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### **Constantinople and the early Islamic conquests**

The Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453 was the fulfilment of a project that was launched already by the first Muslim conquerors in the 1st century of the Hijra. The Arabic sources refer to two major attacks against the city. In fact one attempt is reported already from the year 644 (Tabari II:86) under 'Abd ar-Rahman b. Khalid who did not reach the city proper but stopped at Pergamon. The report is a short notice in Tabari and it is difficult to judge its historical value. But the two others were according to both Arabic and Byzantine sources real sieges of the city: the Muslim armies actually stood before the walls. The first one most likely took place between 667 and 672, thus lasting almost six years (Theophanes pp. 353 ff.; Tabari II:86, 163). This attack is of a particular renown since Abu Ayyub Khalid b. Zayd al-ansari who had carried the Prophet's standard in the battle of Badr in 624, fell in it and is said to have been buried before the walls. The present tomb was 'discovered' during the siege in 1453 but it is mentioned already by Ibn Qutayba in the middle of the 9th century (Ibn Qutayba 274). He mentions that it was known to the Byzantines who venerated it (cf. Tabari III:2324).

The second siege was under taken during the caliphate of Sulayman b. 'Abd al-Malik in 716-717 and was lead by his brother Maslama (Theophanes 886-899; Tabari II:1314ff.; Mordtmann 1986). The siege is surrounded by legends and the foundations of the Galata tower as well as the Arap Camii are said to have been laid out during this event although there is still no archaeological confirmation of this.

The two sieges of Constantinople are remarkable military achievements even if the Muslims did not succeed in taking the city. When Mehmet Fatih finally made the city part of *dar al-islam* a hadith was circulated in which Muhammad is reported to have said: "You [i.e. the Muslims] shall conquer Qustantiniyya; peace be upon the prince and the army to whom this shall be granted!" According to Mordtmann (1986:532) this hadith cannot be traced earlier than as-Suyuti (15th century). It is, however found already in Ahmad b. Hanbal's *Musnad*, one of the six canonical books of hadith, compiled in the 9th century CE and there the prince is identified with Maslama b. 'Abd al-Malik (Ibn Hanbal 4:335 no. 19165).

The thrust against the capital of the Roman empire is part of the larger event, viz. the Islamic conquests. This project is definitely one of the most remarkable military enterprises in world history. Unlike many others, it has had decisive consequences for the course of world history: the spread of the Arabic language in the Middle East and North Africa, and the spread of the new religion which was soon transformed into a major spiritual force in the world, creating a cosmopolitan culture of amazing richness and variety. Which were the reasons behind it and which role did Constantinople play in it?

As far as the general causes of the conquest are concerned several explanations have been suggested (Donner 1981:3-19; id. 2008). A common widely spread idea since long was that the aim was conversion: the conquests aimed at spreading the new religion from Arabia and making the world Muslim. The concept of *jihad*, 'the holy war', was consequently seen as essential among the forces behind the conquests. A moderation of this concept was the idea that even if the ideological pretext was religious, the main forces were economic. The religious motivation was an intellectual superstructure legitimizing a gigantic *razzia*. The steering force was the innate cupidity and greed for booty characteristic of the 'bedouin'. This explanation was launched by two leading scholars during the first half of the 20th century, L. Caetani and C. H. Becker (Donner 2008:xix-xx). Especially Caetani rejected the importance of ideology, claiming that the 'Arab nomads' had no sense of religion at all (Donner 2008:1-13). An even more 'secularized' model was suggested by H. Winckler who saw the expansion of the Arabs as the last great invasion of nomadic Semites from the Arabian Peninsula, the first of which had been the Akkadians 2400 BCE, the Amorites around 2000 BCE, followed by the Aramaeans (including the Israelite invasion of Palestine) around 1200 BCE (Donner 2008:xix). There is no doubt that these explanation reflect the orientation towards economy and social structures as the main forces of history so characteristic of western historiography since the end of the 19th century.

As far as our problem is concerned there were some dissenting voices. In two articles published in the 1950ies G. H. Bousquet voiced scepticism about the abstract prevalent economic models of the conquest (Donner 2008:xx-xxi, 15-35). He emphasized what the sources actually say, viz. that Islam was a religious movement founded by a prophet who was not a military man and that the whole culture created by the conquests was permeated by ideas and ideals ultimately stemming from this prophet and the circle around him. To deny the religious, or rather, ideological factor is actually a blatant denial of what the sources say. Some subsequent scholars tried to find explanations that could include the ideological factor among the main 'secular' causes. One important line of thought, represented by M. Hodgson (Hodgson 1974 207ff.), F. Donner (Donner

1981:55, 251-271) and H. Kennedy (Kennedy 2007:56f), is that Muhammad actually created a new kind of political entity in Arabia founded on the new religion. This entity transformed the role of the nomadic tribes: they had to stop warring between themselves. Instead their energy was directed outwards towards the Fertile Crescent. The ideology was able to institutionalize the traditional booty-taking, which however remained a main factor behind the mobilisation of the tribes.

A radical reintroduction of the ideological factor was given by P. Crone and M. Cook in the now famous book *Hagarism. The making of the Islamic World* in 1977. Based on reading of contemporary non-Arabic sources they claimed that early Islam was a kind of a Jewish revival movement based in north-western Arabia aiming at the conquest of Palestine and rebuilding of the temple. This triggered off the first conquests which later on were transformed into something else. Already Bousquet had emphasized the different stages of the conquest.

*Hagarism* was met with quite strong opposition from several scholars and Crone/Cook seem later to have backed down on certain quite provocative statements in that work. It has also generated renewed work with the sources, Arabic and non-Arabic, for the first century of Islam having produced a substantial amount of highly qualified studies on several aspects of the conquest manifest i.a. in the splendid series of publications named *The Formation of the Classical Islamic World*.

Without denying the non-ideological factors behind the conquest story it is obvious that ideology played a central role. The emphasis on this aspect is a lasting result of Crone/Cook's work. But their construction of a Jewish revival movement as it is presented in *Hagarism* is not very convincing. But there are other pieces of evidence than those pointed out by them that may shed new light on a very important factor of crucial importance for the understanding of the Islamic conquest.

One major problem concerning the conquests in general which should be kept in mind is the lack of contemporary Arabic sources from the period. The main testimonies are written down more than one century after the events even if these sources often quote older ones going back to the period. This makes the question of source criticism crucial and difficult. There is one source discovered fairly recently that sheds a dramatic light upon the ideological aspect of the events. It is the *Kitab al-fitān*, 'The Book of Tribulations', written in the beginning of the 9th century by Hammad b. Nu'aym, a respected *hadith*-scholar dead 842 CE. This book is a compilation of eschatological statements by different authorities. A substantial part of it originates from Yemenis belonging to the community of Yemeni Muslims in the city of Hims in Syria during the

end of the Sufyanid period in the Second Civil War around 690 CE. There is no reasonable doubt that the attribution of these sayings to the people of Ḥimṣ is basically correct as has convincingly been shown by W. Madelung in a groundbreaking article (Madelung 1986) in which he presented the text for the first time. Later on, the text, which is preserved in one manuscript, has been edited a couple of times. The text offers a unique glimpse into the thinking and ambitions of a substantial part of the Muslim community in Syria during the early stage of the conquests. The sayings give a picture of how the Yemeni Muslims envisaged the final stage of the world history, an event which they obviously considered themselves part of and witnesses to. The sayings do not describe an eschatological scenario in a distant future but a cataclysmic event which was unfolding before their own eyes.

The scenario is as follows: Mu'awiya b. Sufyan, the founder of the Umayyad dynasty, is the great hero. He is part of a series of seven rulers, the last of which will be the *amir al-'usab*, 'the prince of the hosts', a messiah of Qahtanid descent, i.e. a Yemeni. This figure is given the title *al-mansur*, 'the victorious one' and *al-mahdi*, 'the guided one', two titles which thus have a Yemeni origin. He shall put an end to the reign of Quraysh and will rule until the end of the world. He is the one who will face the final battle with the main enemy of Islam and he will fulfil the ultimate purpose of the message of the Prophet: the conquest of Constantinople and the final defeat of Rome. The great battles, *al-malahim al-'uzma*, are described in glowing colours and in great detail. An *umma* of the people of Musa and, in another saying, the descendants of Qadhar, i.e. both Israelites and North Arabians, will join the people of Saba in the final battle which will take place on the plain of al-'Amq at Antioch, followed by the capture of Constantinople (Madelung 1986:158-159). After that, 'Isa b. Maryam will descend at the eastern gate of Damascus.

The picture given in the *Kitab al-fitan* is completely clear: for the Yemenis in Syria the main goal of the Islamic project was the conquest of the Roman empire and its capital, Constantinople. The sayings preserved in the book originate in connection with the ascendance of other rival groups in Syria during the Sufyanid caliphate. There is e.g. a violent polemic against the Syrian Qudha'a-tribes, tribes which later became the allies of the Yemenis after the battle of Marj Rahit in 684 CE. The sayings are thus earlier than this date (Madelung 1986:180ff.).

These ideas among the Yemenis in Syria could be of limited importance, representing quite local ideals among one group among many others in the early Islamic movement. But it should be noticed that the Yemenis played a crucial

role in the conquest of Syria. They are said to have been decisive factor during the first wave of conquests (Tabari I:2612; Mad'aj 1988:69-75; Madelung 1986:183f.). It is said that when the order of mobilisation was given by Abu Bakr the Yemenis were very keen on taking part in the Syrian campaign whereas it was more difficult to engage them against Iraq and only a few tribes joined the campaign there (al-Mad'aj 1988:65-69). The details cannot be presented here but the impression is that the Yemenis had a special urge to go towards Syria – the Roman empire.

One more element might be pointed out. Yemen looms large in the early Islamic quasi-historical picture of the history before the 6th century. In the genealogical system, the Yemenis are identified with the 'real Arabs', they are the ones who first received the Arabic language and most of the prophets mentioned in the Qur'an whose historical domicile was uncertain or unknown, like Hud, Salih, Luqman, *dhu l-Qarnayn* (Q 18:83ff.), the people of *tubba'* (Q 44:37) etc. are located to Yemen. These elements are accepted as canonical history in the entire classical Islamic historiography but they do not have any corresponding background in the political prominence of Yemen after the 1st century of the Hijra. After 720 the Yemenis were successively marginalized and have remained so until this day. The picture of the prominence of Yemen must thus be formed very early, in the 1st century, and it can thus be assumed that it reflects the prominence of the Yemenis during this early period during the conquest of Syria. What seems to have been the first world history in Islamic literature, written by the Yemeni scholar Wahb b. Munabbih in the 720ies CE, now extant in the *Kitab at-tijan* edited by Abu Muhammad 'Abd al-Malik b. Hisham one century later is a most eloquent document concerning the early Yemeni view of their role in history (Retsö 2005-06). The conquests of the Umayyads are there presented as mere repetitions of the (unhistorical) conquests by the pre-Islamic kings of Yemen. The univocal acceptance of these Yemeni views by the ensuing Islamic historiography continued until this day is also remarkable and it may indicate that the Yemenis should not be seen as one group among many others but instead as a leading element in the early Islamic movement.

The Yemeni eschatology documented in the *Kitab al-fitan* should be read in this context. It is most likely not only the wishful thinking of groups who were beginning to lose their prominent position (thus Madelung) but contains elements which were basic incitements during their heyday, i.e. during the initial stage of the Islamic conquest. And we have seen that there is no doubt about the goal of that project: the defeat of Rome and the conquest of Constantinople. If this was the ideology inspiring the Yemeni faction in the Islamic movement and

if their position in that movement indeed was that of central military leadership one might start to wonder where these ideas originate.

I would suggest that the background should be looked for in the pre-Islamic history of Arabia, especially that of the recently discovered empire which ruled Arabia under a monotheistic religion during more than two centuries before the rise of Islam. The realisation that the kingdom of Himyar was not a beduin entity like the Lakhmids in al-Hira or the Ghassanids in Syria but a real imperial project, based on an ancient agricultural society with an urban culture and with many contacts with the surrounding world, an empire which established itself as the leading power in Arabia during the 5th century CE, reaching the Roman limes in Syria around 500 (Shahid 1989:120 ff.) is due to change our understanding of the rise of Islam considerably, to say the least.

There are two factors which should be singled out in this context. The first is the religion of Himyar which definitely was monotheistic and, according to the later Arabic historiography, Jewish (Robin 2003; Gajda 2009:223-254). What kind of Judaism was practised in Himyar may be debated but there is little doubt about the connection with the great monotheistic biblical tradition. The location of the Queen of Sheba to Yemen is documented for the first time by Philostorgius in the beginning of the 5th century (*Historia ecclesiastica* 3.4) and it is tempting to see this as a reflex of self-understanding in Himyar: the Himyarites were of course not Israelites but the story of the Queen of Sheba as the righteous gentile was well established by the Christians and when identified with the Yemeni Saba it gave the Yemeni monotheists a great predecessor, giving them a place in the sacred history.

Let us thus assume for a moment that the monotheistic Himyar indeed identified itself with Sheba of the Old Testament. Admittedly we do not have any contemporary document from Himyar itself indicating this, although the identification is well established in the *Kitab at-tijan* and most likely already in the Qur'an (cf. suras 34 and 27). Since Saba was the old name of the most renowned kingdom in South Arabia, whose name was preserved in the official title of the kings of Himyar, the identification with Sheba in the Old Testament must have been almost compulsory. It is difficult to imagine a judaizing monotheistic ideology in historical Sheba not exploiting this fact. In the Hebrew Bible there are some passages in which Sheba is given an eschatological role. In Isaiah 60:1-11 and in Psalm 72:11 it is told how Sheba in the end of days shall come to Jerusalem with perfumes, myrrh and frankincense and innumerable camels paying homage to the king of Israel. It should be remarked that the Christian kings on the other side of the Red Sea used similar Biblical references like Psalm 72:9 and 68:32 in order to legitimate their own claims to be a new Israel. The glorious role of Sheba in the salvation history is indicated already by

the saying of Jesus in Matthew 12:42. According to these Biblical passages Sheba will be among the foremost representatives of those loyal to the monotheistic faith. It was not difficult for Yemenis to envisage an eschatological role for themselves even in the new religion, Islam, which after all, was not that different from their own monotheistic faith. As a matter of fact, the telling of the story of the Queen of Sheba in the 27th sura of the Qur'an may indicate that Yemeni monotheism was recognized and accepted in Islam already by the time of the Prophet

The other factor is the dramatic developments in South Arabia around 520 CE. According to the historian Procopius the Romans activated their allies in Ethiopia against the Jewish kingdom of Himyar which obviously had become a major threat to Roman interest in Arabia and the Red Sea (Procopius 1.20). The Ethiopian invasion in 525 CE was a major event in the history of the age with great repercussions in the Christian world and in Arabia (Gajda 2009:82-109; Nebes 2010). We do not have any certain literary documents showing reactions in Yemen proper but an attack of a Christian power against a New Israel must have generated a strong ideological response. It was not the first Roman and Christian attack against Israel and its allies. On two occasions in the past Israel had received support from Iran: the time of Cyrus the Great and the Parthian invasions in 40 BCE, still reflected by the presence of the Magi in the birth story in the gospel of Matthew. The anti-Christian Yemeni part sought support by the Sassanian ruler in Ctesiphon, the Iranians took action and finished off the Ethiopian rule in Yemen around 570 CE (Shahid 1995:365-372; Gajda 2009:149-156). The new Yemeni king, enthroned by the Iranian support, Sayf b. Dhi Yazan, is until this day surrounded by legends and is seen in later Arabic tradition as one of the main promoters of the *din Ibrahim* (Guillaume 1995). He is even said to have been the first who prophesied that the small boy Muhammad would become the greatest of prophets, a Yemeni countering of the Bāḥirā legend (*Kitab at-tijan* 306-310).

The question is now: was there a Yemeni idea of revenge against the Christian empire that had crushed theirs in 525 CE? We must admit that we do not have univocal contemporary evidence. But the joining of Yemen with the Islamic state in Western Arabia around 630 CE created a new main political power in Arabia which in many ways is surprisingly similar to the ancient kingdom of Himyar (*pace* Donner 1981:55). Until then Islam had mainly been a local Hijazi phenomenon. Following the events leading up to the year of delegations (630 CE) a new power had risen in Arabia. The Yemenis were, as we have pointed out, quite keen on the Syrian campaign. Did they have a political and ideological agenda? The sayings preserved in the *Kitab al-fitān* point in that direction. The remarkable position of Yemen in the earliest Islamic historiography which

remains until this day could be an indication that their role was much more prominent than usually recognized. Among the learned Yemenis in Hims in the middle of the 7th century there seems to have been no doubt: the conquest was a joint Israelite-Yemeni attack against the arch-enemy: the Roman empire. The conquest directed against Rome, generated other conquests as side-effects; Iraq and Iran, Egypt. But it seems that the central thrust was that against Rome in Syria.

If this is true the Islamic conquest receives a new perspective. The struggle between monotheism and the Mediterranean empire (or empires) started already with the Maccabean insurrection in 167 BCE and culminated in the Jewish uprisings in 70 and 132 CE. The hatred against the Hellenistic world domination is a central theme in Jewish thinking during centuries, evident e.g. in the Book of Revelation. But by the rise of the judaizing Himyarite kingdom the ideological struggle was renewed. The position of Constantinople in Islam had then from the beginning a most crucial role: the capital of the arch-enemy of the pure monotheistic heritage. The great attack in the the first Islamic century failed although close to success. A prophecy that the Yemeni messiah, consequently the conqueror of Constantinople, will be a man with three letters in his name was around already around 700 CE (*Akhbar 'Ubayd* 478). It could refer to the name of the second caliph, 'Umar b. al-Khattab, but also to the name Muhammad. In the latter case the prophecy was at last fulfilled in 1453.

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