
*Rosetta* 9.5: 47-54.

[http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/colloquium2011/reynolds_monasticism.pdf](http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/colloquium2011/reynolds_monasticism.pdf)
Athletes of Virtue in the Age of the Caliphates:
Monasticism and Pilgrimage in the Early Islamic ‘Holy Land’
c.650-900 CE

Daniel Reynolds
PhD candidate, 2nd year (full-time)
University of Birmingham, College of Arts and Law
dkr893@bham.ac.uk

Context

Academic awareness and interest in the apologetic and theological activity of Palestine’s monastic milieu in the Early Islamic period has accelerated over the past twenty years and its growing profile on modern academic agendas has facilitated a more detailed understanding of the reaction of monastic writers to ‘Arab’ political hegemony after the 630s CE¹ and their intellectual response to the consolidation of a rival Islamic theological discourse.

A steadily growing corpus of critical editions of surviving texts continues to endorse this trend and the appearance of many translations in modern European languages (increasingly English) has, in addition, facilitated the exposure of this material to a wider academic audience and a greater repertoire of critical and disciplinary approaches. Continuous publications focussing on individual writers are also beginning to open newer research avenues aimed at outlining the broader trends and theological approaches employed by Palestinian monastic communities in the defence of Christian doctrine and devotional identity.²

Equally vibrant developments have characterised the concurrent academic analysis of Early Islamic polemical discourse directed against Christian

¹ For the most complete synthesis of source material, and related bibliography, see Hoyland 1997.
² Griffith 2008, which explores emerging themes in Christian-Islamic discourse and synthesises over 30 years of his own scholarship.
communities and associated monastic writers between the eighth and tenth centuries: communities which still constituted a significant demographic presence in the Early Islamic Levant and which remained strongly imbued with connections to older established networks of authority.  

Recent studies have drawn attention to the significant level of interchange and dialogue between writers of both social and religious factions. A resulting feature of this contemporary academic probing is the modern recognition of the sensitivity of Palestinian Christian apologetic to concurrent trends in Islamic theological thinking and methods of religious disputation.  

Following the adoption of Arabic by Palestinian monastic communities after 750 CE, monastic writers rapidly appropriated the style and linguistic flair of contemporary Islamic discourse (frequently inspired by the Qur'an) in order to safeguard the survival of the wider Christian community. Ongoing interest in this linguistic and theological transition has generated the publication of several eloquent studies and does not require fuller elaboration here.

Far less elucidated in modern studies, are the wider social, economic and material transitions which framed these developments within monastic communities after the seventh century. Modern studies have achieved an intricate understanding of the theological and linguistic trends in monastic literary production in the Early Islamic period yet, in contrast, almost nothing is currently available which examines the broader physical and social environment in which such monastic writers operated and to which their theological contributions undoubtedly responded. The underlying aim of my doctoral thesis is to present such a wider social and archaeological context to this existing body of research.

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3 See the numerous contributions of David Thomas, 1992; 2008 which explores the works of several key writers.
4 Swanson 1998; 2007
5 The first complete treatise in Christian Arabic that is currently identified is the erroneously named On the Triune Nature of God (Sinai Arabic MS 154) dated by various scholars between 755-88CE.
6 Swanson 1998; 2007
Palestinian Monasticism 614-950 CE.

Continued refinements in the identification and chronological sequencing of ‘Early Islamic’ ceramic assemblages have instigated a dramatic reappraisal of the initial impact of the Arab conquest on Palestine’s monastic milieu and wider Christian infrastructure. Ongoing discoveries of epigraphic dedications in church and monastic structures, dated to the eighth and early ninth century, have also partly provoked this popular reassessment of established interpretive models. Once maligned as a period which heralded dramatic devastation to Palestine’s network of monasteries and pilgrimage sites, more recent scholarly revisions have stressed the uninterrupted occupation of monastic sites throughout the period and the continuity of monastic social roles in the formative phases of the Umayyad Caliphate. This trend has been highly welcome, not least because it has successfully liberated discussions of the Early Islamic period from a litany of anti-Arab prejudices but also because it has facilitated a more nuanced assessment of social change in Syria-Palestine between the seventh and tenth centuries.

However, the popular emphasis upon monastic ‘continuity’ in the Early Islamic period has in turn raised several additional issues which warrant further critical appraisal. Chief among these is the continued adherence of many scholars to the idea that the decline of monasticism and Christian pilgrimage in the region can be attributed to a single cataclysmic event which produced an identifiable archaeological sequence. The revisionist approaches to the Arab conquest have rendered its own destructive role as somewhat obsolete, but the underlying theory is still routinely applied to discussions of the earlier Sassanid conquest (c.614-28 CE). Abandonment phases at monastic sites are habitually attributed to the Sassanid incursion, based on a persistent misdating of Late Byzantine fine ware and the use of the surviving textual accounts as a methodological basis for archaeological strategies in the

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8 Di Segni 2009
region. Recent studies have indicated that this interpretative model is unsustained by archaeological data and a further branch of my own doctoral research has sought to outline the key methodological flaws in current approaches to the key source of the Sassanid occupation of Palestine: Strategios’ Capture of Jerusalem.

In contrast to these more pessimistic interpretations are those which stress the continuity of monastic life in the Early Islamic Levant. Whilst not misguided (a growing corpus of epigraphic dedications, excavations and papyri continue to endorse this image of stability), the indiscriminate use of this term, which is often presented without a practical definition, risks reducing its value to little more than inverted cliché of the older theory of endemic devastation. This issue is made particularly acute by developments at monastic sites such as St Aaron’s at Petra, where an earthquake in the mid-eighth century destroyed the existing monastic site. The monastic community survived, but was only rebuilt on a third of its original scale – in marked contrast to two previous destructive phases at the site where the complex was reconstructed and refurbished in its entirety. It appears that the main site only temporarily continued in use until its abandonment in the early ninth century. This pattern of monastic continuity, framed by a steady process of contraction, impoverishment and eventual abandonment, is replicated at other sites in the region. Such examples necessitate the need for a more nuanced recognition of the nature of monastic continuity in the Early Islamic world and the wider social processes which permitted or prohibited monastic survival. The rather cumbersome use of the term ‘continuity’ belies a growing corpus of archaeological and textual material which elucidates the diminishing physical presence of monasticism in the Palestinian landscape, and more generally, the declining socio-political role of Christianity towards the later ninth and tenth century. Explanations for this progressive development are at present, visibly lacking.

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11 See Magness 1993, for a revised chronological sequence for many wares artificially dated to 614.
12 Avni 2010
14 See Mikkola et al 2008, for a full discussion of the phasing of the monastic church.
This situation is primarily a product of existing, as yet widely unchallenged, research methodologies for earlier phases of Palestinian monasticism. Habitual focus on the ethnic constructions presented by Palestinian hagiography has encouraged a widespread assessment of the monastic milieu (and related avenues of patronage) as a primarily artificial movement stimulated by imperial sponsorship and successive waves of elite immigration from the Byzantine heartlands of the Aegean and Anatolia. The Arab conquest, which is considered to have severed these ties, is commonly enlisted to explain the perceived rapid faltering of Palestinian monasticism in the Early Islamic world. The model is widely replicated, but nonetheless overlooks a substantial body of epigraphic and papyrylogical material which emphasises the strong integration of monastic communities in localised networks of authority and the importance of the monastic institution as a venue for localised elite patronage and devotional activity.

However, the visibly more modest nature of these patronal interventions highlights a further development which presented significant implications to the trajectory of monastic communities. Steadily isolated from elite contact with the Byzantine world and from the centralised state resource of the Umayyad government, Palestinian monastic communities were required to become economically and culturally self-perpetuating to survive and were increasingly more reliant on the stability of Christianity among localised elite families.

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15 See, for example, Binns 1994 which presents an entire history of Palestinian monasticism based around a limited range of hagiographical material. Similar sentiments are also repeated in Hirschfeld 1993: 152 and the earlier study of Judean desert monasticism; Hirschfeld 1992.

16 At the monastery of Sergios and Bakkios in Nessana, the family of Sergios play an important roles as *hegoumenoi* (abbots) of the monastery and also appear as witnesses and conveners of legal proceedings; *P.Ness* 58 and *P.Ness* 75 provide two examples. See Stroumsa 2008, for a discussion of the Nessana papyri. Some examples of Arabic and Aramaic epigraphy are provided in Di Segni and Naveh 1996, Piccirillo 2001 and Shahid 2001. The corpus of Aramaic and Arabic inscriptions in Palestinian churches has yet to be fully collated.
The rapid abandonment of monastic sites, over the course of the ninth and tenth centuries, can be explained as a response to this accelerated process of elite conversion to Islam and the increasing Islamic scrutiny of Christian doctrine which collectively succeeded in breaking these traditional patronal bonds. As champion defenders of Christian doctrine or figures of highly sexualised ridicule, monks stood at the interchange of these diverging religious expressions.\textsuperscript{17}

Only a limited number of monasteries survived the impact of this widespread cultural reorientation and by the tenth century, the presence and activity of Palestinian monasteries was to be characterised by its consolidation into several key centres focussed around Jerusalem, the Judean Desert and Sinai. Monastic communities which survived this formative social shift appear to have all shared one key feature: each incorporated a tomb or biblical site whose significance extended beyond localised pious custom and were significant religious loci for Christians throughout the Islamic or Byzantine world and increasingly, from Armenia and the Carolingian or Anglo Saxon kingdoms of the former Roman west. This ability to draw patronage and members from a wider geographical sphere, arguably shielded such monastic institutions from the collapse of localised systems of benefaction. It also may clarify why it is these key centres which produced the most energetic defence against Islam: the arching aim of this communication is to explore some of these explanations.

\textbf{Bibliography}


\textsuperscript{17} For the use of the monk as a heroic apologetic figure see Griffith 1998. For the portrayal of monks as sexual deviants or objects of homoerotic desire see Sprachman 1997.


