

THE INFLUENCE OF OTHER CULTURES ON THE ISLAMIC CALIPHATE

HELEN STEELE

Rather than being a break with pre-Islamic traditions, including Byzantine and Sasanian, the Islamic Caliphate represented at first a synthesis of aspects of all three cultures. Over the course of centuries, gradual change resulted in a more distinct Islamic culture, but one that still bore hallmarks of the earlier traditions.

Despite claims by the Byzantines to being a direct descendent of the Roman Empire, the Byzantine Empire was in a period of flux in the years preceding the Islamic invasion. Years of natural disaster, plague, internal dissent and invasion had weakened the structures of the Empire, especially in the sixth century.¹ In the wake of these problems, the Byzantines began to rely upon Arabian tribes such as the Ghassanids to protect the fringes of their empire.² The Emperor ceded control of the provinces to governors, removing the self-governance of the many cities in the region.³ Meanwhile, the distribution of population changed. Once great urban commercial cities such as Antioch declined, but the population of rural areas did not decline, and in some cases grew.⁴ However, this change was not uniform. While Kennedy argues that the period saw an overall shift from an urban to a rural population,⁵ archaeological evidence from Epiphania suggests that some cities continued without ruralization throughout the period.⁶

The God-Kings of the Persian Empire, the Sasanians, were facing similar changes in their own domain. Conflict with the Byzantines and internal dissent had forced reform of ancient systems. As in the Greek

Empire of the late sixth century, the governance of the Empire was centralized and urban centers had little autonomy. The Sasanians had also reformed taxes, set up governmental regions and begun to make changes in the formation of the military.⁷ Just as the Byzantines used the Ghassanids, the Sasanians similarly employed the Arabian Bedouin tribe of the Lakhmids to protect the Western fringes of their Empire.⁸

Unlike the two great Empires, Pre-Islamic Arabia was unorganized, a series of tribes within which personal allegiance and kinship played a significant role.⁹ Leadership was by chief, elected by the members of the tribe from the preeminent lines. Leaders, however, did not rule by force, but rather by persuasion and under the gaze of public opinion.¹⁰ While most of the tribes were pastoral nomads, some had begun to settle: the Quraysh of Mecca relied upon trade,¹¹ while archaeology points to extensive settlement the Ghassanids of Syria in the region around Bostra.¹²

As armies of Islam moved out of Arabia and into the former provinces of the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires, the rapid expansion of territory forced the Caliphs to adopt new modes of governance. In many cases, they adapted structures and practices already in place and used by the two earlier Empires. The Caliphs needed to divide their new conquests in order to rule them, and took their lead from the Persians. The Persian Empire had divided their land into four quarters, and in turn, into smaller provinces known as *ostans* or *kuras*. The Caliphs used these divisions to divide their own Empire.¹³ Under

¹ Clive Foss, "Syria in Transition, A.D. 550–750: An Archaeological Approach," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 51 (1997), 259.

² *Ibid*, 250.

³ Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, 2nd Edition (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2004), 2.

⁴ Clive Foss, "Syria in Transition," 204.

⁵ Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, 4.

⁶ Clive Foss, "Syria in Transition," 231.

⁷ Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, 9–10.

⁸ *Ibid*, 1

⁹ *Ibid* 18.

¹⁰ *Ibid* 19

¹¹ *Ibid*, 21.

¹² Clive Foss, "Syria in Transition," 251.

¹³ Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, 10.

the Caliphs, the military districts – *junds* – changed in shape, for example, the city of Antioch moved from the *jund* of Homs to that of Qinnasrin, but the principle remained the same.¹⁴ While early governors, known as *amirs*, remained relatively independent of Medina, this soon changed.¹⁵ As al-Tabari relates, under Mu'awwiya, the distribution of governorships of these *junds* was firmly in the hands of the Caliph, suggesting a focus upon consolidation and centralization of power with the Caliph, which mirrors similar centralization in both the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires.¹⁶ By the rule of al-Mansur, the Caliph had the ability and will to remove a governor at whim as described in *The Meadows of Gold*.¹⁷

While the governors changed from Byzantine or Sasanian, the lower levels of government and the lives of the ordinary people changed little in these provinces. In Syria, for example, Clive Foss argues that the greatest upheavals in daily life had occurred in the previous century, and that the Muslims left the region largely untouched.¹⁸ In particular, there seems to be neither any evidence of wide-scale attempts to convert the native Christians to Islam, nor of any great influx of Arab immigrants, especially in the North around Antioch.¹⁹ In effect, the Caliphate left much of the lower level administration to those from the provinces, despite their being non-Muslims. These administrators even spread beyond their original provinces, moving to Damascus and later Baghdad to form an important part of the civil bureaucracy. The lesser aristocracy of the Persian Empire, the *dihquans*, had formed an important part of the administration of the Sasanian Empire, continued under the Caliphs and formed a large bloc of the administrators for the Abbasids.²⁰

¹⁴ Clive Foss, "Syria in Transition," 192.

¹⁵ Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, 69.

¹⁶ al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari, Volume 18, Between Civil Wars: The Caliphate of Mu'awiyah*, translated by Michael G. Morony, Bibliotheca Persica. ed. Ehsan Yar-Shater (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987) 219.

¹⁷ Mas'udi, *The Meadows of Gold: the Abbasids*, trans. and ed. by Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone (London: Kegan Paul International, 1989), 150.

¹⁸ Clive Foss, "Syria in Transition," 259.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 204.

²⁰ Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, 11.

Economic life changed little with the shift from Byzantine and Sasanian rule to Islamic rule. Jere Bacharach citing the innately conservative nature of coinage notes that Byzantine and Sasanian coinage continued in circulation until the Umayyad caliph, Abd al-Malik.²¹ This is backed up by archaeological evidence from Syria, where Byzantine coins apparently remained in use well into the latter half of the seventh century: digs have uncovered seventy coins of Constans II (645–48 CE) as well as "Arab-Byzantine" coins from a later period.²²

As with the formation of the provinces, the Caliphs took many of their ideas regarding taxation from the Persians who in turn took them from the Byzantines. Under Khusrau I in the mid-sixth century, the Persians had reformed the system of taxation to bring in both land and poll taxes.²³ Under the early caliphs, the original owners of the land kept their land and paid their new masters both a land-tax, the *kharaj*, and a poll tax, the *jizya*. Just as the Persian aristocracy and priesthood had been exempt from the Persian poll tax, so too were Muslims exempt from the Islamic *jizya*.²⁴ However, while the methods of tax collection remained the same, the ultimate destination of the moneys collected created unease and dissent. While the earliest caliphs allowed some autonomy in the spending of tax funds, by Caliph Harun al-Rashid, the Caliphs insisted upon the collection of all taxes in Baghdad, just as the Sasanians had collected their taxes centrally.²⁵ The Caliphs used this money to pay the army and to begin large-scale building projects: little of the money made it back to the provinces. Rebellions, such as those in Khurasan, were the result of this policy.

Changes in policies regarding the military had in part obliged a change in tax collection policy. In the early Islamic conquests, the caliphs had relied upon tribal groups to spearhead the invasions and to police the frontier

²¹ Jere L. Bacharach, "Thoughts About Pennies and Other Monies," *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 35.1 (2000), 5.

²² Clive Foss, "Syria in Transition," 195.

²³ Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, 10.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 68

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 132

provinces.²⁶ This bore a great resemblance to the use of Arab tribes by the Byzantines and Sasanians in their frontier provinces. The practice had largely fallen into disuse in the chaos of the latter half of the sixth century, especially after the Ghassanid rebellion of 582 CE in Syria.²⁷ At the core of their Empires, however, both the Byzantines and Sasanians had used tax income to pay for standing armies, and as the tribal armies of the Islamic Caliphates proved troublesome, the Caliphs looked to this model. The early Abbasids used a core group of Khurasanis, paid for from taxes, to enforce their rule, while later Abbasids introduced a slave army.²⁸

The question of succession to the Caliphate was a constant problem to the Caliphs and one that was rarely resolved well. The earliest of the Caliphs followed the patterns established in Pre-Islamic tribal Arabia: that the community should elect the strongest candidate to lead the *umma*. This mirrored the effective situation in the Byzantine Empire, for while notionally hereditary, the Emperor tended to be the man most able to manipulate the forces around him to achieve the throne and the people accepted 'usurpers' such as Heraclius readily if they proved strong enough to lead.²⁹ However, the fifth Caliph, Mu'awiyya, after defeating the 'Alids and their claim to the Caliphate based on family, broke with this tradition by naming his son, Yazid, as his heir. Although Mu'awiyya might have been able to make an argument that his son was the best man for the job, the selection of Yazid's infant son, Mu'awiyya II, as Yazid's heir was clearly based on heredity not ability.³⁰ This insistence upon hereditary, despite ability, seems most like the situation in the Persian Empire, where strict principles of heredity for its rulers brought a number of weak Emperors such as Khusrau II, but denied legitimacy to strong men who tried to usurp power.³¹ This question was never totally resolved, by the Umayyads or by their Abbasid successors. Lassner

describes the struggles over the succession to the Caliph Abu al-Abbas as one of the most dominant questions of the early Abbasid rule. Yet, the argument did not involve sons of Abu al-Abbas but his uncle and his brother.³² While Wellhausen argued that Persian influences grew stronger under the Abbasids,³³ this seems to point to a move away from a strictly father-son heredity in favor of something closer to the original tribal and Byzantine models, where strength and competency had an impact.

With the succession so often disputed, the Caliphs needed to ensure their authority. While the centralization of power and reform of the military contributed to this increase in power, the caliphs once looked to Byzantine and Sasanian concepts. The Byzantine Emperor, while not enjoying divinity himself, was the head of the Eastern Orthodox Church. The Sasanian, on the other hand, considered their Emperor a God-King, a divine being ruling with the support of Ahura Mazda, the Good God of Zoroastrianism.³⁴ While the Caliph would never claim such divinity, many caliphs including 'Ali, based their claim to authority on religious as well as secular arguments. In the Abbasid period, Al-Mamun claimed the title of *imam* and introduced the *mihna*, a religious inquisition. John Nawas argues that this was not primarily for a religious reason, but to reinforce his personal authority in the face of political disputes.³⁵

The Caliphs also learned from the Byzantines about means to secure their power. The Byzantine Emperors had used public architecture to reinforce their authority. They had built great colonnades, cathedrals, agoras and public baths in their cities such as Antioch and Apamea, and rebuilt as necessary to reiterate their control.³⁶ The Umayyads began a similar series of building projects, especially in Damascus, with the same aim. However, caliphs such as al-Walid chose to built mosques,

²⁶ Ibid., 66.

²⁷ Clive Foss, "Syria in Transition," 252.

²⁸ Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, 134.

²⁹ Ibid, 7.

³⁰ Ibid 88.

³¹ Ibid 11

³² Jacob Lassner, *The Shaping of 'Abbasid Rule* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 19.

³³ Ibid. 4

³⁴ Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, 7.

³⁵ Nawas, John A. "A Reexamination of Three Current Explanations for al-Mamun's Introduction of the *Mihna*." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 26.4 (1994), 619.

³⁶ Clive Foss, "Syria in Transition," 191.

rather than cathedrals and other public buildings, adopting pre-Islamic forms such as the *mihrab*, to new religious uses.³⁷

As the Islamic Empire extended rapidly into the former provinces of the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires, the caliphs needed to find new means to govern their vast territories. Rather than effect a sweeping change, the Caliphs often adopted earlier structures, such as administration, governmental units and taxation, from their predecessors. Even as time passed and the Caliphate became a distinct and complex creation, the influence of the earlier traditions remained: in the military, in methods of invoking authority and in matters of the succession. Thus, rather than being a break from earlier traditions, the Caliphate was rather another point on a continuum of change and reform that only gradually resulted in a unique political structure.

³⁷ Nuha N.N. Khoury, "The Mihrab: From Text to Form," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 30.1 (1998), 2.

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