this and the reaction of those in the empire to the Khurramites is extremely difficult due to the highly contradictory information preserved in our surviving sources. Not only are different accounts of both Theophobos and the Khurramites given in different sources, but those of their actions whilst in the empire are also confused. For instance, the *Logothete Chronicle* preserves an account of Theophobos fleeing to the empire with forces from the caliphate, whereupon he was made a *patrikios* by Theophilos, married the emperor's sister, and the Khurramite forces enrolled as the 'Persian' *tourmai* and allowed to marry Roman women.³⁹ Theophanes Continuatus, on the other hand, gives two different versions of the same story. In one, Theophobos is born in Constantinople to either a 'king' from Persia or the illegitimate offspring of a tryst between a Persian king and a local woman. He comes to prominence when a 'Persian' embassy arrives in Constantinople seeking him out as one of royal blood; as a result, he is taken into the

³⁶ Mohamed Rekaya, 'Mise au point sur Théophobe et l'alliance de Babek avec Théophile', *Byzantion* 44 (1974), 46; al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk*, 33.1165; Theoph.Cont. 3.20.

³⁷ Genesis, 3.6; *Logothete Chronicle*, 130.8. That they converted at this point seems likely given that they seem to have been permitted to marry Roman women at the same time.

³⁸ The traditional argument to reconcile the discrepancies between the Arabic and Greek sources, first advanced by Grégoire, was that Naṣr and Theophobos were one and the same person, with the former changing his name to the latter upon his baptism: Henri Grégoire, 'Manuel et Théophobe ou la concurrence de deux monastères', *Byzantion* 9 (1934): 186-8; *passim* Rekaya, 'Mise au point'. This has been convincingly refuted by Signes Codoñer in favour of distinguishing the two and making one the otherwise unnamed father of the other, thereby reconciling the otherwise conflicting accounts of the deaths of Naṣr and Theophobos: Juan Signes Codoñer, *The Emperor Theophilos and the East, 829-842: Court and frontier in Byzantium during the last phase of iconoclasm*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 153-163.

³⁹ *Logothete Chronicle*, 130.8.

palace by Theophilos and educated. Meanwhile, the events found in the *Logothete's* account occur in conjunction with the other Khurramite leader, Babek, fleeing to Sinope with his own forces.⁴⁰

Genesios, for his part, repeats modified versions of the twin origins stories, the main difference being that it is Babek who ends up in Sinope with the Khurramites while searching for Theophobos' unnamed father, who had apparently been living there and "had by now become a Roman subject".⁴¹ Similarly contradictory accounts survive about the conduct of Theophobos and his Khurramite forces during the battle of Anzen in 838, which occurred immediately prior to the sack of Amorion that year. According to the *Logothete Chronicle* and Theophanes Continuatus, the emperor was surrounded by enemies during the battle and abandoned by the Khurramites, with the *domestikos* Manuel saving his life.⁴² On the other hand, Theophanes Continuatus also gives a remarkably similar account of a battle that had occurred beforehand, in which it was the regular Roman forces under the *domestikos* that fled from the Arabs, with the emperor protected on a hill by Theophobos and the Khurramites and eventually rescued by them under cover of darkness.⁴³

Henri Grégoire was the first to unpick the tangled web of claims and counterclaims made about Theophobos and the Khurramites, noting the factual inaccuracies of the account of their origins given by Theophanes Continuatus when cross-referenced with the Arabic and Syriac source base.⁴⁴ From these, we get confirmation of the flight of the Khurramite rebels under Naṣr to the empire, as well as

⁴⁰ Theoph.Cont. 3.19-20.

⁴¹ Genesios, 3.2-6.

⁴² *Logothete Chronicle*, 130.27; Theoph.Cont. 3.24.

⁴³ Theoph.Cont. 3.22.

⁴⁴ Henri Grégoire, 'Manuel et Théophobe ou la concurrence de deux monastères', *Byzantion* 9 (1934), 183-204

the eventual defeat of the separate rebellion under Babek and his execution by Caliph al-Mu‘taṣim. Thus, Babek’s appearance in Sinope was impossible, meaning that the flight of Naṣr was misidentified in the common source of *Genesios* and *Theophanes Continuatus*.⁴⁵ Grégoire also demonstrated the existence of multiple quasi-hagiographical traditions surrounding both *Theophobos* and *Manuel*, with the two main versions accounting for the apparent duplication of the battle of Anzen in *Theophanes Continuatus*: the historical battle is in fact the chronologically earlier one, in which *Theophobos* and the *Khurramites* save the emperor. The events presented as the ‘real’ battle of Anzen by both *Theophanes Continuatus* and the *Logothete Chronicle* originated in either a pro-*Manuel*, or anti-*Theophobos*, source.⁴⁶

This confusing jumble of different narratives is in fact of great value to the purposes of our investigation, since the contradictory histories of the *Khurramites* and their leader reveal something about their initial reception within the empire, their perceived Romanness, as well as later attempts to reconfigure these — either to deny their Romanness or to heighten it. If one were simply to read the ‘official’ version of events given by the chroniclers, stripping away the later fabrications, one would find a group of people and their leadership who were almost immediately accepted into the Roman fold: Christianised, enrolled into the service of the empire, given military lands, and allowed to marry Roman women.⁴⁷ Indeed, *Genesios* refers to this swift adoption as *Theophilos* “[enrolling] the Persians into the Roman state”; *Theophanes Continuatus*, in a section which seems to come from neither of the quasi-hagiographical traditions, states that *Theophilos*, after he inscribed the *Khurramites* on the army register and

⁴⁵ Vasiliev, *Byzance et les Arabes I*, 332; al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’riḫ al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk*, 33.1165.

⁴⁶ Grégoire, ‘Manuel et Théophobe’, 187-191.

⁴⁷ *Genesios*, 3.2; *Logothete Chronicle*, 130.8; *Theoph. Cont.* 3.22.

organised them into regiments, “commanded that they should be numbered amongst the Romans who went out to war against the Hagarenes”.⁴⁸ Moreover, once one identifies Naṣr as the unnamed father of Theophobos whom Babek supposedly sought out in Sinope, then he himself is described as “being one of those enumerated among the Romans”.⁴⁹

Looking beyond the macro-level view of the elites and state, a more nuanced picture appears. Our only near-contemporary Greek source which deals with the Khurramites is the ninth-century *Life of St. Athanasia of Aegina*, the early events of which take place sometime close to the fall of Crete to the Arabs in the mid-820s.⁵⁰ After she had been widowed once, Athanasia and her parents received word of an imperial edict “that unmarried women and widows should be given in marriage to foreign men”.⁵¹ No identity is given as to who these ‘foreign men’ might be, but the timing would certainly lead to the conclusion that this decree was the ‘permission’ that Theophilos gave to the Khurramites to marry Roman women. The writer of Athanasia’s hagiography evidently had very little interest in who these people were, the important fact was that they were not Romans and that the decree led to Athanasia being forced into a second marriage and away from her calling as a nun. While not hostile in any specific sense, the *Life* does suggest that away from the immediate clash against Islamic forces in Anatolia, in which the Khurramites were an indispensable part of the Roman army, these newcomers were as alien as they had been before coming to the empire and converting to Christianity.

⁴⁸ Genesisios, 3.3; Theoph. Cont. 3.21.

⁴⁹ Genesisios, 3.3 [“ὁ Βάβεκ εἰσήει [...] κατὰ πόλιν Σινώπην ἀνερευνῶν τὸν Θεοφόβου πατέρα, παρὰ Πέρσαις πάνυ τιμώμενον, Ῥωμαίων ὄντα τοῖς καταλόγοις”].

⁵⁰ *Life of Athanasia*, 1.

⁵¹ *ibid.* 2.

A similar view, although one which did actively seek to reject Romanness for the Khurramites, can be found in those elements of the ‘pro-Manuel’ source that found its way into the chronicles — a source which has been given a tentative *terminus post quem* not long after the events of 838.⁵² This source not only denied that Theophobos was the one to rescue Theophilos at Anzen, instead giving the role to Manuel, but also described the Khurramites in such a way that the *Logothete Chronicle* records Manuel “[seeing] that the emperor was among the Persians and understood that they were now inclined to betray him to the Arabs and, by doing so, be reconciled with the Arabs”.⁵³ Both they and Theophobos are then accused of treachery and launch a rebellion, but are swiftly reconciled since Theophilos “feared that the Persians might join the Arabs”.⁵⁴

The notion that the Khurramites, who had only five years earlier fled to the empire and been given lands and wives there, might have rebelled and joined the Arabs in 838/9 seems rather preposterous. They were not Muslims to begin with, had willingly converted to Christianity, and the last remnants of their former rebellion against the caliphate under Babek had been crushed the previous year.⁵⁵ Instead, the accusation of disloyalty is a smear levelled against them by the composer of the aforementioned ‘pro-Manuel/anti-Theophobos’ account, seeking to aggrandise its hero, Manuel, for having saved the emperor from a treacherous foreign force. The Khurramites, despite not being Muslims, hailed from Islamic lands and could evidently be easily depicted as untrustworthy non-Romans who would betray the empire to its enemies if it served them.

⁵² Grégoire, ‘Manuel et Théophobe’, 202-4.

⁵³ *Logothete Chronicle*, 130.27.

⁵⁴ *Logothete Chronicle*, 130.29.

⁵⁵ Rekaya, ‘Mise au point’, 59-60.

The mirror-image of this is found in a quasi-hagiography for Theophobos, identified by Grégoire.⁵⁶ This text, preserved in scattered references in the three chronicles, sought instead to emphasise the Romanness of its protagonist and his followers. It did this by magnifying on the qualities which we have repeatedly seen as being associated with Romanness, particularly in antithesis to Islam: Theophobos was thus “pious, and well-endowed with manly eloquence of the traditional kind”, a “noble youth”, “because of his Orthodoxy he was loved by the citizens no less than by the Persians”.⁵⁷ During the battle of Anzen, Theophobos and the Khurramites are braver and more steadfast than the regular Roman troops, staying by the emperor’s side and defending him alongside the imperial corps whilst the rest of the army “had deserted him”.⁵⁸ This mythic, saintly Theophobos is pious and loyal to a fault, maintaining his allegiance to Theophilos and the Roman state even though the emperor was a heretic and paranoid to the point that he had Theophobos put to death.⁵⁹

The fictitious origins story given to him also serves to emphasise his Romanness, especially when put in relation to the war against the Arabs. It is not so much the fact that he apparently hailed from Constantinople — the location seems to be one of convenience rather than chosen for a specific purpose — nor that he has illustrious heritage — since the version in which he is an illegitimate child seems to be that which the compiler of Theophanes Continuatus preferred, as it comes before the other version and is more detailed.⁶⁰ Instead, it is the fact that he is the scion of the royal house of the

⁵⁶ Grégoire, ‘Manuel et Théophobe’, 196.

⁵⁷ Genesisios, 3.2-3; *Logothete Chronicle*, 130.29 — this passage does follow on immediately from the apparent rebellion of the Khurramites and mention of Theophilos’ fears that they would join the Arabs, but its emphasis on the orthodox nature of Theophobos beliefs (as opposed to the iconoclast Theophilos) tallies well with other aspects of the pro-Theophobos source as enumerated by Grégoire.

⁵⁸ Theoph.Cont. 3.22.

⁵⁹ *Logothete Chronicle*, 130.43-44.

⁶⁰ Theoph.Cont. 3.19-20.

Persians, the Romans' ancient nemesis, and brings the old foe to the side of the Romans to fight the Arabs: the people who had caused the Persian royal house to die out, according to the version of events used here.⁶¹ This would not have been lost on the contemporary audience for the piece. The version in Theophanes Continuatus makes a direct connection between the destruction of the Persian royal house by the Arabs and the 'Persians' under Babek seeking out Theophobos and submitting themselves to Roman authority to be governed by him; moreover, there remained an awareness in educated circles of the status of the Persians as the empire's greatest threat in times past.⁶²

One thus finds a devout, loyal servant of the Roman state and church who fights against the Arabs and who brought about, in a sense, the spiritual union of Romans and Persians — the absorption of the ancient enemy into the Roman state to fight against the new one. Of course, such a laudatory reception was not afforded to Theophobos or his followers in reality. To those away from the war in Anatolia, he and they were simply foreigners; for their opponents, their origins outside of the empire made them an easy target for slander and accusations of disloyalty. It is striking, however, that a quasi-hagiographical account such as this could be produced and emphasise characteristics that would nullify any accusation that the Khurramite refugee was anything other than a Roman in all the ways that mattered.

In a sense, the various treatments of Theophobos and the Khurramites demonstrate the fluidity and flexibility of Roman identity in the minds of those in the empire in this period, and particularly with regard to the Islamic world and those who came from it. We see the Khurramites as fully Roman so far as the imperial

⁶¹ Theoph.Cont. 3.19.

⁶² Theoph. Cont. 3.19. On the persistence of the Persians in historical memory in this period see, for instance: Nicholas Mystikos, *Letters*, 5.122-43 and 25.92-6; Ps.-Lucian, *Philopatris*, 28.

administration was concerned, albeit maintaining their own 'micro'-ethnic category within the institutional framework of the army. Outside of this, they remained foreigners. Meanwhile, for those whose purposes it served to denigrate the newcomers and their leader, accusing them of wanting to betray the empire and return to the Arabs was a sure-fire way of tarnishing them and of denying their acceptance into wider Roman society; the exact opposite was true for the writers of the quasi-hagiography, whose purpose was precisely to show how integrated into Roman values and opposed to the Muslims Theophobos and his people were — loyal and pious even in the face of overwhelming odds in battle to defend a heretic emperor, bringing Roman and Persian together to fight a common foe.

While the Khurramites were neither Muslim nor Arab, there were certainly many instances in our period of Muslims either fleeing to the empire of their own volition and converting to Christianity, or otherwise of being taken prisoner and then converting and wishing to remain. That such individuals existed in relative abundance throughout the empire and across social strata can be deduced from a variety of evidence. Not least among these is the evidence we have from our Arabic source base for the fact that Muslims taken prisoner by the Romans who converted to Christianity had the option to remain there. According to Ṭabarī, before an arranged prisoner exchange to be held in 856, either the empress Theodora or a eunuch named Theoktistos made an offer to some of the Muslims held prisoner that they could convert and, cryptically, "be on an equal footing to those who had done so previously"; likewise, in 860, those Muslims

who had already converted to Christianity whilst in captivity were allowed by Michael III to return to the empire from the site of the prisoner exchange.⁶³

On the Roman side, we have the so-called ‘ritual of abjuration’ used by Muslims to anathematise their original faith, discussed in the previous chapter, as well as several other versions of similar rituals for accepting converts from Islam that survive in various *euchologia* manuscripts from across the empire.⁶⁴ Sadly, although we possess information pointing to the existence of communities with converts from Islam in the ninth and tenth centuries, we have no way of knowing how they were received by the existing community and how their place as Romans was understood, or indeed whether they were accepted as Romans at all. It is possible to surmise that, at least for the purposes of the imperial administration and those operating in it, such converts were to be accepted fully into the wider social fabric of the empire. Certainly, there is no indication to suggest to the contrary — that they somehow received ‘special treatment’ because of their conversion from Islam.⁶⁵

Thankfully, we are not entirely at the mercy of the assumption that seems to be made at the administrative level that converts from Islam ought to be treated in the same way as someone who was a Roman ‘from birth’. One illuminating individual case concerns the reception of perhaps the most well-known convert from Islam in Byzantium in this period, the Arab eunuch Samonas. Samonas appears at court during

⁶³ al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk*, 34.1426-7 [the veracity of this account is perhaps to be called into doubt, since the option given to the prisoners was ‘convert or be executed’; this event is not recorded in any extant Greek source and it closely parallels the events surrounding the deaths of the Forty-two Martyrs of Amorion a decade earlier, with the prisoners given the same choice and again in advance of a prisoner exchange] and 1449-51.

⁶⁴ Montet, ‘Un Rituel d’abjuration’, 145-163; Claudia Rapp, ‘The Vienna Euchologia Project: New Sources for the Social History of Byzantium’, paper presented at the *Late Antique and Byzantine Studies Seminar*, University of Oxford, 16th January 2019.

⁶⁵ A possible exception to this comes from various military manuals from the period that specify deserters be put under surveillance even after converting to Christianity, but this seems to only apply in a military context, such as: *De Re Strategica*, 41.1-11.

the second half of the reign of Leo VI, eventually reaching the office of *parakoimomenos* before falling from grace around 908 and dying at an unknown date.⁶⁶ The image of Samonas that we find in our source base mirrors that of Theophobos decades earlier, in which his origins in the Islamic world could be weaponised and used by political opponents in order to deny his status as a true Roman and instead portray him as a traitor to the empire and to Christianity.⁶⁷

One of the key incidents in the career of Samonas came in 904, when he is recorded as having fled from the palace heading east and was eventually apprehended at Siricha by Constantine Doukas before he could cross the Halys river (the modern Kızılırmak).⁶⁸ The exact circumstances and reasoning for Samonas' departure from the capital are unclear. The only testimony in the sources is given by Constantine Doukas, who alleged that Samonas was attempting to flee to Syria and which the emperor apparently accepted as the truth; although he then asked that Doukas lie to the Senate about the matter as he wished to be reconciled with Samonas.⁶⁹ Doukas failed to do this, resulting in Samonas being kept under house arrest for four months, but then being elevated to the rank of *patrikios* by the emperor.⁷⁰

The episode is confused and reads more as a political attack line against one of the emperor's confidants, accusing him of wanting to flee to the empire's enemies and even that he might only be a pseudo-Christian. The *Logothete Chronicle*, which is generally more hostile towards the Macedonian dynasty and its supporters, states that Samonas was "pretending that he had made the journey because of his faith in the

⁶⁶ Lennart Rydén, 'The Portrait of the Arab Samonas in Byzantine Literature', *Graeco-Arabica* 3 (1984), 101.

⁶⁷ *Logothete Chronicle*, 133.25 [c.f. Skyl. 7.17].

⁶⁸ *Logothete Chronicle*, 133.42-3; Skyl. 7.25; Theoph.Cont. 6.22.

⁶⁹ *Logothete Chronicle*, 133.43; Skyl. 7.25; Theoph.Cont. 6.22.

⁷⁰ *Logothete Chronicle*, 133.46.

Cross”, the implication being that his devotion to Christianity was a front — especially since the *Chronicle* later says that Samonas was “appointed *parakoimomenos* because of his support for the emperor in every lawless and evil action, and he began to plot against the Church”.⁷¹ It is interesting to note that the more pro-Macedonian account of Theophanes Continuatus merely states that Samonas “gave as an excuse that he had come for the sake of prayer”, having “taken refuge at the cross in Siricha”, a reason which is also implied to be untrue, but where the implications for Samonas’ beliefs are somewhat less severe — it is not his faith in Christianity that is in question, more that he would have travelled so far simply to pray.⁷² The difference is subtle, but significant.

The entire narrative is preposterous, given that its outline runs thus: Samonas had become a *protospatharios* and a friend of the emperor by informing Leo of an attempted coup (“thus the whole clan of Zaoutzes was wiped out because of Samonas”), yet only a few years later he attempted to flee to Syria, is apprehended, but then gets promoted less than a year later to *patrikios* and, eventually, *parakoimomenos*.⁷³ Despite this lack of credibility, it receives an importance in the sources that far outweighs Samonas’ own at the time, belying its political significance. Rather, like with Theophobos, the most effective way of discrediting Samonas, a former Muslim whose father was supposedly a prominent figure in Melitene (a major launching post for Arab raids on the empire in the tenth century), was to present him as wanting to abandon the empire and even the Christian faith and flee back to the land from whence he came.⁷⁴ The signs of this betrayal narrative appear not only in this incident, but also in the claim that Samonas sabotaged Leo’s plan to convince the exiled Andronikos Doukas to return

⁷¹ *Logothete Chronicle*, 133.42 and 50.

⁷² Theoph. Cont. 6.22.13-15 [εἰς τὸν ἐν τῷ Σιριχᾷ καταφεύγει σταυρόν, εὐχῆς δῆθεν χάριν ἐηλυθέναι προφασισάμενος].

⁷³ *Logothete Chronicle*, 133.27.

⁷⁴ For Samonas’ father, see: *Logothete Chronicle*, 133.58; Skyl. 7.31.

to the empire by telling the Arab messenger that he would be instigating the “ruin of Syria”; likewise the story that he told his father not to convert to Christianity, but to return to Tarsus since he “would rather come to [him]”.⁷⁵

The point of this discussion is not so much to argue that these accusations were false, but rather to highlight the fact that the methods used to discredit Samonas, or to present him as the victim of court intrigues, all connect back to his origins as a Muslim and his potential for disloyalty to the Romans in some shape or form. If one accepts all the charges laid against him, then he not only attempted to flee to the caliphate, but he also engineered the downfall of Andronikos Doukas and prevented his return, thus ‘saving Syria’ from ruin, colluded with Leo in damaging the church, and prevented his father from converting to Christianity on the basis that he was planning to return to him. Despite his conversion to Christianity and longstanding imperial service, Samonas appears to have never quite been able to shake off a lingering suspicion on the part of those at court that he might one day apostatise and betray the Romans thanks to his Islamic origins.

These cases, the Khurramites, Samonas, and other Muslims settling in the empire, illustrate the heterogeneous nature of Romanness and the competing, sometimes contradictory, interpretations of it that could lead to certain individuals or groups being perceived as Romans or ‘not-Romans’ at different times, under different circumstances, and according to different people. What they have in common are the general features understood to determine what being a Roman meant and how an association with the Muslim world, however tenuous, could be used to undermine it. Whilst we sadly cannot know how most Muslims and other non-Christians that came

⁷⁵ *Logothete Chronicle*, 133.56 and 58; Skyl. 7.29 and 31.

into the empire from the Islamic world were treated, nor how their identity was understood by either them or their peers beyond the limited information available to us, we can see from the more elite-level examples discussed above the potential problems of integration and acceptance into an identity whose parameters were constantly shifting.

7.3: How (Not) to be Roman

Our final category of analysis in examining the complex set of interactions between Romanness and the 'otherness' of the Islamic world is that of those who were seen as abrogating their Roman identity by converting to Islam or otherwise demonstrating their loyalty to the caliphate over the empire. It stands to reason that the perception of these individuals was highly subjective, and we do not have any surviving testimony from the perspective of any individual or group which found themselves in such a position. We are thus unable to determine whether they themselves saw their status as Romans as being forfeited, but we can deduce from the reaction in the empire to their actions how Romanness was defined in relation to the 'radical other' of Islam, by focusing on what specific aspects of Romanness these people were seen to have betrayed. Four individual cases may be isolated for study: the first two demonstrate a degree of flexibility toward this attitude, with the people involved understood differently depending on various political and historical circumstances. The latter deal with the issue of forfeiting Romanness in an absolute sense, although again these cannot be divorced from or understood without the context in which they occurred.

Both of the following cases demonstrate considerable similarities in their causes and, ultimately, in their portrayal in the surviving sources, although not in the outcome

for the respective individuals. The first concerns the *domestikos* Manuel, who was tied to Theophobos, and Andronikos Doukas, a general during the reign of Leo VI who has also been mentioned above in connection to Samonas. Both men were apparently forced to flee from the empire to the caliphate, both were warmly received there, and both were the subject of attempts by the authorities in Constantinople to secure their return.

In the case of Andronikos, the cause of his flight is relatively straightforward, and was, supposedly, connected to political machinations set in motion by Samonas in retribution for Andronikos' son, Constantine, having foiled his flight.⁷⁶ Andronikos, his family, and followers spent some time in Baghdad before Leo VI's attempt to contact him (foiled again by Samonas) resulted in them being imprisoned and compelled to convert to Islam before they eventually died there.⁷⁷ The cause of Manuel's flight and even its dating are subject to speculation, due to the nature of the sources that were used by both the *Logothete Chronicle* and Theophanes Continuatus. As Grégoire pointed out, the sequence of events given by Theophanes Continuatus that puts his exile after the battle of Anzen is impossible, since Manuel is reported by the *Logothete* to have died of his wounds shortly after the battle. It is instead the result of the pro-Manuel source's attempt to heighten the heroic nature of its protagonist by having him save the heretic emperor's life, only to then be forced to escape execution by that same man.⁷⁸

This leaves us with two possibilities, either Manuel fled during the early reign of Theophilos, returning some point before 838 as a result of an embassy conducted by John the Grammarian; or he fled during the reign of Theophilos' predecessor, Michael II, (possibly in connection with the failed rebellion of Thomas 'the Slav'), again returning

⁷⁶ *Logothete Chronicle*, 133.52; Skyl. 7.29.

⁷⁷ *Logothete Chronicle*, 133.56; Skyl. 7.29; al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḫ al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk*, 38.2276-8.

⁷⁸ Grégoire, 'Manuel et Théophobe', 199-202; *Logothete Chronicle*, 130.28; Theoph.Cont. 3.25.

thanks to an embassy of John the Grammarian.⁷⁹ The date of Manuel's flight does have important implications for establishing the chronology of events during the reign of Theophilos, but it is peripheral to our concerns here: what is important is that he did in fact flee to the caliphate and spent what appears to be several years there serving the caliph and putting down a rebellion in Khurasan, before his eventual return in time to fight at Anzen in 838.⁸⁰

We therefore have two prominent figures in the elite of the empire who defected to the Muslims, one of whom eventually converted to Islam (albeit under duress) and another who actively fought in the name of the caliph for a time. Given the hostility towards the Islamic 'other' that has been the hallmark of this discussion, one would expect to find an unremittingly hostile depiction of them both as traitors, yet the opposite is generally true. The positive portrayal of Manuel, for instance, who was "conspicuous for his courage", "the noble Armenian ... whose piety was even greater than [his bravery]", can be largely put down to the oft-mentioned quasi-hagiographical account from which the chroniclers seem derive their information for the careers of both Manuel and Theophobos, no doubt facilitated by the fact that there is no evidence to suggest that Manuel ever converted to Islam during his time in the caliphate.⁸¹

His return to the empire, supposed feats during the battle of Anzen, and the need to juxtapose his sacrifice defending the empire with the inconstancy and paranoia of the iconoclast Theophilos all contribute to Manuel being lauded. Indeed, his service to the caliphate is softened by a remark that he was leading Roman prisoners of war during

⁷⁹ Grégoire, 'Manuel et Théophobe', 199; Magdalino, 'The road to Baghdad', 196-199; John Rosser, 'John the Grammarian's Embassy to Baghdad and the Recall of Manuel', *Byzantinoslavica* 37 (1976): 168-171. Dating the flight to Michael II's reign would seem to make more sense and would explain why Theophanes Continuatus manages to give an account of Manuel's positions under Michael I and Leo V, but is completely silent about him during Michael II's reign: *Theoph. Cont.* 3.19.

⁸⁰ *Logothete Chronicle*, 130.16; *Theoph. Cont.* 3.25.

⁸¹ *Genesios*, 3.2; *Logothete Chronicle*, 130.16; *Theoph. Cont.* 3.19.

his campaign in Khurasan, and not Muslim soldiers.⁸² Likewise, the positive portrayal of Andronikos Doukas is likely to do with the need by the same sources to denigrate and discredit Samonas and his plots; the Doukai are thus the victims in this and Andronikos' conversion is neutralised by his betrayal to the caliph by Samonas, his imprisonment, torture, and eventual death. Their rehabilitation is thus the product of later concerns on the part of either the chroniclers or the sources from which they drew their information in the mid-tenth century.

Virtually nothing survives of any contemporary reaction to the defections of either Manuel or Andronikos on the Roman side outside of these chronicle narratives; however, there are glimpses which point to an understanding that both men had in some way forfeited their right to be considered Romans as a direct result of them having fled to the caliphate. For Manuel this comes, surprisingly, in Theophanes Continuatus: during the events following John the Grammarian's embassy and Manuel's return to the empire, he is quoted as having written to the *strategos* of Cappadocia, saying cryptically "When I arrive there, sending the Saracen invaders off to another place, I myself shall fall in with the ambushade and return to the Roman customs".⁸³ That last phrase, 'return to the Roman customs', is difficult to qualify, especially given the otherwise seamless transition back to the empire that Manuel makes in the narrative and the fact that he (so far as we know) had no need to reconvert to Christianity. The total absence of any qualifying information ensures that disentangling what these 'Roman customs' were in this context is impossible; the only logical supposition that can be made is that Manuel, or at least the source which provided this particular anecdote, was referring to his subsequent assumption of various imperial

⁸² Theoph. Cont. 3.25.

⁸³ Theoph. Cont. 3.26 [ὅταν ἐκεῖσε δὴ γένωμαι, τὰ μὲν τῶν Σαρακηνῶν κοῦρσα ἐπ' ἄλλον δὴ τινα τόπον ἐξελαύνειν ποιήσας μετὰ τοῦ λόχου δὴ γένωμαι καὶ πρὸς τὰ Ῥωμαίων ἔθη ἐπαναδράμω αὐτός].

titles and offices as well as the loyalty and service to the empire that went along with these — contrasting with his previous position in the service of the enemy and thus marking a ‘return’ to ‘Roman customs’.

For Andronikos Doukas we have even less to go on, and would have nothing but for the chance survival of a contents page in a fragmentary manuscript produced in the tenth century which lists a series of poems, one of which was entitled “Λέοντος δεσπότης εἰς Ἀνδρόνικον τὸν ἀποστάτην” — which may indicate that there was an awareness in the empire at the time of Andronikos having forsaken his Christian faith and, by extension, his connection to the empire and its Roman identity.⁸⁴ Meagre though this evidence may be, it does serve as a corrective to the otherwise featureless narrative accounts of Manuel and Andronikos in the chronicles, which would have them flit from empire to caliphate and (for Manuel) back again without much in the way of consequences for how they were perceived by the population at the time. These all too brief embers of an alternative perspective show both that there were some consequences to identity from abandoning the empire for the caliphate, even if forced, and the ultimately subjective nature of how Romanness could be defined depending on circumstances.

Our sources are rather starker in their assessment on forsaking Romanness in our final two examples. The later of the two, and the one for which we have far less information, concerns the events surrounding a certain Themel, whom, we are told in his only documented historical appearance, was a presbyter in a village called Herakleos. Themel was stripped of his ministry by the local bishop for having interrupted his liturgy and attacked and killed a group of Arab raiders from Tarsus

⁸⁴ Carlo Gallavotti, ‘Note su testi e scrittori di codici greci’, *Rivista di Studi Bizantini e Neoellenici* 24 (1987): 42. The alternative reading of ἀποστάτης is that it simply means ‘rebel’, rather than ‘apostate’.

whilst wearing his vestments and wielding a *semantron*.⁸⁵ Cast out by the bishop, he defected to the Arabs, renounced Christianity, and became one of very same raiders marauding the borderlands of the empire. The account ends by stating that “It would be unpardonable to set down in writing the atrocities he committed”.⁸⁶

This episode is shrouded in mystery, not least because it only appears in the *Synopsis Historiōn* produced by John Skylitzes in the later eleventh century, and no date is given for when it took place beyond the fact that it is supposed to have occurred during the sole reign of Constantine VII (945-959). Its significance lies not in Themel’s actions, but rather in Skylitzes’ reaction to them and the fact that we are made aware of these events at all. As pointed out by Bernard Flusin, the *Synopsis Historiōn* is tightly focused on events in Constantinople, the actions of emperors, or otherwise events with a direct impact on the imperial court — Skylitzes, in his abridging process, tended to cut out any extraneous details that can otherwise be found in the chronicles that overlap with the scope of his own or from which he drew his information.⁸⁷ This makes any details of particular interest when they do not meet these criteria for inclusion, a category into which Themel certainly falls.

What is especially striking about this story is that it has no parallels in any other surviving text, unlike some of the other ‘asides’ that Skylitzes decided were worthy of inclusion in his work. For instance, a notice about the arrival of a pair of conjoined twins in Constantinople can be found in Skylitzes’ account of the reign of Romanos I Lekapenos. It is otherwise totally unrelated to the narrative (it is not even used as a portent), but was included thanks to it being embedded in a passage taken from the

⁸⁵ Skyl. 11.8.

⁸⁶ *ibid.*

⁸⁷ Bernard Flusin, ‘Re-writing history: John Skylitzes’ *Synopsis historion*’, in John Wortley (ed.), *John Skylitzes: A Synopsis of Byzantine History 811-1057*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 24.

Logothete Chronicle.⁸⁸ Themel, on the other hand, is nowhere to be found in any other extant source. It would be a thankless task to attempt to determine the source that originally contained the anecdote; more important is why it managed to escape Skylitzes' chopping block. The answer must be sought in the concluding remark made by Skylitzes himself and what impact the incident might have had on any Roman reader coming across it. The passage, much like the anecdote about the conjoined twins, seems to be included purely for its shock value. For any Christian, any Roman, let alone a priest, to apostatise and go over to the very enemy who caused death and destruction to the empire and its people, was a total rejection of any values that could be described as 'Roman'. His defence of his flock against the Tarsiote raiding party counts for nothing in the light of his subsequent actions, which Skylitzes magnifies in their horror by leaving them entirely up to the imagination of the reader, deeming them too appalling to put down in writing for posterity. Whether Themel was a real individual, or a product of rhetoric does not diminish the importance of this short anecdote in painting a picture of the rejection of Romanness — a monstrous event, an aberration akin to the twins.

Our final example is considerably better attested and is referenced in a variety of sources: the rebellion of Thomas 'the Slav' during the reign of Michael II, or rather the treatment of its eponymous figure. In an article published in the inaugural edition of *Travaux et Mémoires*, Paul Lemerle established the various conflicting accounts of Thomas' life and conduct, as well as his rebellion; drawing attention to the fact that the most widely reported version of events derives from the account given by the imperial government of Michael II, concocted shortly after the end of the rebellion.⁸⁹ We therefore possess two vastly different accounts of Thomas, one which can be considered

⁸⁸ *Logothete Chronicle*, 135.82; Skyl. 10.38.

⁸⁹ Paul Lemerle, 'Thomas le Slave', *TM* 1 (1965): 272.

somewhat closer to the historical reality and which is largely positive towards him; the other created to serve the purposes of his opponent.⁹⁰ The differences in how Thomas is depicted in one when compared to the other demonstrates perfectly how an association with Islam and its practitioners could be used to definitively disassociate an individual and their supporters from even the broadest conceptualisation of Roman identity.

In this regard, and particularly considering the epithet usually given to him, it is important to establish that Thomas was, or at least could be, seen as a Roman in the first place. This can be done with even a relatively brief examination of the various versions of the ‘positive’ account of the rebellion, in which Thomas is described as “hailing from the land of the Romans” and “loved by all for his courage, and no less for his cheerful disposition and affability”, and he was, in reference to Leo V, “also an Armenian by descent and no less a brave and restless man”.⁹¹ Insofar as this version can be deemed ‘pro-Leo’ and ‘anti-Michael’, the association made between Thomas and Leo, in which the former is the loyal and committed servant of the latter and who began his rebellion in retribution for Leo’s murder by Michael, definitively paints Thomas as fundamentally Roman in the normative sense — he is Christian, virtuous, loyal to the empire. There is nothing in the presentation to suggest an alternative interpretation. Moreover, allusions to a ‘barbarian’ origin for Thomas all come from later versions of the story reported in

⁹⁰ The arguments made by Signes Codoñer, *contra* Lemerle, that we ought to distinguish between two different Thomases that were conflated by the sources are ultimately unsatisfying: Signes Codoñer, *Emperor Theophilos*, 40-45, 188-94. Although Signes Codoñer is likely correct that Thomas’ rebellion began during the reign of Leo V, this does not mean *a priori* that the rest of the information in the ‘official’ account is also true, nor that the ‘alternative’ version is necessarily false. Indeed, neither account likely represents ‘reality’, as both have an agenda in discrediting or justifying the rebellion. The claim by Signes Codoñer that Michael the Syrian’s account of Thomas provides independent corroboration for the ‘official’ narrative is unsupported. He states that, despite writing significantly later, Michael’s source for the rebellion was the contemporary work of Dionysios of Tel Mahrē; however, the absence of any reference to Thomas or the rebellion in the *Chronicle to 1234*, which also followed Dionysios for this period, belies this: Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, 3.12.9; *cf. Chron.1234*, 200-10 — where Thomas’ rebellion ought to be recorded; Signes Codoñer, *Emperor Theophilos*, 192.

⁹¹ Genesisios, 1.6 and 2.2; *Logothete Chronicle*, 129.4; Theoph. Cont. 2.11.

the tenth century. The two earliest accounts, the ‘official’ version produced under Michael II and that in George the Monk’s *Chronicle* that follows it, either make no comment on Thomas’ genealogy, or describe him as simply having “lowly and obscure origins”.⁹²

The contrast with the ‘negative’ account could not be starker. Thomas, instead of being a loyalist supporter of Leo V, is instead reduced to the position of almost an ‘anti-Roman’. In the earliest surviving record of this version, given in a letter from Michael II to the Frankish king Louis the Pious, the origins of the rebellion are presented thus:

Igitur tempore Leonis, qui ante nos hoc imperium tenuit, quidam homo, Thomas nomine, antiqui diaboli discipulus et eius operum promptus perpetrator fuit. Is, cum esset cuidam ex maximis patriciis subiectus, tempore, quo Herena imperium tenuit, fraudem operatus est in dominum suum, scilicet concubuit cum uxore domini sui. Cum haec res ad notitiam pervenisset, profugit in Persas, timens legalem subire sententiam. Qui cum illic moras fecisset a diebus praefatae Herenae usque ad praedictum Leonem, fidem Christi abnegans et hoc modo proditor fidei Christianae fuit, quo facilius potuisset multos infideles Sarracenorum et ceterarum aliarum gentium ad suam perducere voluntatem, suggerebatque eis, quod ipse esset Constantius, filius saepe dictae Herenae imperatricis, et quod alter pro eo esset oculis privatus et ipse inlesis oculis sanus evasisset.⁹³

Rather than a noble, courageous, virtuous, man, Thomas is instead a student of the Devil: an adulterer who fled from justice, masqueraded as the murdered son of an empress, apostatised from Christianity, and gathered various other infidels, but

⁹² George the Monk, *Chronicle*, 793.10-12 [“[ὁ Θωμᾶς] ἐκ γὰρ τῆς Ῥωμαίων γῆς ὀρμώμενος δυσγενῆς τε καὶ ἀφανῆς πρὸς τὰ μέρη τῆς Συρίας ἀφίκετο”]; *MGH*, Conc. 2.2, 44a: 475-6.

⁹³ *MGH*, Conc. 2.2, 44a: 475-80 [“Therefore, in the time of Leo, who held this imperial power before us, there was a certain man named Thomas, a student of the ancient devil and an eager perpetrator of his works. He, after having been a servant to someone from among the greatest patricians, committed deceit against his lord at that time when Irene held the imperial power. That is to say, he slept with the wife of his lord. After this had come to be known, he fled to the Persians, fearing that he would be subjected to a legal sentence. He, after spending that period of time from the days of Irene up to that of the aforementioned Leo, renounced the faith of Christ and in this way was a traitor to the Christian faith, by which means he was easily able to win over many infidels of the Saracens and of certain other peoples to his cause. He convinced them that he was Constantine himself, son of the oft-mentioned empress Irene, and that another was deprived of his eyes instead of him and that he had avoided being blinded and was healthy.”]

specifically Muslims, to attack the empire. He is an enemy of the Christian faith just as much for his sinful actions as for his apostasy, and he is an enemy of the empire for his collusion with the Muslims and his wholly false claim on the imperial throne. This portrayal was repeated, with slight modification, as the ‘official’ account of the rebellion.⁹⁴ It culminates with Thomas, having lived in the caliphate for twenty five years, making a deal with the caliph to deliver the Roman empire to him, thus leading to him being crowned emperor in Antioch and beginning his invasion of the empire.⁹⁵

It is a wilful misrepresentation of what seems to have really occurred. Moreover, one that drew together strands from earlier rebellions that also elicited help from powers to the east: such as the abortive rebellion of Saborios, whose appeal to Mu‘āwiyā led to the first Arab siege of Constantinople in 668, and, before that, the man who claimed to be Theodosios, son of Emperor Maurice, who had miraculously survived the murder of his family by Phokas, and fled to Khusrow.⁹⁶ The latter was even supposed to have been crowned emperor at Ctesiphon, much like Thomas was supposedly crowned at Antioch, and used as a pretext for the Sasanian invasion of the empire.⁹⁷ In reality, Thomas arranged a treaty between him and the caliph to prevent an invasion during what amounted to a civil war in the empire.⁹⁸ This was twisted to instead present Thomas as a scion of the caliphate and his rebellion a calculated attempt to destroy the Romans. It is, in short, a deliberate and targeted character assassination, using the common view of what constituted being Roman to destroy an opponent. To strip them so completely of any qualities of Romanness in favour of an association with the

⁹⁴ *Genesisios*, 2.4; *Logothete Chronicle*, 129.4; *Theoph.Cont.* 2.10.

⁹⁵ *ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Khuzistan Chronicle*, 20.20-1 [=Geoffrey Greatrex and Samuel Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars AD 363 — 630*, vol.2, 232] [ps.-Theodosios]; *Theoph. Chron.* AM 6159 [Saborios]. Howard-Johnston, *Last Great War*, 17-18.

⁹⁷ *Khuzistan Chronicle*, 20.20-1.

⁹⁸ Lemerle, ‘Thomas le Slave’, 287-8.

enemies of the empire and Christianity that a rebellion in reaction to a palace coup instead morphed in historical memory into an existential threat to the Roman world order. Stripping Thomas of any claim to being a Roman through a complete association with a constructed idea of the Islamic 'other'.⁹⁹

That this portrayal resonated beyond the elite circle in which it was initially formulated can be seen from the dominance of this depiction of the rebellion of Thomas 'the Slav' in later historiography. It appears first in the chronicle of George the Monk, then finds its way into all three of the main tenth-century chronicles that cover the reign of Michael II, despite that emperor's support for iconoclasm and, consequently, his generally negative image in the later historical record.¹⁰⁰ In addition to the chronicles, it is found even in more 'accessible' or popular forms of literature: the mid-ninth century *Life of Ss David, Symeon, and George of Lesbos* parrots the 'negative' version of events; and, in some ways, goes further in strengthening the connection between Thomas and the Islamic world by implying that his forces came directly from the Arabs, rather than the (implausibly) diverse cast that constitutes the rebellion in most of the other accounts.¹⁰¹ The all-pervasiveness of the false account of Thomas rebellion speaks of the effectiveness of its choice of denigrating an individual through the denial of Romanness, of their Christian faith and place in the empire, achieved by attacking their status directly, but chiefly by aggregating them with the ultimate force of otherness and best expression of what could never be considered 'Roman'.

⁹⁹ Koutrakou, 'The Image of the Arabs', 220.

¹⁰⁰ Lemerle, 'Thomas le Slave', 261.

¹⁰¹ Genesios, 2.2 ["He assembled his famous army, which was composed of Agarenoi, Indians, Egyptians, Assyrians, Medes, Abasgians, Zichians, Iberians, Kabeirians, Slavs, Huns, Vandals, Getai, and all those who had partaken of the abomination of Mani, as well as Lazoi, Alans, Chaldians, Armenians, and other peoples of all sorts"]; Lemerle, 'Thomas le Slave', 261-2; *Life of Ss David, Symeon, and George of Lesbos*, 17; Theoph.Cont. 2.12.

The discourse surrounding the relationship between Romanness and Islam reveals the complexities inherent with the study of identity, how membership of a group could fluctuate based upon the prejudices, political considerations, and the circumstances that the individual or group found themselves in. The key aspect of this, however, is the way in which the constructed image of Islam that had developed over the course of the eighth and ninth centuries served as a mirror to reflect back Romanness in its most basic form. The framing of Islam as opposed to the existence of the empire and its people, both politically and religiously, meant that interacting with it necessitated a reckoning on the part of the individual or group on their own sense of Romanness, and the same on the part of external observers. Islam as the 'radical other' to Romanness forced a crystallisation of latent assessments of Roman group identity during these moments of interaction and reveals the degree to which it was predicated on the combination of political loyalty to the empire and Christian religious identity. It is these qualities that those considered 'Romans' were assessed by as they interacted with the Islamic world: whether they were ambassadors or prisoners.

The 'otherness' of Islam made crossing the boundary from it to Romanness particularly problematic. As the cases of Theophobos, the Khurramites, and Samonas show, their origins from the Islamic world could be used to reject their claims to have joined the Roman one. It was precisely the key qualities of Romanness, and its perceived conflict with Islam, that formed the basis for these attacks, focusing on accusations of disloyalty to the emperor and possible apostasy. Conversely, loyalty to the empire and adherence to the Christian faith were the qualities highlighted by accounts that aimed to stress that these people 'belonged' to the Roman world, just as they were the main criteria that prisoners of war had to maintain to be ransomed back as free Romans. Going over to join with the Muslims was a monstrous act of betrayal, whether it really

happened (as with the priest Themel) or whether it was invented to blacken someone's reputation for posterity (as with Thomas 'the Slav). As ever, though, these characterisations were not immutable. The cases of Andronikos Doukas and Manuel show that it was possible to be rehabilitated and accepted back into Roman society even if one went to serve in Islamic armies or apostatised from Christianity, provided one was important or useful enough to those in the empire controlling the historical narrative; or, crucially, if there was a convenient person or group with stronger connections to the Islamic world who could be scapegoated – Samonas in Andronikos' case, Theophobos in Manuel's. Evidently, and as one might expect, it was more palatable for someone to be brought back into the fold as a Roman than it was to be accepted as a Roman in the first place.

The Islamic 'other', characterised over the preceding two centuries as the antithesis of Romanness at its most basic level, functioned in an active and a passive capacity within Roman identity discourse. Active, in the sense that it could be used by those in a position to control the discourse to delegitimise the claims of their opponents to belonging to the empire's common identity; passive, in that interaction with the Islamic 'other' served to highlight the very assumptions about what constituted a 'Roman' that have preoccupied this study from the beginning. Interaction with the Islamic world created a useful mirror to reflect Romanness back on those who claimed it as their identity, maintaining its coherency in the face of immense cultural and societal changes, and ensuring that it remained as relevant in the tenth century as it did in the seventh.

8. Understanding Romanness and Islam

8.1: *Roman Groupness*

This study has aimed to integrate current sociological and anthropological trends into the study of Roman identity in Byzantium to move beyond the more rigid classification systems favoured in the debate over whether Romanness was an ethnic or a premodern national identity.¹ Such discussions tend towards fitting Romanness within an ideal-type system that, however sophisticated it may be, inevitably fails to address the inherent complexities and contradictions in how identity is presented. In doing so, the study has focused on the sociological concept of 'groupness', which considers the internal contradictions in the way that historical actors conceive of their own group identity and which is interwoven throughout the analysis.² This approach recognises the mutability of identification schema, the ways in which other people and groups can be considered both part of the group and separate from it, depending on context.

Such fluidity makes the group identity unstable and thus not particularly useful as a tool of historical analysis; since it would require an individualised interpretation of what 'Romanness' was deemed to constitute on a source-by-source, case-by-case basis.³ Instead of presenting every inherent contradiction and possible permutation of Romanness according to the source base, this study has sought to identify and examine Romanness in its broadest form. Identifying not the 'perfect' Roman, but rather the common denominator that the greatest number of sources might agree on being Roman.

¹ See Introduction, 1.1 and 1.2.

² Brubaker, *Ethnicity*, 11-2; Jenkins, *Rethinking*, 11.

³ Kaldellis, *Romanland*, 81-3.

In essence, to find who could be, rather than who was, considered Roman at any given moment.

Consequently, this study has adopted two distinct approaches to addressing how to identify the principles of Roman identity in Byzantium. The first was to identify the key features of what constituted Romanness in the minds of those who produced our written source materials. A secondary aim was to demonstrate the inherent fluidity and contradictions of the collective identity, to show that the prejudices displayed in our sources under some circumstances may disappear under others; and, thus, that the most appropriate way to understand Romanness in the empire is to examine what its maximal boundaries were.⁴ Recognising the fact that the boundaries of Roman group identity were flexible and could expand to include, or contract to exclude, different groups of people based on different perceived characteristics under different circumstances. Nevertheless, the core values of the identity remain constant across the sources and are expressed when an external 'other' is present in the discourse that could not be thought of as Roman.

This is the approach in chapters two and three, which took a synchronic look at Romanness in the period of roughly from 550 to 650 and analysed texts from across the full social and geographical reach of the empire, as it then existed. Through a presentation and analysis of these sources, it was demonstrated that the core value of Roman group identity was the synthesis of Christian faith and imperial power that had developed in the empire in the preceding centuries: Christianity and an identification with the imperial power based in Constantinople were the *sine qua non* of Romanness. Other factors, such as doctrine or language, could, and were, used by writers to

⁴ See chapter three in the present work.

distinguish others from their own interpretation of Romanness, but these were among the mutable characteristics of the group identity. They were values factored into the fluctuating boundaries of the identity: if one individual or group considered Chalcedonianism or miaphysitism as indicative of Romanness, then the conceptual boundaries of the group would reflect that. However, such boundaries and assumptions could change; the underlying principle that to be Roman was to be Christian and a member of the empire remained constant.

By moving away from an approach that reifies the assumptions made by some sources about Romanness and not by others, we gain a more nuanced perspective on the nature of the empire's collective identity. This approach does not privilege the normative output of the imperial centre and it embraces the contradictions inherent in group identity. It also moves away from the debate on Roman ethnic or national identity that often fixates on an either/or understanding of identity: either Roman or not Roman; as opposed to *might* be Roman for someone at some time, but might be something else for another person or at another time. This approach does not, however, result in an amorphous, unusable conception of Roman groupness. Rather, it allows us to better see the identity discourse in the empire and its changes over time. Once we accept the basic principles of Romanness — the implicit assumptions in the sources — then we can deduce those times when additional qualities were added into the equation and analyse the circumstances that these occurred. For instance, under what circumstances did a Chalcedonian Greek-speaker consider a miaphysite Syriac-speaker a fellow Roman, and when did they not? It also allows for diachronic analysis of the fundamentals of Romanness: when, if ever, does the Christian aspect of Romanness evolve into a specifically 'orthodox' Chalcedonian one? When, if ever, does Greek become the definitive 'Roman language', such that non-Greek speakers are considered

non-Roman by association?⁵ Some of the practical implications of this approach towards Roman identity for the study of the empire have been examined in chapter six in relation to Islam, but there is much more that can be done that falls outside of the scope of this thesis.

8.2: *Romanness and Islam*

The second approach was to identify the ways in which the image of the 'other' was constructed amongst self-described Romans. This process acted as a mirror for reflecting back an understanding of Romanness, since the image of the other is ultimately constructed based upon a negative impression of the perceived values of the individuals in-group.⁶ As such, the development of an 'other' is indicative of subconscious assumptions and conscious choices on the part of the individual, which both draw upon an existing discourse and help shape it in turn. The development of Islam as a competing religious system and the spread of this knowledge to the empire thus helped to reinforce existing ideas about Romanness and its relationship with the Christian faith. Furthermore, while awareness of Islam influenced the development of Roman identity, that identity also shaped the image of Islam and its practitioners that formed in the empire's discourse. Islam was deliberately constructed in opposition to ideas of Romanness, its features misrepresented and caricatured in order to position it as an 'other' whose religious and political/military hostility towards the Romans served to bolster their own sense of collectiveness.⁷ This was addressed in chapters three

⁵ For a discussion of this see chapter 3.4 in the present work and Kaldellis, *Romanland*, 102-5.

⁶ Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*.

⁷ See chapter 6.3.

through six, which took a more diachronic approach and focused on the construction of an Islamic 'absolute other' within the empire's discourse over the course of the second half of the seventh century, into the eighth, and culminating in the ninth and tenth centuries.

This was achieved by assessing three key areas. The first was analysing the existing strategies of understanding the 'other' within Roman society, particularly the way in which the Persian 'other' had been constructed in previous centuries and especially in relation to the last Roman-Sasanian war, as well as the ways in which preconceived ideas of pre-Islamic Arabs combined with attitudes towards Romaness to shape the initial reaction in the empire to the conquests. The second was to understand the internal evolution of Islam itself and what impact this may have had on the creation of an Islamic 'other' in the Roman world. This was necessary in order to adequately address the final aim, which was to analyse the image of Islam that was created and perpetuated in the empire over the ninth and tenth centuries, which was a product both of what information was available to those in the empire about Islam and the interaction of this with preconceived ideas about Romaness. The result was an image of the Islamic 'other' that was filtered through the lens of Romaness, being shaped by how Romaness was perceived and used to highlight aspects of the common identity of the empire.

8.3: Romaness as Tool for Analysis

Our study of the materials relating to Romaness in the sixth and seventh centuries demonstrated that, whilst Roman identity could be constructed on the basis of manifold different characteristics and Romaness restricted based on any number of these

(language and doctrinal affiliation being the most common and prominent), its fundamental qualities revolved around a perceived adherence to the Christian faith and a sense of attachment to the political construct of Roman imperial power. These two qualities, which also (not coincidentally) formed the bedrock of Roman political ideology, are expressed as the *sine qua non* for Romanness in material from across the empire, in multiple languages, and from multiple religious communities - as well as from outside the empire - when discussing aspects of belonging to a wider Roman cultural body. We must therefore be cautious when examining other perceived markers of Romanness, such as following Chalcedonian Christianity or speaking Greek, to ensure that these are not presented as fixed determiners of whether an individual or group was, or could, be understood as being Roman. Rather, when such limiting factors appear in our sources, they should be engaged with on an individual level and examined within the context of that source's production to identify the reasoning for constricting the boundaries of Romanness.

Recognising the foundational principles of Romanness and the ways in which Islam was established as a foil to them can help give us better insight into the way in which the empire, as a geostrategic actor, interacted with the caliphate and its successor states, as well as how individuals and groups could be legitimised or delegitimised in public discourse according to their perceived Romanness - with an association with Islam acting as a particular line of attack. The nature of Romanness itself can be perceived through the nature of the interactions that individuals and groups had with the Islamic world in the ninth and tenth centuries. In addition, it also functioned as a factor governing the interactions themselves, particularly in the official relations between the two states, where consciousness of the need to express Roman superiority

was fundamentally directed by how Islam was perceived as both a political and a religious threat.

Moreover, focusing on Romanness as a fluid collective identity defined by Christianity and association with the imperial power in Constantinople extricates it from the mess of additional elements that often clutter the analysis of those who seek to ascribe to it a specifically ethnic or national character. For instance, it avoids having to pin down Romanness on grounds of class distinction, on whether it was associated with any particular territory or 'homeland', or if those who self-ascribed as Romans understood a common framework of descent connecting them to their fellow Romans. Each has been touched upon in recent works on Romanness: yet each of these disagrees with the others on the usefulness of these characteristics, precisely because the sources themselves give us contradictory information.⁸ By focusing instead on a common denominator aspect of Roman groupness and recognising the fluctuating nature of its boundaries, we can instead begin to isolate these contradictory 'auxiliary' aspects of Roman identity and analyse them on their own terms by situating them and the author who wrote them within specific historical socio-cultural contexts. Thus recognising such aspects of Roman identity not as universal markers for the boundary between the Roman and 'non-Roman', but as embedded within a particular discourse unique to that author, text, and context.

⁸ See, Kaldellis, *Romanland*, 68-73; *contra* Stouraitis, 'Reinventing Roman Ethnicity', 75; Stouraitis, 'Byzantine Romanness', 127-30; and Whalin, *Roman Identity*, 212-18.

8.4: *Future Developments*

The approach to Roman identity taken in this thesis leaves many possible avenues for future research open that have not been pursued here for reasons of time, space, or specialisation. Foremost amongst these is the chronological aspect. Unlike many other studies of Romanness in Byzantium, which range across the full span of the empire's history *longue durée* in an attempt to define a 'universalist' Romanness that works in the fourth century as well as in the fifteenth, the present study makes no claims to transhistoricity.⁹ Indeed, one of the aims of the thesis was to analyse the concept of Romanness as it was embedded in the socio-cultural context of the period. As such, the claims made here about Roman identity should not be taken as immediately applicable even to the earlier part of the sixth century, or to the eleventh century onwards.

Collective identity in the empire was ever-changing in response to a multitude of context-dependent factors; thus, whilst the fundamental theoretical concept of 'groupness' and the importance of the 'other' for defining it remain constant, the fundamental qualities that went into the collective identity changed over time. To see whether affiliation with the Constantinopolitan empire and Christianity remained the key aspects defining the outermost boundaries of the collective Roman group identity before and after the period dealt with here would require new studies. Indeed, as has already been hinted at, there are indications even within the period c.600-950 that shifts in these key aspects were underway in regard to language (Greek as the sole Roman language), doctrine (Constantinopolitan Chalcedonianism as the sole faith), and geography (the concept of a defined 'land of the Romans' separate from the territory

⁹ Kaldellis, *Romanland*, 81-2 [which ranges from the sixth to the fourteenth century]; Stouraitis, 'Byzantine Romanness', 123-42 [from Justinian to 1204].

controlled by Constantinople), but that these had not yet gained widespread acceptance.¹⁰ It is only by recognising that, at least in this particular period, that these aspects of Romanness were not considered defining aspects of the identity that we can begin to analyse their emergence as such in later periods, or, perhaps even their disappearance.

In addition to this, the present study has been limited in the scope of its analysis to considering just one group of ‘others’ that interacted with Romanness, both external to the empire and within its frontiers. Whilst Roman relations with Islam and Muslims are, evidently, a useful framework through which to understand Romanness because of the way in which the discourse in the empire presented them as the antithesis of the two core values of Roman identity, there were many more groups that Romans came into contact with in this period where a dialectic of assimilation/disassociation with Romanness can be discerned. It will suffice to deal with the more prominent of these for our period: Armenians. There is not the space to discuss this in any real detail here, merely to outline some of the issues they present for our analysis of Romanness.

‘Armenians’ were present in large numbers in the empire before the start of our period and became increasingly prominent over the centuries, a fact that is well-attested and well-studied. However, much of the literature regarding them tends to essentialise the ethnic identity presented in the sources by accepting at face-value the label ‘Armenian’ without questioning whether this was a mutable quality.¹¹ This is the “Armenian fallacy” in Kaldellis’ formulation, whereby Roman and Armenian are placed

¹⁰ See chapter 3.4, for the linguistic aspect. See Kaldellis on the geographical, ‘Roman-land’, element: Kaldellis, *Romanland*, 68-73.

¹¹ For example: Peter Charanis, *The Armenians in the Byzantine Empire*, (Lisbon: Livraria Bertrand, 1963); or Nina Garsoïan, ‘The Problem of Armenian Integration into the Byzantine Empire’, in H  l  ne Ahrweiler and Angeliki Laiou (eds), *Studies on the Internal Diaspora of the Byzantine Empire*, (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1998), 53-124.

on the same conceptual level, such that an individual is either one or the other, or 'mixed'.¹² Fitting Armenians into our framework of Roman groupness raises interesting results. We are almost never given any reason as to why certain individuals are classified as 'Armenian'.¹³ Are they Armenians on the basis of their religious doctrine, their language, their place of birth, or, more nebulously, their customs? Did they picture themselves as 'Armenian' and identify as such in distinction to being Roman? In the vast majority of cases we cannot know: they are simply 'Armenian'. One may surmise that the intended reader of such texts may have inherently 'known' what was meant by the appellation, but the cases are simply too numerous and diverse for that to be possible in all instances. Should we, therefore, see these people as Armenians and not Romans?

The answer must be 'no', or, at least, a qualified 'no'. The picture is far too complex for any easy solution. For one, Romanness, as it functioned in our period, did not preclude these groups from being considered Romans as well as 'Armenians' (whatever that may have meant to any one individual writer). Indeed, in the case of Emperor Basil I we find that his 'official' biography, written in the tenth century under the auspices of his grandson, Constantine VII, emphasised the Armenian ancestry of the progenitor of the then-reigning dynasty.¹⁴ Yet, in other instances, it is evident that the writer wished to make a distinction between those who were considered Romans and Armenians, the most prominent example of which being Leo the Deacon's discussion of those people who were settled on Crete after its reconquest by Nikephoros Phokas.¹⁵ We consequently find ourselves with another case of 'Schrödinger's Romans', in which the boundaries of Romanness could expand or contract depending on context to

¹² Kaldellis, *Romanland*, 155-9.

¹³ For some examples of 'Armenians' appearing without qualification in our sources see, for instance: *De Ceremoniis*, 2.44; *De Velitatione*, 2.11-22; Genesis, 3.2; Leo the Deacon, 4.7.

¹⁴ Theoph. Cont. 5.2-4.

¹⁵ Leo the Deacon, *History*, 2.8.

encompass these 'Armenians'.¹⁶ Once one accepts the paradigm that the Armenians in our sources could, in fact, also be Romans, it inherently problematises their 'Armenianness'. It would be the task of others to disentangle and make sense of this identity discourse: to ask what were the circumstances that led some authors to distinguish Armenians from Romans and others to assimilate them; to question what exactly were the attributes that separated the two groups, and whether these changed over time. Even after the loss of its eastern and southern territories in the seventh century, the empire contained considerable diversity: it remains to be examined what their status was vis-à-vis Romanness.¹⁷

Whilst it is clear from our textual sources that Roman group identity was not simply a conceit of the Constantinopolitan elite, but a collective identity that had meaning to individuals and groups across the empire, it has been beyond the scope of this study to examine the practical mechanisms by which such a collective identity was propagated and maintained across a geographical expanse that, at the start of our period, stretched from Spain to the Euphrates; from Aswan to Crimea. How did people across this area come to know that they belonged to a collective Roman world? The mechanics of this must be sought in the ways in which collective identity was expressed through the church, a common legal and tax system, a common semiotic language, the imperial army, and more generally through the movement of people, goods, and ideas throughout this space. A greater focus on these aspects may also go some way to moving beyond the limitations of our textual sources by allowing for the greater inclusion of

¹⁶ See 3.1 in the present volume for an exploration of this phenomenon.

¹⁷ The discourse around the 'half-Khazar' son of Emperor Romanos Lekapenos, Basil, is one such example, as are the '*mixtobarbaroi*' that appear in texts: H  l  ne Ahrweiler, 'Byzantine Concepts of the Foreigner', in H  l  ne Ahrweiler and Angeliki Laiou (eds), *Studies on the Internal Diaspora of the Byzantine Empire*, (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1998), 2-3. On Basil Lekapenos' 'ethnicity', see: Leo the Deacon, *History*, 3.7; John Skylitzes, 15.2.

material evidence and a synthesis between that and the texts. Finally, the question must also be asked about the extent to which individuals and groups that identified as Roman at one point could continue to do so in the absence of such mechanisms: the most obvious example being the Romans who found themselves permanently marooned beyond Constantinople's control in Syria, Palestine, and Egypt.

It is regrettable, yet necessary, that such problems could not be examined in any great detail in this thesis. The benefit of these omissions, however, is that there is much work still to be done in the field of Roman identity and many more insights that await discovery. The nature of this study, dealing with such a complex topic over such a long span of time, meant that it could only ever be relatively broad-brush and limited in its focus. Nevertheless, it is hoped that it can present a new analysis of Romanness in Byzantium that moves away from the question of 'who was Roman' towards that of 'who *could* be Roman', and under what circumstances were they considered as such. Furthermore, the study hopes to present some of the practical uses of the study of Roman identity, providing greater insight into the way in which our sources present external forces like Islam, explaining certain aspects of response in the empire to those external forces, and furthering our understanding of the internal social dynamics of the empire: helping to explain elements of its internal coherency and how it was able to persist as a unitary political entity for so many centuries. At the very least, this study hopefully shows that the debate over Roman identity in Byzantium is very far from being resolved, despite the copious amount of ink spilled over the last decade or so, and nor should we wish for it to be put to rest any time soon.

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