

Mobility and Materiality in Byzantine-Islamic Relations

7th-12th Centuries

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ABSTRACTS

Beihammer, Alexander (University of Notre Dame, USA): Exchange and mobility in the Byzantine-Seljuk borderland of 12th-century Asia Minor

The Byzantine-Seljuk borderland crystallized after a series of Turkish westward advances and Byzantine counter-attacks in the last years of Emperor Alexios I's reign and covered a vast strip of land stretching from the Sangarios valley in Bithynia along the fringes of the western Anatolian plateau as far as the headwaters of the Maeander River and the Taurus mountains. Throughout the 12th century this frontier zone was characterized by a high degree of permeability. The local defensive structures followed the region's geographic configuration and consisted of a thin frontline of isolated outposts and a relatively dense network of strongholds and garrisons watching over river valleys, agricultural areas, and access routes in the hinterland. While narrative sources mainly refer to this system as a barrier against invasions and transhumant pastoralists, we may infer that in times of peace and tranquility it was for the most a vast contact zone generating numerous forms of human, material, and cultural exchange. This paper will discuss three different aspects of 12th-century cross-border mobility by focusing on (1) migratory movements of sedentary and nomadic border populations, (2) the exchange of goods and commodities through cross-border commercial relations along the major east-west routes of Western Asia Minor, and (3) examples of cultural assimilation resulting from cross-border contacts between Christians and Turks.

Brey, Alexander (Wellesley College, USA): From Sicily to Sind: Byzantine luxury objects in the Umayyad Empire

According to the 9th-century historian al-Baladhuri, the first Umayyad caliph, Mu'awiya (r. 661–680), received "idols and gold and silver studded with pearls" looted from a raid in Sicily. Rather than keeping these luxury items or auctioning them locally, he shipped them to the provincial capital of al-Basra in modern Iraq. From this geographically central location in the Caliphate, he apparently intended to sell them to buyers from the easternmost province of Sind, what is today Pakistan, where they would fetch a high price. Taking these Byzantine luxury objects and their journey from Sicily to Sind as its starting point, this paper focuses on mobility between Byzantium and the Umayyad Caliphate in the 7th and 8th centuries as seen through the lens of three main categories of material exchange: diplomatic gifts, loot, and trade. Since few exotic luxury objects have been documented in scientific excavations of Umayyad monuments, most evidence for these exchanges comes in the form of reused images adorning Umayyad monuments and objects, later texts composed for Abbasid patrons in the 9th and 10th centuries, and modern technical analyses of materials including metals and glass. Considered together, these reveal distinct patterns of mobile objects, owners, and makers, which find parallels in Umayyad encounters with other neighboring kingdoms and empires.

Cosentino, Salvatore (University of Bologna, Italy): Byzantines and Muslims in early medieval Crete: Military economy, human landscape and trading exchange (ca. 600-900)

This paper aims at addressing the topic of Byzantine-Islamic relations in Crete in a *longue durée* perspective by avoiding the caesura between the period before and after the constitution of the emirate of Crete. Emphasis will be given to four key issues: 1) the economy of war seen from both parts, namely the strategizing behind Muslim military operations, the organization of Byzantine defense, as well as the impact of pillages upon Cretan society and demography 2) the transformation of human landscape on the island due to the state of militarization during the early Middle Ages 3) the modalities of settlement of the Muslims on Crete during their rule on the island 4) the sphere of exchanges undertaken on Crete and in the world around it throughout the period from the 7th to the early 10th century.

***Dospel Williams, Elizabeth* (Dumbarton Oaks, USA): From architecture to fabric and back again: The legacy of Sasanian textiles in Byzantine and early Islamic aesthetics**

This paper explores the long-lasting appeal of Sasanian textiles in Byzantine and early Islamic aesthetics, particularly in interior design and architectural decoration. In the first part of the paper, I present the complicated state of research on Sasanian textiles. On the one hand, it is possible to determine the Sasanian origins of certain textile motifs or designs, such as exotic animals, palmettes, and winged motifs, often arranged in mirrored patterns. These motifs connoted luxury and status well into the 8th and 9th centuries in Byzantium and the Islamic world, where they appear in textiles and architectural decoration alike. In the end, however, we must confront a conundrum: we can identify the incredibly influential category of Sasanian textiles mostly through their reflections in other media produced in other regions and at other times. In my conclusion, I argue that art historians need to account for a more circular and diachronic movement of Sasanian textile motifs, rather than a straightforward transmission from one medium to another. My broader methodological aim is to contrast the inherent mobility and timelessness of textile motifs, and the fixed-in-place and -time nature of architectural decoration.

***Durak, Koray* (Boğaziçi University, Turkey): Mobility of people in Byzantine-Islamic exchanges**

It is almost a cliché to remark that different groups of people moved between the Byzantine and Islamic worlds for political, military, economic, and religious purposes such as diplomats, merchants, and pilgrims. However, a strict definition based on purposes diminishes the complex nature of the exchanges in question, since many of those who travelled across the frontier did not fulfill one function, but assumed a number of roles such as diplomats-cum-merchants, clergy-cum-diplomats, and raiders-cum-traders. The aim of this paper is to show what roles were combined with which others, advantages and limits of such composite roles, and the impact of such hybrid practices on the daily working of political, military, economic, and religious/cultural contacts between the Byzantines and the Near Easterners. Such a perspective may help us understand medieval hybrid identities, and even go beyond the definition of identity as a unit of analysis.

***Eger, Asa* (University of North Carolina at Greensboro, USA): Anatomy of a Byzantine-Islamic frontier fort: Cross-cultural materialities and identities at the site of Ḥiṣn al-Tināt**

It is now well-understood that the Islamic-Byzantine frontier was a porous one, linked with movement and exchange, rather than sealed by a line of fortresses on either side of which lay a no-man's land. However, few of these forts have ever been excavated and their material culture studied. Analyzing the physical remains of interaction across the frontier provides crucial evidence of the composition of these frontier 'forts', the nature of trade between Byzantine and Islamic lands, and the ethnic and religious identities of those that inhabited them. Between 2005-2011, the site of Tüpraş Field near Dörtöyl, Turkey on the Mediterranean's Bay of Iskenderun, was surveyed and excavated over three seasons. The site can be identified as Ḥiṣn al-Tināt, mentioned in Islamic sources. The excavations have allowed us to examine the anatomy of a small-sized ḥiṣn or frontier fort. The site had two main occupational phases, 8-10th centuries and 10-12th centuries, or roughly, before and after the Byzantine reconquest. The results show principally that the fortress was not a military garrison but rather a waystation, sitting astride the frontier and well-connected to Byzantine and Islamic territories by both land and sea, and was inhabited without break from the 8-12th centuries. Secondly, material culture of metal, glass, ceramic, and tile objects point to local production from Islamic northern Syria even past the Byzantine reconquest, as well as goods imported from the Black Sea and Sea of Marmara regions, Fatimid Egypt, and 'Abbasid Iraq, for trade. Finally, these local and cross-cultural materialities provide evidence on the ethno-religious identities of the site's inhabitants and their way of life that gives a more complicated picture of settlement on an otherwise dichotomous frontier.

***Freeman, Evan* (University of Regensburg, Germany): Crossing sacred bounds: Islamic arts in the Byzantine liturgy**

Byzantine canonical, historical, and hagiographical sources often suggest that boundaries between consecrated objects in church treasuries and non-sacred objects of everyday life were clearly defined and strictly controlled. Some texts go so far as to imply that only objects embodying a sense of material, moral, and religious purity were permitted to enter service in the Church. As such, it would seem reasonable to infer that the Church must have excluded arts from Islamic lands, whose peoples were viewed as religiously heterodox and often as military enemies by the Byzantines. Indeed, a 13th-century historical account written by George Pachymeres betrays anxieties about the presence of Islamic texts in ecclesial settings. Yet surviving artistic evidence paints a more complex picture. The use of Pseudo-Arabic scripts to decorate Middle Byzantine churches is well documented, and there is evidence such scripts may have appeared on Eucharistic objects as well. Eucharistic vessels preserved in the Treasury of San Marco in Venice incorporated repurposed stone and glass vessels from antiquity and Islamic lands. Church inventories reveal that objects of Islamic origins were not only present in some churches, but also that ecclesial authorities understood and apparently had no objections to their Islamic history. Such examples challenge textual accounts of strictly defined sacred boundaries and suggest that Byzantine religious ritual could be a site of cross-cultural encounter. They raise questions about how and why Islamic elements entered the Byzantine liturgy and the ways in which they were understood.

Gerolymatou Maria* (Institute of Historical Research, National Hellenic Research Foundation, Athens, Greece): **Mobility and materiality across the frontier in the 10th century*

Exchange of gifts and emissaries between Byzantium and the Caliphate was a common practice in the deployment of Byzantine-Islamic relations from the 7th to the 12th century. There is plenty of documentation, no matter the changes of persons and dynasties holding power. However, there was a parallel “diplomacy,” traces of which gradually become more frequent. The Byzantine recapture of urban centers in northern Syria in the second half of the 10th century not only had political and demographical consequences, but it also revealed the mobility, which was the principal characteristic of life on the border, often a “no man's land.” It was inhabited by people ready to support one state or the other, depending on the privileges or the autonomy promised to them each time. The political instability of the ruling class in the Caliphate and the challenges of central power in Byzantium were a factor which largely facilitated the violation of treaties, alliances and policies of the states (whether Christian or Islamic) involved in this area. All of them proved to be unexpectedly flexible in order to promote their own interests and achieve their goals. Incursions, treaties providing for the payment of tribute, not to speak about booty and redemption of captives and perhaps more than anything else, the continuously shifting alliances across ethnic and religious lines, are only some of the tactics employed in this struggle.

Leontsini, Maria and Ilias Anagnostakis* (Institute of Historical Research, National Hellenic Research Foundation, Athens, Greece): **Food mobilities between the Byzantine and the Islamic worlds: High-value materials, concepts and trends, 7th to 12th centuries*

Reports on the moving of high-value food goods in relation to diet, as well as to pharmacy and medicine, testify to the developments in practices relating to food consumption and reveal the emphasis on the adoption of eastern foodways, thus indicating in various ways some real and symbolic mobility relationships. The relevant information material is sometimes framed in Byzantine sources with hints to culinary pursuits in specific political, military, economic, social and cultural contexts. Some of these references, especially the literary ones, convey the spread of eastern food items and also attest, usually indirectly, to the presence of population groups that “transfer” materials, habits and tastes. These phenomena were interwoven to the dynamics of the central authority's interests in controlling communication networks in the Eastern Mediterranean. The state measures and operational actions aiming at inspecting land crossings and sea stations, mainly in productive border areas, eventually strengthened and maintained open and active communications and cultural contacts with the Islamic world.

Mavroudi, Maria* (University of California, Berkeley, USA): **Philosophy between the Byzantine and the Islamic world, 9th-11th centuries*

Modern scholarship since the 19th century has repeatedly reiterated that philosophy died in the Graeco-Roman world at the end of antiquity and was reborn in the 9th century in Arabic in the hands of al-Kindi (the first self-identified philosopher in the Arabic tradition). The philosophical materials presumed to have aided this rebirth were the Greek and Syriac manuscripts of late antique authors preserved in the Christian monasteries in Muslim lands. The paper will distance itself from this time-honored narrative. It will explain why the development of philosophy in Arabic in the 9th and 10th centuries was certainly informed by philosophical developments in 9th- and 10th-century Byzantium. It will also outline which concrete intellectual channels made such philosophical communication possible.

Montinaro, Federico* (Tübingen University, Germany): **Religious conflict and mobility in the early medieval Near East: People, letters, and books between Constantinople and the Abbasid Caliphate in the time of Photius*

The paper hopes to provide new insights into what Byzantine texts produced, exchanged, and circulated during the so-called Photian schism (ca. 858-880) such as conciliar acts, letters, canonical collections, and apologetic writings can tell us about political change in the Abbasid Caliphate and the situation of the “Melkites” and other Christian communities under Arab rule and their ties to Constantinople.

Pahlitzsch, Johannes* (Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, Germany): **The Melkites of Syria during the period of the Crusades (1187-1291)*

This paper will focus on the Melkites, i.e. the indigenous, mostly Arabic-speaking members of the Byzantine Orthodox Church in Syria, between the collapse of the first Crusader kingdom of Jerusalem in 1187 and the Mamluk conquest of Acre in 1291. The paper will address the situation of the Melkite community in this transformational period and how their relations with Muslims and other Christian communities developed at this period. A specific characteristic of the Melkites is their high degree of mobility across political boundaries, in the context of which also ideas and objects were transferred between Damascus, Cairo, Jerusalem and Constantinople.

Papadopoulou, Pagona (*Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece*): **Economic, non-economic, ideological and more: Coinage as evidence for Byzantine-Islamic relations**

As one of the most widely circulating objects, and a common archaeological find, coins represent an important indicator of contact and exchange between different peoples and cultures. Byzantine-Islamic relations are not an exception to this rule. As a means of conducting commercial transactions on an interregional and international level it circulated between Byzantium and the Islamic lands, fulfilling a significant economic role. As an important component of the gift exchange between rulers of the Empire and the Caliphate, it was part of non-economic exchanges. It also formed part of in-between exchanges, when used in order to pay tribute or ransom, since this type of transactions had an important economic impact, but were equally non-economic, conveying messages of prevalence on an ideological level. Moreover, the dissemination of messages – religious or related to hegemonic ideology – was achieved through the iconography and epigraphy of coinage, while the imitation and appropriation of these elements could be used as a means of enhancing a ruler's prestige, as an assertion of his supremacy over his opponent, or could simply result from the necessity of continuing a well-established tradition. The paper will review literary, archaeological, and iconographic evidence that sheds light on the role of coinage on different levels of Byzantine-Islamic relations.

Preiser-Kapeller, Johannes (*Austrian Academy of Sciences, Austria*): **The core and the periphery: Byzantium and Islamic polities in the Afro-Eurasian World System, 7th to 12th centuries CE**

The aim of this paper is to embed Byzantine-Islamic relations into the wider framework of connectivity across Afro-Eurasia from the time of the emergence of the Islamic community to the period of the Crusades. For this purpose, the theoretical approach of world system theory, as also applied onto ancient and medieval periods recently (Beaujard 2019), is combined with tools of network analysis on the basis of historical and archaeological evidence for routes and corridors of exchange as well as the distribution of artefacts and commodities. Thereby, shifting “hubs,” “nodes” and “peripheries” as well as “axes” of mobility between and beyond the Islamic and Byzantine spheres are identified. These spatial dynamics are explained through socio-political and economic developments within these polities, but also their interdependencies among each other and with further macro-regions in the Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean and Inner Eurasia. Thus, Byzantine-Islamic relations are equally integrated within more general discussions of global history from the “Escape from Rome” (Scheidel 2019) to the “Great Divergence” (Pomeranz 2000) between Western Europe and the “rest” of the world, which still often a priori localize both Byzantium and the Islamic sphere at the “margins” of their models and debates.

Vokaer, Agnès (*Université libre de Bruxelles, Belgium*): **Ceramic trade and connections at the Abbasid frontier: The case of Tarsus Gözlükule**

Recent excavations by the Boğaziçi University (dir. A. Özyar) resumed since 2007 on the mound of Tarsus (Gözlükule) have shed some further light on a domestic quarter of the town in the Abbasid period. The ceramic material retrieved in quantity, mainly from trash pits around the excavated houses, provides an interesting picture on the dynamics of trade at the periphery of the Caliphate during the 9th-10th centuries. While the location of the city on the frontier between Byzantium and the Islamic world could have led us to expect to find evidence for trade or at least some influences from the Byzantine world, it appears that the vast majority of the wares (glazed tablewares, coarse or cooking wares), stylistically belongs to the Abbasid *koine*. Some types are locally or regionally produced while others, related to the *Samarra horizon*, are imported from Iraq. One exception is worth noting, and will also be discussed in this paper: an amphora, the only imported amphora found during the recent excavations, is likely to originate from the eastern part of the Black Sea.

Vroom, Joanita (*Leiden University, the Netherlands*): **Mapping the movement of materiality: Ceramics crossing the Byzantine-Islamic frontier (ca. 7th-12th c.)**

This paper aims to present a general overview of the distribution of Byzantine and Islamic pottery finds (fine wares, amphorae and coarse wares) throughout the (eastern) Mediterranean from approximately the 7th to the 12th centuries. The focus will range from pottery finds found on Cyprus, Crete and the southern coast of Turkey, which were once part of the Byzantine Empire, to wares excavated at sites in neighboring areas (among which sites in the Levant and in Egypt). Comparison between the ceramics found in these regions will shed new light on exchange patterns of such commodities in this period. The relevance of pottery as object of study is clear: it is the ubiquitous and most mobile material product of the past and can be an indicator of broader patterns of economic as well as cultural contacts and interactions along the Byzantine-Islamic frontier.

Zavagno, Luca* (Bilkent University, Turkey): **Cross-cultural encounters on Byzantine islands (ca.600- ca.900): An archaeological perspective*

This paper examines the role of some large Mediterranean islands as places of cross-cultural encounters in the passage from Late Antiquity to the early Middle Ages (ca. 500-ca. 900 CE). Although literary sources (both Byzantine and Arab and Western) dismiss islands of the eastern and western Mediterranean simply as places of exile or distant military outposts along maritime frontiers, archaeology and material culture have recently shed light on the role they played as “spaces of connectivity.” This is due not only to their strategic locations along the commercial shipping routes crisscrossing the Mediterranean, but also because islands often presented unique opportunities for cultural encounters. Indeed, this paper tries to briefly document how some Mediterranean islands such as Sardinia, the Balearics, Malta, and Cyprus were not simply caught in the crossfire of a “Pirennian” conflict between two (or more) polities; they rather consistently acted as places where local elites adjusted the tone of their daily socio-economic, cultural, and even religious interaction.

Coins (Arab-Byzantine, Byzantine, and Islamic), lead-seals (both Byzantine and Arab), inscriptions (boasting Greek, Latin, and Kufic characters), as well as the results of the analysis of production and circulation of ceramics chime with the literary sources to present a comparative picture of the relationships between the Byzantines and the Muslims as opposed to the idea of a Mediterranean maritime “frontier,” simply pierced by constant cycles of warfare or seasonal raiding.