

# Hellenism and the emergence of Islam

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I make no apologies, especially in this journal, for the use of the term 'Hellenism' in relation to the eastern Mediterranean world at the time of the rise of Islam. It is not intended to convey any specious sense of continuity between past and present. But recent scholarship on the period that I discuss here leaves no room for doubt about the liveliness of intellectual activity, the volume of writing or the geographical spread of Greek language and culture which formed the backdrop to the formation of Islamic rule. That those who participated in this activity were not themselves Greeks in an ethnic sense does not to my mind diminish their impact. Rather, the diffusion of Greek language and culture in some surprising corners of the seventh-century world is precisely the phenomenon to which I wish to draw attention.

The death of Muhammad in 632 fell in the reign of the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius (610-41). Heraclius' reign did not merely see the first wave of Arab conquests; it was also the period when the Byzantine empire ceased to use Latin in important areas of its official life. Latin was still common enough in sixth-century Constantinople for a court poet to produce a long and important political poem in Virgilian hexameters, but by the reign of Heraclius court poetry was in Greek, and drew heavily on the Old Testament for its imagery. Moreover, Greek was now recognized as the official language of the law and the administration. It was spoken and written in all the eastern provinces of what had been the Roman and was now the Byzantine empire. Even in Edessa (Urfa) in north-west Mesopotamia, the home of Syriac ecclesiastical literature, Greek was still in use centuries after the Arab conquest; indeed, sacrifices to Zeus were still taking place there at the end of the sixth century. Moreover, even works written in Syriac, originally a dialect of Aramaic and by now a sophisticated literary language, were frequently translated into Greek within a very short time of composition, while, conversely, the seventh century was the period when the highest proportion of Greek loan-words and expressions permeated written works in Syriac.<sup>1</sup>

Was this use and knowledge of Greek, which can justly be termed Hellenism, just a matter of a superficial 'vener' relating only to the educated classes and with

no impact on the mass of the population? Such a view was and is quite common. We are sometimes told, for instance, that there was a 'Semitic bedrock' – Syrian or Arab – in the eastern provinces, to which Greek culture did not penetrate. Such is the view of a leading Islamicist, Fred Donner, in his history of the Islamic conquests.<sup>2</sup> It is also a view commonly held in relation to Syriac literature, which has been seen as reflecting a special Syrian consciousness and in particular a special kind of Syrian – that is, non-Greek – spirituality. I do not wish to challenge either of these positions here, except to emphasize the fact that the term 'Syriac' describes a language, and does not convey any further implications about the meaning of 'Syrian' as an ethnic term or about the extent of 'Syria' as a geographical entity, any more than the phenomenon of 'Hellenism' in our period is coextensive with the geographical limits of the Greek mainland.

The extent and meaning of Hellenism before and after the Arab invasions of the early seventh century has indeed recently received some scholarly attention. *Hellenism in Late Antiquity*, by G.W. Bowersock, published in 1990, is a short essay which originated as a set of lectures. It conveys very vividly the extraordinarily lively products of Greek culture in our period in the provinces of the eastern Mediterranean, especially Egypt, Cyprus, Syria and Palestine. Bowersock is especially interested in the continuance of pagan motifs. When the Muslims arrived in Syria and Palestine, they found magnificent recent mosaics with classical themes, such as the one found near the theatre at Sepphoris in Israel, showing Dionysus and Heracles. In late-antique Cyprus a great villa at Paphos was also decorated with Dionysiac scenes – the childhood of the god, the victory of Cassiopeia over the Nereids. Similar scenes were depicted in mosaic at Apamea in Syria, a great Hellenized city, and on an Egyptian textile; it may be that with their choice of iconography and their depiction of 'Error' they represent a pagan response to Christianity. In any case, they demonstrate the vitality of Hellenic culture, and Bowersock calls them examples of 'the new Hellenism'.<sup>3</sup>

A suggestion made some time ago by a French scholar adds another dimension to the picture. The sixth-century Byzantine historian Agathias tells in a rather romantic fashion how the Emperor Justinian effectively closed the Academy at Athens, founded a thousand years before by Plato, and how the seven remaining Athenian philosophers travelled to Persia in search of a philosopher king, only to be sadly disillusioned when they actually met the new Shah. Although, according to Agathias, they were given special leave to return to the Byzantine empire, what happened to them when they returned is not clear, although we know that

Simplicius, who was one of the seven, went on to write a series of extremely important commentaries on Aristotle. Recently Michel Tardieu has argued that Simplicius halted his return journey at Harran in Syria, formerly Carrhae (where the Roman general Crassus perished in 53 BC), and founded there a school for the study of Greek philosophy, of which we know from the Arab geographer al-Mas'ūdi in the tenth century. Not only would this be a testimony to transmission of the Greek intellectual tradition in an apparently unpromising place; if the theory is correct, Simplicius' journey would also fit a pattern according to which other pagan philosophers of the period had also journeyed to the eastern provinces around this time in pagan pilgrimage, searching for sacred sites and the springs of knowledge. At the very least, it is another indication that Greek philosophy and learning were flourishing at the time of the encounter with Islam.<sup>4</sup>

A number of recent writers on the subject have united in redefining the conception of Hellenism or Greek culture in the eastern provinces before Islam.<sup>5</sup> According to this newer perception, Greek culture was not something élite and set apart, a kind of 'optional extra' confined to the privileged classes. Rather, the old vertical model must be replaced by a horizontal one: Greek coexisted with Latin and with Semitic languages, or with Coptic in the case of Egypt, in a relationship that was extremely complex. Examples of this interconnection at many levels of society abound over a long chronological period, and include, for instance, trilingual Palmyrene inscriptions in Latin, Greek and Palmyrene, while the papyri from the garrison-post of Nessana, now on the Israeli border with Egypt, which date from well into the Islamic period, use Greek, Syriac, Latin and Arabic. As well as tax-returns in Arabic and various Christian texts, they include a Greek glossary to the *Aeneid*.<sup>6</sup> In the case of Egypt, the common view of the Coptic language, and indeed Coptic culture, as an expression of a supposedly pure native culture, potentially alien to Byzantium, must be given up, for it now seems clear that Coptic grew up in the very contexts where Greek or indeed Syriac were in constant use, and was inseparable from them. In the Fertile Crescent in late antiquity, 'the vast variety of divine names and forms of devotion revealed by dedications in Greek' from places such as Petra and the Hauran demonstrates the fact that Greek was not limited to externals, but that it was constantly used by ordinary people to express local elements as well.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, and even more fundamentally, it was the very influence of Greek culture and Greek language, albeit originally itself an import, that in our period actually stimulated and made possible the articulation of local traditions. Together, Hellenism and Roman

imperial rule made the crystallization of identities more possible, and permitted the eclectic juxtaposition of elements which we with our twentieth-century perspective tend too readily to see as separate.

The implications of this new direction are many and profound. Not least, it means that the Arab conquest of these provinces in the seventh century can no longer be explained by resort to a model which relies on the idea of local, non-Greek, populations disaffected from an 'alien' Byzantine government in Constantinople. If we are to give up the view of a Greek élite and an alien, 'native' population in favour of something far more integrated, we shall need to turn elsewhere for an explanation of the Arab conquests.

To Greek-speaking contemporaries, whether they were themselves pagan or Christian, 'Hellenism' simply meant paganism. To Christians, 'Hellenes' were pagans, classed together with heretics, or with members of other religions such as Jews and 'Saracens' (that is, Muslims). To pagans like Simplicius, 'Hellenes' are those, particularly philosophers, who are loyal to the old gods. In many Christian texts, then, 'Hellenes' are viewed with suspicion, and are the object of a degree of fantasy. A collection of supposed 'pagan oracles' circulated in Syria, and Christian stories of miracle cures performed by saints at their shrines, like that of SS. Cyrus and John near Alexandria in Egypt, regularly contrast the healing power of the saints with the deception of science – 'Hellenic medicine'. Pagan books were burnt in Constantinople in the reign of Justinian, and in the late sixth century, after strange goings-on at Heliopolis (Baalbek), no less a person than the patriarch of Antioch was brought to Constantinople on a charge of paganism. He had been named under torture by Anatolius, an important official who was the vicar of the praetorian prefect at Edessa; in the end, whether or not his accusations were true, Anatolius himself was executed in the Hippodrome and an accomplice lynched by a mob. The patriarch got off. But a charge of Hellenism was no laughing matter.<sup>8</sup>

It is still a common assumption that at this period the Byzantine east was in decline. In fact the eastern provinces, and especially Syria and Palestine (which also encompassed much of modern Jordan), were enjoying a period of unprecedented prosperity. Population growth is amply attested in the archaeological record, and marginal areas such as the Hauran and the Negev were brought under production by elaborate irrigation and intensive agriculture. The case of Nessana and its papyri shows that not only an advanced material culture but also education, even in the Latin classics, had reached this now very remote outpost. These documents have seemed exceptional up to now, in that hardly any papyri have

survived from outside Egypt itself, but another cache of sixth-century papyri from this period has recently been discovered in a newly excavated Byzantine church at Petra; they show that the Nessana documents are unusual only in the chance of their survival. Richly decorated synagogues, sometimes with Hellenizing iconography, like the famous depiction at Gaza of King David as Orpheus, are another feature of the period which points to general prosperity and a high level of general culture. It no longer seems so surprising in this context that Christians in what is now Jordan went on refurbishing and adding to the mosaic floors in their churches long into the eighth century. But it is still remarkable that the spectacular mosaics at Madaba (which had no fewer than thirteen churches in our period), included not only depictions of cities with Greek inscriptions but Nilotic scenes and episodes from Greek mythology, with figures of Hippolytus and Phaedra, Aphrodite and the three Graces, Eros, Achilles and Patroclus. The large city of Scythopolis, west of Tiberias in northern Galilee, was showing no obvious sign of decline when hit by an earthquake in the middle of the eighth century. New evidence is constantly appearing from excavations such as that of the monastery of St Lot near the Dead Sea. 'Decline' is of course relative, and it is likely that the invasion of Syria, Palestine and Egypt by the Persians in the early seventh century had some negative consequences. But the overwhelming majority of the population of these areas in Umayyad times remained Christian, a substantial proportion of them Greek-speaking; the material and cultural life of these Christians was not immediately severed.<sup>9</sup>

The eastern provinces in this period still need to be judged in a Mediterranean perspective. Some indication of the hold which Greek culture still had can even be found in a region not Mediterranean at all, namely the British Isles. Understandably perhaps, Britain was regarded from the perspective of Christian writers in seventh-century Palestine as the ultimate in distant lands. In Greek Christian writing about Judaism from the late seventh century, the extension of Christianity as far as Britain is somewhat optimistically cited as proving the triumph of Christianity throughout the world, a contention that reads oddly to us in a text emanating from the recently established Umayyad caliphate. Yet Canterbury in the seventh century did indeed have a Greek archbishop, Theodore of Tarsus, who is the subject of some intriguing new research. Theodore had evidently had the best available higher education in Greek, as is clear from his surviving Biblical commentaries, though it is not certain where in the eastern empire he obtained this excellent training. He may have been educated at Antioch, and he seems to have

known Edessa as well as Constantinople. He had also been a monk in Rome, where there were many Greek-speaking easterners and a number of eastern monasteries at this time, and he was caught up in the doctrinal debates which were raging in the mid-seventh century. His seat at Canterbury can now be seen to have been a centre of Greek studies, and it has been argued that Theodore himself was the author of a Latin translation of the Greek *Passion* of St Anastasius the Persian and of a Latin work which shows knowledge of the sixth-century Greek *Chronicle* of John Malalas. Theodore did not attend the Council held at Constantinople in 681 which formally condemned Monotheletism: the pope told the Byzantine emperor that Britain was too far away. But Theodore himself had held a British Council at Hatfield in 679, and his views filtered through to the eastern capital.<sup>10</sup>

Rome was a major centre of Greek activity in the mid-seventh century. Several seventh-century popes were Greek-speaking easterners, and their background is reflected in the Byzantine style of decoration in Roman churches such as S. Maria Antiqua and S. Maria in Trastevere; and as well as having a number of Greek monasteries, the city was home to many Greek-speaking monks and clergy from Egypt and Palestine. The first influx, whose influence can also be traced in Sicily and South Italy (both these areas became important centres of Greek monastic life during the early Middle Ages), had come, not as a result of the Arab conquests, but earlier, under pressure of the Persian invasion. In the middle of the seventh century the Lateran synod, which opposed imperial religious policy and led to the death of Pope Martin I and the trial, exile and eventual death of Maximus Confessor, was dominated by Greeks to the extent even that its proceedings were first written in Greek and only afterwards translated into Latin.<sup>11</sup>

We can trace part of this Greek influx into Rome back to Carthage in North Africa, where there were Greek monasteries, and where St Maximus Confessor had installed himself for some years before he decided to set off for Rome in 647/8. There he had been joined for a time by another Palestinian monk, Sophronius, who was fleeing from the Persian invasion of Egypt (the latter was later to become patriarch of Jerusalem); previously Maximus and Sophronius had travelled across the Mediterranean carrying the body of John Moschus, author of the *Spiritual Meadow* and one of the greatest figures in Byzantine spirituality, back for burial in Palestine. When he left Egypt under pressure of the Persian invasion, Sophronius took with him to North Africa a substantial library of Greek books, which is the subject of a letter from Maximus to the Byzantine governor in which he points out the advantage of having these Greek works available in

Carthage. Carthage was also the occasion, in the 640s, of a public debate in Greek on doctrinal matters between Maximus and a deposed patriarch of Constantinople who did himself no favours by choosing to debate with someone of Maximus' stature. Presiding over the debate was Gregory, the exarch of the province, who only a few months later attempted to break away from Constantinople and was then killed in battle against an Arab army in what is now the Tunisian desert.<sup>12</sup>

Cyprus too was a lively place on the eve of the Arab raids on the island. The Cypriot we know as 'John the Almsgiver', patriarch of Alexandria at the time of the Persian invasion, left the city for his native Cyprus and died there. Many Cypriot bishops are known from the period: one, Leontius of Neapolis, wrote a number of Lives of saints, as well as other works. Local meetings and festivals were features of church life in Cyprus in the first half of the seventh century, and a number of Greek Lives of local saints were written, including one of St Spyridon. We also know of close contacts between Cyprus and Palestine, church synods held on Cyprus, and letters flying to and fro. By this time Sophronius, leader of much resistance to the religious decrees under the Emperor Heraclius, and in active contact with colleagues in Cyprus, especially the archbishop Arcadius, was installed in Jerusalem for his short tenure as patriarch.<sup>13</sup>

In this capacity Sophronius had the unenviable task of surrendering Jerusalem to the Arabs in 638. His famous Christmas homily of 634 is well known as one of the earliest Greek testimonies to the arrival of Muslim invaders in Palestine. It laments the fact that his congregation cannot make its accustomed walk from Jerusalem to celebrate Christmas at the Church of the Nativity at Bethlehem, because Bethlehem has fallen into the hands of the 'Saracen' raiders.<sup>14</sup>

Sophronius, by now an old man, was the acknowledged leader of the orthodox and Greek-speaking church in Palestine. He is an interesting figure for our inquiry, for while he had spent many years as a monk of the Palestinian monastery of St Theodosius, he is also described as a 'sophist' – that is, he had received a training in classical Greek rhetoric – and he is the author of a remarkable set of poems in classical anacreontics on the fall of Jerusalem to the Persians and other topics. This of course tells us a good deal about the level of Greek education available in his native Damascus. Sophronius was a stylist: even his saints' lives are written in rhythmical and melodious Greek. His poems bring to life the emotional intensity with which Jerusalem was viewed by Christians, Jews, and indeed Muslims during the seventh century. I quote some lines from John Wilkinson's translation (Sophronius is addressing Jerusalem):

Let me walk your pavements  
 And go inside the Anastasis  
 Where the King of all rose again  
 Trampling down the power of death,  
 And as I venerate that worthy Tomb  
 Surrounded by its couches  
 And columns surmounted by golden lilies,  
 I shall be overcome with joy.<sup>15</sup>

Sophronius' poems illustrate the complex ways in which the classical Greek tradition could be used in a religious context *prima facie* quite alien to it. But secular learning also continued. Cyril Mango has written about the high level of Greek culture, including secular learning, in Palestinian circles in this period, which was later transferred to Constantinople as Palestinians moved there. Thus Michael the Syncellus, one of these Palestinians who moved to Constantinople, had written a textbook soon after 800 on Greek syntax, taking examples from Homer and the Bible; moreover, he put it forth at Edessa, the very home of Syriac culture. The same Michael also continued Sophronius' tradition of writing Greek anacreontics. The Italian scholar G. Cavallo has recently put together an important and fascinating collection of evidence for the continuance of Greek learning in the period. Sophronius of Jerusalem and Theodore of Tarsus, Archbishop of Canterbury, are only two of the multifaceted writers and protagonists in ecclesiastical and political affairs that we encounter there.<sup>16</sup>

In Palestine itself the many monasteries of the Judaeian desert were also Greek-speaking; over sixty sets of monastic remains from our period have been securely identified after energetic survey work by Israeli archaeologists, and some are still extremely impressive today. How much damage was done to these monasteries by the Persian invasion is unclear, despite the existence of lurid accounts by the monks themselves, and archaeologists are agreed that the Arab conquest did not represent a major disruption. A Byzantine church on the north bank of the Wadi Qelt, for example, was undergoing work on its mosaic pavement in the 630s, and people were still being buried there in 637. Life in the monasteries continued, and eventually suffered decline not from major attack (though raids did happen, as for instance at St Sabas in 797), but rather as a result of the gradual decay under Islamic rule of the economic and trading networks that had supported them. Even so, some were inhabited and still functioning as monasteries until very recent



times, and Mar Saba functions still.<sup>17</sup>

George Syncellus, the source, as Mango argues, of much of the early ninth-century *Chronicle* of Theophanes, seems to have been a monk in Palestine in the later eighth century, possibly at St Chariton, where he may have translated into Greek a Syriac chronicle source. One monastery that did continue to support intellectual activity in Greek was indeed the monastery of St Sabas south of Jerusalem, home to two major figures of the eighth century, Stephen the Sabaite (d. 794) and St John of Damascus. Stephen's *Life* was originally written in Greek by his disciple Leontius of Damascus (d. 821), and we know from the two extant Sinai MSS that it was translated into Arabic, the language of the surviving complete version, only in 903. The early MSS from the library of St Sabas itself have long ago been destroyed or removed, and nineteenth-century travellers remarked on the bad state of the library. But the majority of those which have survived, which mainly date from the eleventh and twelfth centuries and later, are in Greek. It is clear that in our period St Sabas had an extensive library of patristic texts and a fair number of classical ones. Naturally translation into Arabic soon became necessary – by the ninth century some of the monks themselves have Arabic names – and St Sabas played a significant role in the transmission of Christian-Muslim apologetic in Arabic; even so, Greek was not ousted. The earliest surviving Arabic manuscript from St Catherine's monastery on Sinai dates from the ninth century. As late as 1800, St Sabas still had a copy of Libanius, and there are classical works among the surviving Greek MSS.

St Sabas was also the home of important new developments in Greek orthodox hymnography; both John of Damascus and his adoptive brother Cosmas the hymnographer were among its monks in the eighth century.<sup>18</sup> John of Damascus is of course one of the greatest figures in Byzantine orthodoxy and the author of a very large and varied corpus of writings in Greek, for which the library of St Sabas must have been a crucial resource.<sup>19</sup> Despite John's birth in Damascus and his family's connection with the service of the Umayyad caliphs, his intellectual and theological background is wholly Byzantine, and it is difficult to accept the arguments of some scholars who wish to persuade us of his 'Semitic', or 'Arab' nature, and to detach him from his Greek intellectual background by arguing that his famous defence of religious images had nothing to do with Byzantine iconoclasm but was directed at local conditions in Palestine under the caliphs. A much more intriguing problem is posed by the fact that John is not mentioned at all in the very circumstantial *Life* of his fellow-monk Stephen the Sabaite, which

provides us with rich details about life in the St Sabas monastery at exactly the time when John is supposed to have been there; to compound the difficulty, the Life of John himself, on which his biography largely depends, is both late and extremely fanciful.<sup>20</sup> Stephen was a powerful and ascetic figure, and his biography gives an impression of the St Sabas monastery in his day as a rich and influential place. The Life of Stephen contains much plausible detail, and the fact that John is neither named nor cited as one of the 'glories of the Lavra', whom Stephen commends to his disciples, is distinctly odd. It may however be simply that the Life shows us what a rich and diverse place the monastery then was, and, perhaps, how deep were the rivalries that could occur there.

Another important Palestinian monastery was that of St Catherine on Mount Sinai. The survival of its library and of its early icons up to the present day is often ascribed to its isolated position, which enabled it to escape attack and to maintain a continuous existence through the centuries of Islamic rule, at some point acquiring the dedication to St Catherine by which it is now known. By contrast, St Sabas was only a few miles from Jerusalem, and it is clear that by the ninth century it had become a centre for translation between Greek, Syriac and Arabic. From what we read of its library in modern times, in the nineteenth century it was alleged to be in the charge of illiterate monks who could not even recognize an uncial Greek manuscript, and with all the books eaten away by mice, dust and pests; the notorious Tischendorf is said to have torn up some of the old and damaged manuscripts and taken them to St Petersburg for binding other books. Even so, it should not be forgotten that, like St Catherine's, St Sabas was also able to preserve a remarkable continuity through the early Islamic period.

Relations between the Jerusalem patriarchate and St Sabas and other Judaeen monasteries were extremely close and must have contributed greatly to maintaining the Greek character of the patriarchate itself. This is less surprising when we remember that the Chalcedonian church in Palestine had been primarily Greek-speaking before the conquest as well. Sometimes their successors, the Melkites, are seen as having 'imperial' sympathies, because of this continued use of Greek.<sup>21</sup> But there were Chalcedonians and Greek-speakers in other parts of the Near East, including Edessa; the true picture, then, is more one of a mosaic than of discrete Greek and non-Greek areas.

A picture has been drawn recently of a 'first Byzantine commonwealth' which extended, before the rise of Islam, from the Caucasus to Aksum/Ethiopia.<sup>22</sup> Christian influences, and a loose sense of belonging to a Christian world, were felt

all round the eastern Mediterranean and beyond. Even in the Arabian peninsula itself, Christian and Jewish remains are to be found.<sup>23</sup> The differences between these Christians are more often emphasized than their common elements; thus it is often argued that the divisions between Byzantine Orthodox, Monophysites and Nestorians weakened the empire ruled from Constantinople and aided not only the rise of Islam but also the conquests themselves. But this argument rests on the mistaken assumption that the provincial regions were monolithic in their religious sympathies, whereas in fact the religious map was far more complicated and far more fluid. There were, for example, both Chalcedonians and Monophysites even in the Syrian heartland of Edessa. A further example will underline the danger of hasty assumptions: the seventh-century apocalyptic work known as the *Apocalypse* of Pseudo-Methodius, written in Syriac and translated into Greek, does indeed hope for restoration and the coming of the 'last emperor', but is it Monophysite or Chalcedonian? Scholars are still divided. So I suggest that just as it can be argued that Hellenism *enabled* the expression of local identities, so the invasions of the seventh century crystallized religious divisions among Christians; the invasions loosened the ties between the former provinces and Constantinople, and allowed the development of localized churches with a stronger sense of local identity. Yet even then they had not lost the sense of connection with Constantinople; the orthodox Melkites, for example, flourished in and around Jerusalem, in just those geographical areas where the ideological tension of invasion, recovery and loss were felt most keenly; and in Monophysite Syria, Christians still longed for an eschatological 'last Christian emperor', a new Alexander and a new Constantine, whose reign would presage the end of things.<sup>24</sup>

Once the followers of Muhammad had embarked upon the invasion of Byzantine Syria and Palestine, the next crucial century of Islamic political formation was to take place in the context of an existing administrative structure inherited from Byzantium, and even more important, an existing majority culture. Archaeologists currently working on the period are agreed that there was no sudden disruption in either urban or rural life at the time of the conquest. Most of the new Islamic 'garrison-cities' were established outside Syria and Palestine, and so far as we can judge, Arab settlement was at first slow. Only by the end of the seventh century do the Greek and Syriac sources start to show concern about conversion, and even then it is difficult to quantify. Greek continued as the language of administration for three generations, and there is some evidence of Muslims and Christians living together and interacting on a day-to-day basis.

Anastasius of Sinai, traditionally identified as a monk of the monastery at Sinai, and of Cypriot origin, travelled the length of Palestine and Syria in the period after the conquest and wrote a whole range of works in Greek with only the rarest of references to the Muslims. He claims that there were Cypriot Christian prisoners working for Muslims near the Dead Sea, and there are a few hints of Christians, presumably Greek-speaking, who had become slaves or servants in Muslim households. But there is no indication that they were numerous.<sup>25</sup>

Change was on the whole very gradual. True, the *Life of Stephen the Sabaite*, around 800, writes of the danger of Arab attack for monks venturing outside the monastery into the surrounding desert. But already nearly two centuries earlier, the monks of Rhaithu and Sinai had felt equally unsafe, and monks of Choziba, trying to avoid the Persians, had been set upon by 'Saracens'. The picture is not uniform. Also in Stephen's day, a monk called Martyrius had been able to travel unimpeded 'throughout the lands in the jurisdiction of the Arabs', seeking a spiritual father; Stephen himself was ordained by an Egyptian hermit called Christopher, who lived safely in a cave near the monastery of Theoctistus in Wadi Mukellik, and was known for his charity not only to his own brothers and fellow Christians, but also to pagans and Arabs.

We must be very careful not to build too much on tendentious literary texts, each of which has its own agenda. But clearly Islam inherited, and could not but be influenced by, the complex cultural world of these areas. We tend with hindsight to think in terms of loss and catastrophe, of a great divide between Constantinople and the eastern provinces, of a curtain coming down. In fact, in the words of Garth Fowden, 'the situation looks less negative when viewed from the Caliphate's perspective';<sup>26</sup> seen from the east, Mediterranean unity had not been broken at all. Neither the voluminous works of Anastasius of Sinai nor his own travels as a Cypriot monk in the seventh century convey a sense of catastrophe, though they do portray a changing world. In that changing world, people needed answers to practical questions, as we read in the surviving literature: can one take communion from a heretic? should one pray for political leaders who happen to be pagans, Jews or heretics? is it all right to flee from persecution? did God will the sufferings brought by the Arabs?

It is not a new observation to say that the building of Baghdad and the move of the centre of gravity of the Islamic world from Damascus to the east around 750 was a more fundamental moment of change than the original Arab conquests of a century or so earlier. But the actual role of Hellenism in the preceding period still

gives rise to difficulties and false conceptions. Far from being a shallow and vulnerable 'vener' confined to urban centres, Hellenism itself was 'the bedrock', as Bowersock has put it.<sup>27</sup> In this period, Hellenism in the full sense embraced not only the traditional culture of the educated classes, some of whom could appreciate classicizing anacreontics; it also embraced paganism and the rural cults; and it extended to the highly sophisticated thought and writings of churchmen such as Maximus Confessor, Sophronius the patriarch and St John of Damascus.

Yet it is always easiest to follow traditional historical judgements. Thus the Arab conquests are commonly seen either as a catastrophe for Byzantium, which needs somehow to be explained, whether in terms of Byzantine military collapse or local religious disaffection, or, indeed, as the extraordinary and foreordained advance of a new and powerful religion. But one of the changes which the new archaeological work on the eastern provinces in our period has brought is that it forces one to focus on the small-scale as well as the large. Our texts – like Anastasius of Sinai's questions and answers, or the Life of Stephen the Sabaite – allow us to see a little of the everyday reality of life in this changing century. A Greek inscription from Hammat Gader – classical Gadara – reveals that an accommodation had already been reached within a generation about dating systems, Greek, by the era of the colony of Gadara, and Islamic, dating from the Hijra and the rule of Mu'awiya. A balance found at Scythopolis is marked in both Greek and Arabic, proof of the daily transactions of exchange.<sup>28</sup> Sub-cultures and settlement may tell us more about the *longue durée* of history than the stirring events embroidered in narrative accounts. By these standards, it is arguable that change on that scale was much slower in coming, that Islam in fact both inherited and maintained an ancient world in which Hellenism – transformed and diffused – was a living and dynamic force.

## NOTES

This paper was given as the third Runciman Lecture, King's College London, 1 February 1996, and remains substantially as delivered. I have added indications of further reading.

- 1 Heraclius' court poet was George of Pisidia, author of a number of long political poems which combine classical form and language with Old Testament and Christian imagery and themes: see now J.M. Whitby, 'The devil in disguise: the end of George of Pisidia's *Hexaemeron* reconsidered', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 115 (1995) 115-29. For the relation of Greek and Syriac in the seventh century, see in particular papers II, IV and (especially) V in S.P. Brock, *Syriac Perspectives on Late Antiquity* (London 1984).
- 2 See F.M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton 1981), especially 94.
- 3 G.W. Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge 1990), at 52; Dionysus and Heracles: pl. 9; Cyprus mosaic: pl. 1-4.
- 4 Agathias, *Hist.* II.30.3-31.9; Agathias describes the philosophers from Athens, none of whom was in fact Athenian, as 'the quintessential flower of the philosophers of our age'. The suggestion about Simplicius and Harran was made by Michel Tardieu; see most accessibly on this episode P. Chuvin, *A Chronicle of the Last Pagans* (Cambridge, Mass. 1990) 135-41 and nn., and for philosophers' journeys see M. Tardieu, *Les paysages reliques, Routes et haltes syriennes d'Isidore à Simplicius* (Louvain-Paris 1990).
- 5 F. Millar, *The Roman Near East, 31 BC – AD 337* (Cambridge, Mass. 1993) (important for our subject, despite the chronological terminus suggested); R.S. Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity* (Princeton 1993). The question of Hellenism in the East is discussed for the Hellenistic period, for which similar questions also arise, in A. Kuhrt and S. Sherwin-White (eds.), *Hellenism in the East* (London 1987); for the Roman empire see S. Swain, *Hellenism and Empire. Language, Classicism and Power in the Greek World AD 50-250* (Oxford 1996).
- 6 C.L. Kraemer (ed.), *Excavations at Nessana III* (Princeton 1958).
- 7 Millar, *The Roman Near East*, 530.
- 8 For these events see Chuvin, *Chronicle*, 143-8; M. Whitby, 'John of Ephesus and the pagans: pagan survivals in the sixth century', in M. Salomon (ed.), *Paganism in the Later Roman Empire and in Byzantium* (Cracow 1991) 111-31.
- 9 See in general Averil Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity* (London 1993), ch. 7; M. Whitton, 'Ruling the late Roman and early Byzantine city: a continuous history', *Past and Present* 129 (1990) 3-29. Synagogues: see L.I. Levine, *Ancient Synagogues Revealed* (Jerusalem 1981). The Petra scrolls were uncovered in 1993 in an excavation conducted by the American Center for Oriental Research (ACOR). A convenient introduction to the Madaba and other Jordanian mosaics, with colour illustrations, is to be found in P. Bienkowski (ed.), *The Art of Jordan* (Stroud 1996) 110-32 (M. Piccirillo); since 1991 the Madaba mosaics have been incorporated into an archaeological park. For the Christian communities before and after Islam see also R. Schick, *The Christian Communities of Palestine from Byzantine to Islamic Rule. A Historical and Archaeological Study* (Princeton 1995).
- 10 Greek tracts against Jews in this period: Averil Cameron, 'Byzantines and Jews: some recent work on early Byzantium', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 20 (1996) 249-74. Theodore: see M. Lapidge (ed.), *Archbishop Theodore* (Cambridge 1995).
- 11 For recent bibliography see the Addenda to Averil Cameron, *Changing Cultures in Early Byzantium* (Aldershot 1996).
- 12 H. Chadwick, 'John Moschus and his friend Sophronius the Sophist', *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 25 (1974) 41-74, remains excellent; see now on Maximus, A. Nichols, O.P., *Byzantine Gospel. Maximus the Confessor in Modern Scholarship* (Edinburgh 1993) and A. Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (London 1996). Several papers in Cameron, *Changing Cultures* touch on these events.

13 Cyprus: Cameron, *Changing Cultures*, VI, with Addenda; B. Englezakis, *Studies on the History of the Church of Cyprus, 4th-20th Centuries* (Aldershot 1995). For the writings of Leontius of Neapolis in Cyprus see D. Krueger, *Symeon the Holy Fool. Leontius's Life and the Late Antique City* (Berkeley 1996) and V. Déroche, *Études sur Léontios de Néapolis* (Uppsala 1995).

14 For Sophronius, Islam and Hellenism, see Cameron, *Changing Cultures*, IV. The Christmas service at the Church of the Nativity held in December 1995 in the optimistic expectation of settled peace between Jews and Palestinians revived the old tradition and thus vividly recalled Sophronius' homily.

15 See R.L. Wilken, *The Land Called Holy* (New Haven 1992) 230, citing J. Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades* (London 1977) 91-2. By 'the Anastasis' Sophronius means the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

16 C.A. Mango, 'Greek culture in Palestine after the Arab Conquest', in G. Cavallo, G. De Gregorio and M. Maniacci (eds.), *Scrittura, libri e testi nelle aree provinciali di Bisanzio* (Spoleto 1991) 149-60; G. Cavallo, 'Theodore of Tarsus and the Greek culture of his time', in Lapidge, *Archbishop Theodore*, 54-67 (with many further references).

17 See Y. Hirschfeld, *The Judaean Desert Monasteries in the Byzantine Period* (New Haven 1992); M. Piccirillo, 'The Christians in Palestine during a time of transition, 7th-9th centuries', in A. O'Mahony (ed.) with G. Gunner and K. Hintlian, *The Christian Heritage in the Holy Land* (London 1995) 47-56; for the original buildings, chapels and hermitages of St Sabas, see J. Patrick in Y. Tsafirir (ed.), *Ancient Churches Revealed* (Jerusalem 1993) 233-43.

18 Another great eighth-century hymnographer, Andrew of Crete, was born at Damascus, like Sophronius.

19 For John of Damascus see A. Louth, 'A Christian theologian at the court of the Caliph: some cross-cultural reflections', *Dialogos* 3 (1996) 4-19, citing other works.

20 See M.-F. Auzépy, 'De la Palestine à Constantinople (VIIIe-IXe siècles): Étienne le Sabaïte et Jean Damascène', *Travaux et Mémoires* 12 (1994) 183-218.

21 For an introduction to the history of the Melkite (Chalcedonian) church during this period see H. Kennedy, 'The Melkite church from the Islamic conquest to the Crusades: continuity and adaptation', *17th International Byzantine Congress 1986. Major Papers* (New Rochelle, NY 1986) 325-43.

22 G. Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth. The Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge 1991).

23 Evidence is cited in D.T. Potts, *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity II* (Oxford 1990).

24 For an interesting discussion of Byzantine eschatology see P. Magdalino, 'The history of the future and its uses: prophecy, policy and propaganda', in R. Beaton and C. Roueché (eds.) *The Making of Byzantine History. Studies Dedicated to Donald M. Nicol* (Aldershot 1993) 3-34, with further bibliography.

25 The slowness of change: Averil Cameron and G. King (eds.), *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East II. Land Use and Settlement Patterns* (Princeton 1994); Averil Cameron (ed.), *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East III. States, Resources and Armies* (Princeton 1995). Anastasius of Sinai is another witness to seventh-century Greek culture in Palestine: see for an excellent survey B. Flusin, *Saint Anastase le Perse et l'histoire de la Palestine au début du VIIIe siècle* (2 vols.: Paris 1992).

26 Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 141.

27 Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity*, 73.

28 Cameron, *Mediterranean World*, 180.