

**Byzantium, the Arabs, and the Rise of Islam  
Colloquium in Memory of Irfan Shahîd (1926–2016)**

Georgetown University and Dumbarton Oaks  
October 13, 2017, 9:30 a.m.–6:00 p.m.

Colloquiarch: Emma Gannagé (Georgetown University)

**Abstracts**

**The Bible in Arabic in *Oriens Christianus: Status Quaestionis***

Sidney Griffith (The Catholic University of America)

While scholars have long searched for evidence of the ready currency of translations of the Bible into written Arabic by the first third of the seventh century, being thereby available for consultation at the origins of the Arabic Qur’ān, until now the available evidence strongly suggests that at the time biblical and parabiblical lore circulated orally among the Arabic-speaking peoples and not yet in writing. The evidence consists of what can be deduced from the state of Arabic writing available prior to the production of the written Qur’ān, from remarks made in late antique Greek and Syriac texts, and most importantly, from the evidence of the Arabic Qur’ān’s own echoes and reminiscences of biblical and parabiblical lore. Professor Shahîd was rightly convinced that the Bible in Arabic must have been “a vital force in the life of the Arabs” prior to the rise of Islam. This essay revisits Shahîd’s search for the medium and manner of the Bible’s currency among late antique Arabic speakers, taking its cue from his insistence that the Bible’s role in the liturgy is the crucial *point de repère* for the inquiry.

**Irfan Shahîd and the Martyrs of Najran**

Jack Tannous (Princeton University)

One of Irfan’s greatest contributions was his discovery and publication of a new Syriac text related to the Martyrs of Najran. In this paper, I discuss the various Syriac Himyarite texts, Irfan’s contributions to their study, and recent attempts at reexamining some of Irfan’s claims. Irfan once expressed to me a desire to respond to these, but alas never had the opportunity to do so. I will therefore offer reflections on the current state of the question in his honor.

**Irfan Shahîd and Pre-Islamic Arab Christianity: Perspectives Past and Future**

Robert Hoyland (University of New York)

One of Irfan’s earliest discoveries was a Syriac document in Damascus that pertained to the Arab Christians of Najran, which, in his own words, “opened the dossier on the importance of Najrān as the major Christian center in Pre-Islamic Arabia, which was radiating Christianity to all the Peninsula” (*DOP*, oral history interview, August 2008). In many of his publications on Rome and the Arabs, Irfan returned to the topic of pre-Islamic Arab Christianity and related questions, such as the writing of Arabic before Islam and the role of tribes like the Ghassanids and Lakhmids in the spread of Arab Christianity. In this paper, I review and comment on some of Irfan’s ideas on this subject and discuss recent advances that shed new light on these old questions.

## **The Religion of the Pre-Islamic Nomads of North Arabia**

Ahmad Al-Jallad (Leiden University)

The religious beliefs of pre-Islamic Arabia have been poorly preserved in the Islamic tradition. Nevertheless, until recently scholars have largely been reliant upon the often garbled accounts of early Muslim historians, such as Hisham Ibn Al-Kalbi's *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, for the understanding of the religious world of the pre-Islamic Arabian nomads. Today, thanks to the growing number of epigraphic and archaeological projects across the Arabian Peninsula and Jordan, we have at our disposal tens of thousands of pre-Islamic inscriptions, produced both by settled folk and nomads. Many of these texts contain religious content, including prayers, invocations, and mentions of pilgrimages, sacrifices, and other religious rites. This talk aims to synthesize an image of the religious world of the Arabic-speaking nomads of North Arabia and the southern Levant based on the Safaitic inscriptions, and will focus specifically on the concept of Fate/Time (cf. Greek Αἰών).

## **Tenth-Century Byzantine and Arabic Poetry on Military Exploits**

Maria Mavroudi (University of California, Berkeley)

From the ninth until the mid-eleventh century the Byzantine and the Islamic worlds were engaged in brutal warfare. On occasion, this circumstance is treated in the poetic output of the period, both in Greek and in Arabic. This paper compares examples in each language and reflect on the use of poetry within each cultural and linguistic domain.

## **The Court of Women in Baghdad and Constantinople**

Nadia Maria El Cheikh (American University of Beirut)

The role and position of women at the Abbasid court has been a difficult topic to research in view of the nature of the sources and the scant information on the various aspects of court culture and politics. In this paper, I investigate the women at the Abbasid court in the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries. My approach is a comparative one, as I will rely on parallel examples from Byzantine history in order to shed light on possible practices and to underline major differences in the court cultures of the two imperial capitals.

The paper discusses the roles that the Byzantine empress Irene and the wife (and mother) of the caliphs Khayzuran played in the third/ninth century I also compare the respective roles of the mother of Caliph al-Muqtadir, Shaghab, and the Byzantine empresses Zoe and Theodora in the fourth/tenth century. In the last section, I analyze the role of women in the Abbasid and Byzantine court ceremonial. In addition to developing our understanding of these facets, this paper seeks to stress the significance of using a comparative approach in trying to understand specific historical phenomena pertaining to early Islamic history.