Embedding Conquest: Naturalizing Muslim Rule in the Early Islamic Empire (Project Report)

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The ERC-funded research project »Embedding Conquest«, based at Leiden University, studies the mechanics by which early Islamic rule took root in a tapestry of diverse territories and different social contexts. Based on a large corpus of documentary and literary texts, especially letters, the research team has identified elements of political, territorial, and institutional cohesion stemming from interpersonal ties of loyalty and dependency binding individuals to each other and to the state. This contribution presents the project's main scope and achievements. Additionally, it focuses on multilingualism, highlighting the participation of people from different religious groups in shaping early Islamic rule, in line with this special issue's focus on collaboration among Muslims, Jews, and Christians as colleagues in the early Islamic period.

The research team of the »Embedding Conquest« project, funded by the European Research Council and based at Leiden University's Institute for Area Studies, studies the mechanics of imperial governance in a premodern, non-European context. In this contribution, I take the opportunity to share some of the project's main achievements. After introducing the project's scope, I will offer some considerations and examples based on the team's and my own research to highlight the participation of people from different religious groups in shaping early Islamic rule, in line with the special issue's focus on collaboration among Muslims, Jews, and Christians. With this overview, I wish to underline two key aspects of our work, building on a significant body of scholarship on both Islamicate history and empire studies: one is the effort to contextualize research on early Islamicate societies in material perspective, considering the materiality of historical texts and objects; the other is a preference for working collaboratively and comparatively within our discipline, as well as in conversation with historians, curators, anthropologists, and philologists in neighboring fields.

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Embedding Conquest

The Muslim conquests of formerly Roman and Sasanian lands led to entirely new configurations and institutions while also building on pre-existing state structures and incorporating regional elite groups. The empire that rose from the conquests – encompassing the periods of the Medinan, Umayyad, and Abbasid caliphates – comprised culturally and linguistically diverse regions. The caliphs came to dominate a massive area, stretching from the Atlantic to the Amu Darya, from the Atlas to the Hindu Kush, being shored by both the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, including regions with different political traditions. But if conquest through expansion and negotiation defined the empire's geographic scope, it was through a creative process of »embedding« into the social fabrics of that vast space that early Islamic rule was established. The »Embedding Conquest« research project studies that very process of political realization through rooting and grounding.

The project started from a quest to understand the success of the Muslim conquests, that is, the ability of all actors involved in the rise of the caliphate to turn the conquests' initial drive from group and territorial expansion into a sophisticated and resilient political entity with a distinct imperial culture. From very early on, they were able to build and transmit endurable institutions and to tie together a tapestry of diverse regions into a complex yet coherent political space, one which would endure and keep developing. Long-lasting institutions, extended networks, and the preservation of older forms and conceptions of rule are some of the elements which make it possible to approach the caliphate as a coherent category for historical analysis.[1]

But if continuity of social and political institutions gives coherence to the early Islamic empire, what sustained those institutions over time? In our project, we have tried not to take our state-building categories for granted, working our way back from the expression of hierarchical relations between individuals (whether they appear to be top-down, bottom-up, or horizontal) to the broader imperial structure, rather than vice versa. Instead of starting from the finished edifice, the caliphate and its provinces, as it is most commonly done, we looked for elements of cohesion in discrete local contexts and individual exchanges. We scratched the surface of the edifice's walls, so to speak, looking for the wires and bolts, anything that appeared to bind the larger elements together.

We have identified such binding parts in two main types of interpersonal connections. First, we observed them in human and material ties *across regions*. These were created through movement (e.g., trade, taxation, delegations) and were realized by people on the move, such as soldiers, scribes, merchants, tax-collectors, government appointees, fugitives, captives, and enslaved people, as well as people traveling small distances for work or because

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1   The definition of empire adopted in this project was influenced by the theorizations and empirical approaches of various scholars including Janet Abu Lughod, Cátia Antunes, Jane Burbank, Gabrielle van den Berg, Partha Chatterjee, John Haldon, and Chris Wickham. On empire studies, see especially Abu Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*; Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History*. On the early Islamic empire, see the contributions in Hagemann and Heidemann, *Transregional and Regional Elites*. On continuity, see especially al-Azmeh, *Emergence of Islam*, 11-41; Salaymeh, *Beginnings*, 21-42; Tannous, *Medieval Middle East*, 201-224. On administrative continuity, see especially Legendre, Umayyad administration; Papaconstantinou, Early Islamic empire; Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim State*, 49-216; Sijpesteijn, Continuum approach; see also Palombo, Local clergy.

of some problem.[2] Second, we found them in the written expression of sodalities cutting *across social, ethnic, and religious groups*. These could appear in the form of favor exchanges, recommendations, petitions, business agreements, and other connections binding individuals to each other and to the state; or, conversely, by creating in-group solidarity at the expense of others, by using kinship, excommunication, and revolts as means of exclusion.[3]

Moreover, much of our work has centered on the language of governance. How did people talk about power differentials and hierarchies inside and outside the Islamic administration, in their daily correspondences, or when writing in the state's name? How did they convey loyalty, obedience, and opposition, and how did they express orders and requests? And finally, where do we see personal relationships converging into thicker, identifiable political structures, such as organized systems of protection, petitioning, or delegation?

To answer such questions, the research team identified a number of significant actors and investigated what kinds of ties linked them to each other and to the state to such an extent that their exchanges contributed to shaping the caliphate's distinct administrative and sociopolitical cultures.

The Project's Components

Our research has been based on a large corpus of sources from and concerning regions in Egypt, Palestine, Khurasan, Iraq, and Iran. Overall, the team has analyzed sources in several languages and scripts, namely Arabic, Persian, Greek, Coptic, Bactrian, and Sogdian, in order to pinpoint interpersonal exchanges that allowed a large and complex political entity to function – an imperial administration made of interconnected regions, people, and objects. The majority of the sources we studied belong to dispersed heritages, being scattered in many collections and kept outside their countries of origin; we have taken steps to account for the distortions, limitations, and biases brought into our research by this condition.[4]

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2   We discussed connectivity across regions at the following conferences: *Correspondence, Crosspollination, and Control: Transregional Connections and Movements in the Early Islamic Empire* (17-18 May 2018); *Contesting Empires: Sogdiana, Bactria and Gandhara Between the Sasanian Empire, the Tang Dynasty, and the Muslim Caliphate* (17-18 September 2020); *Networks and Ties of Exchange: Trade and Merchants Across the Premodern Middle East* (3-4 June 2021); *Textual Sources and Geography of Slavery in the Early Islamic Empire* (3-4 December 2020, 18-19 December 2021).

3   We discussed connectivity across groups at the following conferences: *Acts of Protection in the Early Islamic Empire* (24-25 January 2019); *Rebellions and Revolts in the Early Caliphate* (7-9 November 2019); *Ties that Bind: Mechanisms and Structures of Social Dependency in the Early Islamic Empire* (3-6 December 2019); *Expectations of Justice and Political Power in the Islamicate World* (27-29 October 2021); *Ties of Kinship and the Early Islamic Empire* (6-8 December 2021).

4   See Palombo, Working with collections; Palombo and Kristiansen, Museum, with reference to recent studies. For an introduction, concerning in particular the dispersed Egyptian papyri, see Gad, Troubled archive; see also Eissa and Saied, Museum collections. On our website (materialsourcesforearlyislamandlateantiqueneareast.hcommons. org/, last accessed 29 June 2021), we have gathered resources for the study of Islamicate material cultures. On materiality, see also our blog »My Favorite Medieval Things« (emco.hcommons.org/category/eyeopeners/, last accessed 29 June 2021).

Figure 1: A basket of papyrus fragments from excavations at the Monastery of Apa Epiphanios, near Thebes, Egypt. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 12.180.422. The Met's Open Access Program, Public Domain.

In looking for connections, we paid special attention to letters – administrative, official, and private alike, transmitted both as documents and inside literary works – because letters express relationships in a somewhat clearer way than other text types. They do so by using various rhetorical strategies, including the choice of verbs and pronouns, titles, religious formulas, and greetings. The way letters display emotions tells us about experiences and strategic manipulations of social hierarchy. Their material features (e.g., supports, sizes, layouts)

are also revealing of the relations between senders, addressees, and carriers. While looking at letters (as well as documents formatted as letters), the research team members have focused on two different sets of sources: documents preserved on papyrus (*see Figures 1 and 2*), paper, and parchment (some already edited and even digitized, others unedited); and letters and documents transmitted inside Arabic literary works. Moreover, we have considered Arabic historical works, such as chronicles, universal histories, and local or provincial histories.[5]

The topics covered by the letters we analyzed are varied. Some were written to ask for favors, to send or claim money, to prepare trips, organize shipments, obtain travel permits, or start litigation. People wrote to complain about state officials, or even to plan rebellions, or conversely, they wrote appealing to the authorities' support. The highest authorities themselves wrote letters to command, instruct, advise, appoint, dismiss, or threaten, and often to secure allegiances. In addition, most administrative documents – not only the official correspondence of the caliphs and their governors – were written in the form of letters. Tax receipts, petitions, and travel permits alike often share epistolary formulas. Thus, letters from the early Islamic empire tell us not only about who wrote to whom and for what reasons, but also about the materiality, mechanics, and temporalities of writing about state matters.

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5   Recent publications on letters by team members include the following: Sijpesteijn, Arabic script and language; Hayes, Economic actors; Huseini, Thinking in Arabic; see also the blog post by Palombo, Writing from prison. A comparative workshop on letter-writing was organized by Eline Scheerlinck in April 2018; a second relevant comparative workshop was organized by Petra Sijpesteijn in July 2021. The latter's proceedings will appear in a forthcoming volume centered on »strategies of entreating«, with contributions by Petra Sijpesteijn, Ed Hayes, and Eline Scheerlinck and Cecilia Palombo. A series of guest lectures titled »With Kind Regards«, organized at Leiden University by Fokelien Kootstra, Petra Sijpesteijn, and Birte Kristiansen in 2022, looks at »convention, standards, and breaking the rules in letter-writing«. The project's final conference, to be held in late 2022, also puts at the center language as an element of social interdependence: *A Matter of Speech: Language of Social Interdependency in the Early Islamicate Empire (600-1500)*. On letter-writing, see Grob, *Arabic Private and Business Letters*; Krakowski and Rustow, Formula as content; Semin, Linguistic markers; Wagner and Outhwaite, Two lines; Clarysse, Emotions; Younes, Joy and sorrow.
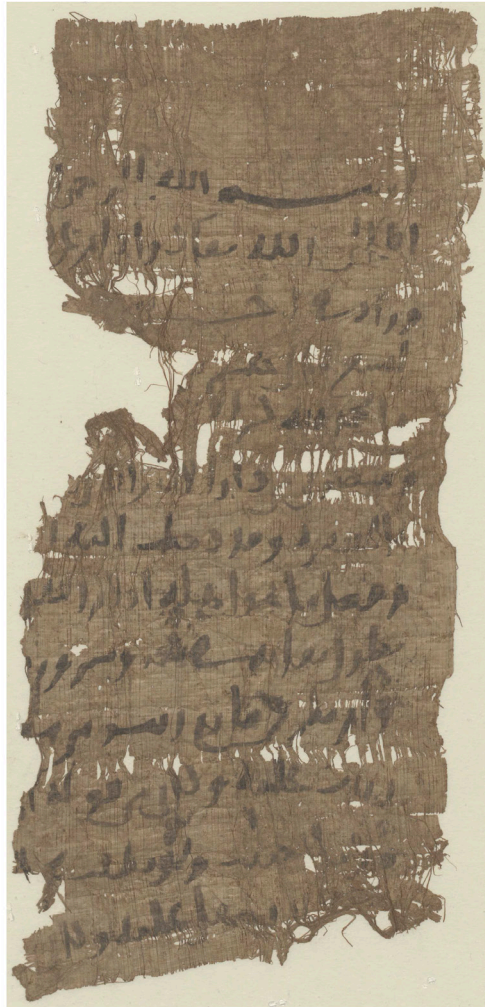
Figure 2: Fragmentary Arabic letter on papyrus, early Abbasid period. Made available by Leiden University, Creative Commons.

We have been working comparatively through six regional case-studies. Petra Sijpesteijn's research focuses on a large corpus of Arabic request letters from Egypt, which were produced by a variety of writers including administrators and merchants, and concerning different social strata, from governors to dispossessed individuals. Through this corpus, weighed against materials in other languages, she has been investigating a broad spectrum of expectations related to justice and fairness.[6] Eline Scheerlinck, working with Coptic and Greek documents, has traced a sophisticated system of problem-solving strategies bringing together Egypt's rulers with a world of local administrators, village headmen, and local people looking for protection. Her work has highlighted the mechanics of protection especially in relation to traveling and mobility.[7] Alon Dar's doctoral research looks at the relationship between the caliphal center, based in Syria, and provincial Arab elites settled in Egypt and Iraq

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6   Sijpesteijn, *Righting Wrongs*; Sijpesteijn, Local elite authority.

7   Scheerlinck, *Solidarity and Self-interest*; Scheerlinck, Asking for protection; Scheerlinck, Banning and cursing. See also Scheerlinck, Governor's order; Scheerlinck, Out of the cave.

in the Umayyad period. He has been studying the exchanges of caliphs and governors with each other and with Arab local notables at politically sensitive moments, such as during revolts.[8] Reza Huseini has been researching the shifting power balances and diplomacy games between conquering armies and local power groups in Khurasan, Bactria, and Sogdiana during and after the Arab Muslim conquests, reframing the meaning of »conquest« in those regions.[9] Ed Hayes and Cecilia Palombo have studied the role of religious leaders and agents operating at the margins of the administration, showing how these figures were involved in shaping government, intervening in matters such as taxation and the dissemination of politico-religious ideas. Their work has centered on early Imami Shiʾi leaders and their role in organizing communities in Iraq and the Iranian provinces (Hayes), and Christian churchmen and monastic scribes and their role in shaping the governance of Egyptian local communities (Palombo).[10] In addition, the team has collaborated with other scholars and prepared publications centered on the sociopolitical connections developed in the early Islamic empire through ideas of protection, justice, history writing, kinship, and religious excommunication, and those created by means of traveling, conquest, trade, and enslavement.[11] Through teaching, public lectures, museum events, didactic videos, social media, board games, and blog posts, we have made efforts to communicate our research to different audiences.

Altogether, we have been able to reconstruct an arc of dense political developments – from the earliest configurations put in place after the conquests until the consolidation of Abbasid rule – from a thick reading of both literary accounts and documentary texts embedded in local contexts, down to the granular level of formularies and word choices, paying attention to the role of authors and scribes, and interrogating the materiality of texts. By focusing on linguistic shifts, we have been able to observe points of overlap as well as friction between personal and political ties, such as when formal orders were imparted as requests by deploying words of affection in seemingly informal tones, or when the language of kinship was used to express social hierarchy. We have thus gone a step further than studying the interaction between rulers and those ruled by considering a variety of stakeholders in the making of early Islamic rule, in which people contributed to maintaining the caliphate's political structures because of a complex blend of religious, material, professional, and personal motivations, some made ad hoc, others ideologically grounded, and not simply because of rivalry, constriction, or lack of better alternatives. We examined binding dynamics made of loyalties, sodalities, and shared interests, as well as situations in which those ties broke loose, putting the system under stress. The explanatory strength of this approach is that it has allowed us to account for the active role of various social groups in the life of the empire, without separating the development of institutions from that of on-the-ground social realities. Moreover, by keeping personal connections together with institutional and ideological frameworks, we were able to highlight multiple layers of dependency and loyalty. Ultimately, those were the joints and fault-lines of the empire.

8　Dar, *Ruling an Empire*. See also Dar, Fighting.

9　Huseini, *Framing the Conquest*; Huseini, Thinking in Arabic.

10　Hayes, *Hidden Imam*; Hayes, Economic actors; Palombo, *Islamic Local Government*; Palombo, View from the monasteries.

11　The team members are preparing a number of forthcoming publications on these subjects, including Dar and Sijpesteijn, *Acts of Rebellion*; Hayes, *Acts of Excommunication*; Hayes and Sijpesteijn, *Ties that Bind*. See also Scheerlinck and Hayes, *Acts of Protection*; Dar, Hide and seek; Hayes, Burn after reading; Huseini, Justice. We plan to publish two edited volumes focused respectively on expectations of justice and expressions of kinship in early Islamicate societies, based on two international conferences organized in 2021.

Collaboration through Shared Languages

A further advantage of reconstructing broad political structures starting from human con-
nections is that we have been able to see more clearly the intersection of different religious
groups. The coexistence of religious communities was a defining feature of all the regions
of the early Islamic empire we have studied, even if with different demographic proportions
and developments. To be sure, this was not always peaceful or tensionless. But in contrast to
some threads of discursive and prescriptive literature that put the emphasis on group cohe-
sion and religious exclusivity, such as the texts on the employment of non-Muslim admin-
istrators recently studied by Luke Yarbrough, the documentary and literary letters we have
studied do not convey the picture of a society primarily arranged according to communal or
sectarian categories.[12] In what follows, I will touch briefly upon two aspects of collaboration
among members of different religious groups emerging from the »Embedding Conquest«
project and provide a few examples and considerations based on my own research.

The first aspect is collaboration towards the development of shared vocabularies of gov-
ernance. This occurred through extended contact over time, and it is most visible in the (dis-
continuous) overlap between professional, scholarly, religious, and linguistic communities
in discrete local contexts. For example, I have found overlaps between business, administra-
tive, and ecclesiastical networks in Abbasid Egypt, which sometimes led to the exchange
of documents as well as of documentary formularies.[13] To an extent, the multi-confessional
spaces inhabited by both Muslims and non-Muslims coincided with those of multiple linguis-
tic traditions. Literary elites were remarkably creative with the use of languages and scripts;
and because literate individuals from different religious groups had written exchanges with
state representatives and non-state actors alike, they brought into and then outside the ad-
ministrative structure elements of the linguistic traditions they were familiar with. Some
texts betray the authors' direct or indirect knowledge of the administrative system (be it
taxation, the judicial system, the functioning of tribunals, or other aspects) and, more gen-
erally, of administrative and juridical principles. For example, based on the documents they
produced I have shown that Egyptian monastic scribes working in the early Abbasid period
were deeply familiar with the local administrative system and with the production of Arabic
documents.[14] Access to multiple languages was clearly an important asset for the literary
elites living in the early Islamic period, and one that put Arabic culture at the center of an
intricate net of language use.[15] While Arabic soon affirmed itself as a language of science and
literature, as well as the main language of political and juridical discourse, Christian, Jewish,

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12   Yarbrough, *Friends of the Emir.*

13   Palombo, Local clergy.

14   Palombo, *Islamic Local Government.*

15   On the introduction of Arabic in the documentary evidence, see Sijpesteijn, Arabic script and language; Sijpesteijn,
      Multilingual archives; Sijpesteijn, Multilingual policy; Papaconstantinou, Language of empire; Garosi, *Projecting
      a New Empire.*

Zoroastrian, and Buddhist literary elites continued to transmit religious texts in the languages they had been using before the conquests. At the same time, they created new forms of written knowledge directly in Arabic, or they adopted Arabic alongside other languages. We thus find new compositions, translations (*see Figure 3*), and various forms of what George Kiraz has called »Garshunography«, that is, writing systems associating scripts and languages in new sociolinguistic combinations (Garshuni Syriac and Judeo-Arabic being two relevant examples for the early Islamic period).[16]

Figure 3: An example of scholarly multilingualism: from a manuscript containing an Arabic translation of the Gospels in rhymed prose, with marginal notes in Arabic and Syriac, and the university's book labels in Latin (fol. 2). Leiden University Libraries, Digital Collections, Or. 561. Made available by Leiden University, Creative Commons.

For instance, a substantial corpus of »Copto-Arabic« literature was created in Fatimid Egypt (and later periods) by translating into Arabic a number of Christian religious texts composed in Coptic during the Abbasid period. Many of these texts are anonymous homilies and saints' lives composed in Sahidic Coptic probably in the ninth century CE and later transmitted in Arabic.[17] Those Abbasid-era Coptic texts were written in an adapted Greek script (Coptic being a case of »Garshunography«) and they contained many Greek words, but even before

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16 See Kiraz, Garshunography. On scholarly exchanges and translations of religious literature, see, for example, Schmidtke, Intellectual history; Kashouh, *Arabic Versions*; Samir, *Foi et culture*.

17 See Palombo, View from the monasteries.

they were turned into Arabic texts they had already incorporated elements of Arabic, such as loanwords and idiomatic phrases, as well as administrative concepts. Some of these local religious texts passed through regional forms of Coptic, and some would later be transmitted in Geʿez through the mediation of Arabic. Most of these texts and their Arabic translations were composed by anonymous Christian authors, mainly in monastic circles, but some – like the Abbasid sources of the so-called »History of the patriarchs of Alexandria« – are attributable to figures who had positions in the church administration and who were well acquainted with urban notables and lay administrative circles. Other texts were composed directly in Arabic but relied on older Coptic sources. This literary corpus thus incorporated elements of various linguistic traditions, not to mention literary influences, blending them into new combinations.[18]

But the possibility of using different languages in select contexts was not only a prerogative of literati and scholars. It was a feature of the early Islamic administration, writ large, and it occurred also inside political arenas. Thus, multilingualism characterized the work of those who created documents for the administration on a daily basis. Many texts were produced by »simpler« writers from a variety of religious groups, who did not always display their religious affiliation. We find people with Muslim, Christian, and Jewish names in both private and official letters, working as scribes and accountants, and often coinhabiting the caliphate's chanceries, courts, armies, and tribunals. One space in which people from different religious and linguistic groups happened to work side by side was the residence-cum-chancery of higher administrators. Many thousands of letters show us that in Egypt from the Medinan to the Abbasid period the provincial administration functioned simultaneously in Arabic, Greek, and Coptic, the proportion between those three languages varying by decade depending on local circumstances.[19] Thus, not only do we read accounts about Christian and Jewish secretaries working in the major chanceries of the caliphate or being hired by important political figures, such as caliphs and princes, but we also find them in the extant documentation coming from the professional archives of less famous officials.[20]

In Egypt, Muslim high administrators based in mid-size provincial towns employed personnel with various language skills. For example, secretaries based in al-Ushmunayn in the early Abbasid period produced official letters in both Coptic and Arabic for administrators such as the high official Yazīd b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān. In the region of the Fayyum, the scribes working for Yaḥyā b. Ḥilāl produced documentation in both Greek and Arabic.[21] One good example of such a multilingual and multireligious environment is seen from a document written in 136 AH, a few years after the Abbasids came to rule. This is a letter that a high

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18 On Copto-Arabic literature, see, for example, den Heijer, Coptic historiography; Papaconstantinou, Historiography; Papaconstantinou, Language of empire; Mikhail, *Byzantine to Islamic Egypt*, 232-254; Sidarus, Copto-Arabic historiography.

19 See n. 15. On multilingualism in Egypt, see also Legendre, Arabic thoughts; Legendre, Umayyad administration; Fournet, Multilingual environment.

20 On literary accounts, see, for example, Khalek, Non-Muslim officials; Palombo, *Islamic Local Government* (ch. 3 and ch. 4); Yarbrough, *Friends of the Emir*, 164-216.

21 On Yazīd b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, see Palombo, *Islamic Local Government* (ch. 3). On Yaḥyā b. Ḥilāl, see Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim State*, 117-152.

official (ʿāmil al-amīr) called Hishām b. Ziyād, overseeing the area of al-Ushmunayn, addressed to the resident of an important monastery in that region. The official letter, containing information about that person's tax installment share and about his rights during the tax collection, was written by two scribes, first in Arabic and then in Coptic.[22] While we cannot know the religious background of Hishām b. Ziyād's scribes just by knowing the language they used, Coptic was learned mostly in Christian environments, often at monasteries.[23] The letter's addressee, called Yuḥannis, was most probably a monk or even a monastic leader. The document was received and stored probably at the same monastery, where other monastic scribes, if not Yuḥannis himself, would be able to read it and where it could be shown to the local tax-collectors in due time. Another example comes from an official letter in Coptic, bearing the seal of the Muslim local governor Rashīd b. Khālid, who administered the region of Ihnas in the Marwanid period; here, a secretary at the governor's service with a distinctively Christian name and a Greek title was ordered to go and check on the accuracy of some accounts on the local chancery's behalf.[24]

The examples could easily be multiplied: the early Islamic empire's early administration practically operated in Arabic alongside other languages. The choice appears to have been based on local circumstances and it was possible because local administrators continually employed individuals with various language skills. In some cases, the acquisition of such skills was directly linked to people's religious background.

Collaboration as Shared Expertise

Overall, our collaborative work has shown us that the simultaneous work of people from different religious groups interacting with state personnel extended much further than mere coexistence inside pre-made administrative spaces. Rather, those spaces themselves were construed and became part of the state's geography through extended interaction and exchange. A further aspect of collaboration among Muslims, Jews, and Christians that I wish to mention concerns their ability to directly affect the development of the caliphate's political culture. They not only made use of common administrative procedures, and were ruled by the same governors, and responded in various ways to the same political authority; they also played an active role in defining the state's infrastructure, practices, and ideologies.

For example, as I have found in my research, in the same period in which some Christian scribes educated in Coptic worked in the service of Muslim Arabic-speaking administrators in Egypt, like in the examples mentioned above, the scribes of some large monasteries wrote, used, and stored official documents serving the purposes of local rule, being related to various administrative matters such as taxation, traveling, and legal cases. But those monastic scribes did more than simply mentioning administrative matters coming from »outside«. By communicating with lay officials, informing local authorities, storing documents, and moving papers from the local chanceries, they also contributed to sustaining the administration of discrete regions in the caliphate, to make things work.[25] Local scribes and other officials might work in the service of Muslim high functionaries for a time, or they might communicate with the chancery about administrative matters from time to time. In both cases, they learned and put into practice specialized skills.

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22   Clackson and Sijpesteijn, Trilingual tax demand.

23   On Coptic literacy and monasticism, see Choat and Giorda, Communicating monasticism; Fournet, *Rise of Coptic*, 112-148.

24   Garel, Une demande.

25   Palombo, *Islamic Local Government* (ch. 2).

Many extant scribal exercises from the Umayyad and the Abbasid period show us the traces of an education system in which local writers learned how to use the appropriate formularies, for example by practicing the writing of Arabic phrases, and perhaps even copying Quranic passages (*Figure 4*).[26] Local scribes, including monastic ones, became skilled in accounting, writing letters, and physically crafting official documents, which in itself was an important form of specialized knowledge, allowing the administration to expand. Many scribes in Abbasid Egypt were able to decipher several alphabets, and to use specific scripts based on the documents' contents; for example, in some documents of monastic provenance we find the scribes practicing a particular Greek minuscule which was employed in Egypt mostly for fiscal matters by the Marwanid chanceries and well into the Abbasid period.[27]
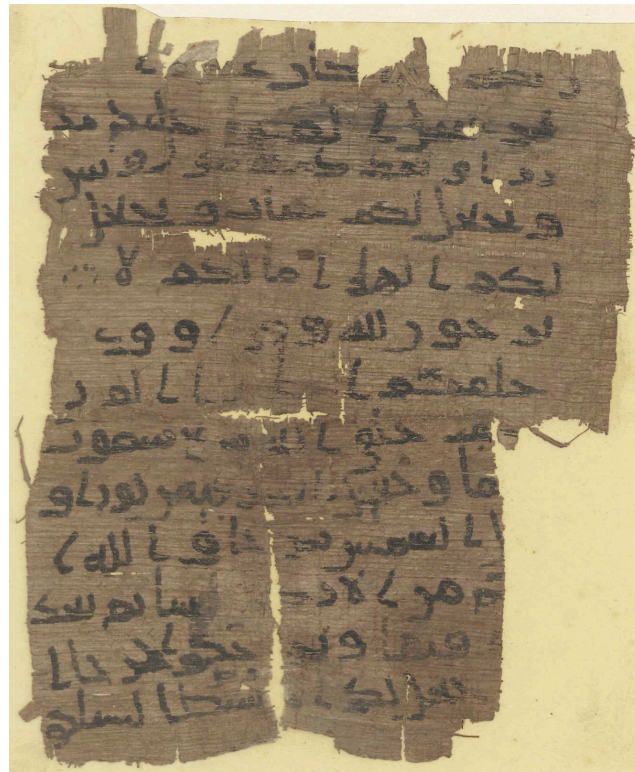

Figure 4: A Quranic fragment on papyrus, containing verses from Sura 7, possibly as a writing exercise, Umayyad or early Abbasid period. Leiden University Libraries, Digital Collections, Or. 8264. Made available by Leiden University, Creative Commons.

Thus, the practice of writing (for, to, and about the state) created a kind of specialized knowledge that was shared by literate individuals from different religious groups, including beyond scholarly circles. In addition, those same writers contributed to disseminating ideas of Islamic governance. For example, I believe it was based on the reception of a Quranic injunction that local scribes were pushed to expand the production of written receipts for recording

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26 Palombo, *Islamic Local Government* (ch. 3). On multilingual exercises, see, for instance, Berkes and Younes, Trilingual scribe.

27 See Mavroudi, Greek language; Morelli, *Documenti greci*, 6-16.

monetary transactions; this was done with the approval of learned elites (as exemplified by an Egyptian churchman in Alexandria praising a caliphal decree about writing down fiscal receipts) and under the impulse of local qadis (as mentioned by a Muslim local functionary in Egypt in a letter to his business associates).[28] It was also based on a Quranic passage, as it had been interpreted by influential scholars that, for instance, the poll tax was applied on all non-Muslim male adults in the various regions of the caliphate while the *ṣadaqa* was imposed on Muslim taxpayers to provide for the poor. The categorization and collection of such taxes embedded ideological principles of just governance, which were then disseminated also through the work of local officials, scribes, and tax-collectors, including non-Muslim ones, thus turning the collection from a theory of ideal types to a set of repeated gestures and institutionalized practices.

Conclusion

We can thus look at the involvement of people from different religious groups as impacting two interrelated spheres of early Islamic rule at the same time: practice and knowledge production. Various contributions to this special issue highlight that Muslims, Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and people from other religious groups exchanged knowledge within scholarly circles – such as among jurists, philosophers, or medical experts. Muslim, Christian, and Jewish scholars exchanged scientific and historical knowledge, and sometimes engaged in theological debates; the authors of religious texts were often the same people who fulfilled administrative roles, and many of them were familiar with administrative archives. At the same time, more anonymous groups of literate individuals exchanged a type of knowledge that was more markedly technical and practical, in that it functionally allowed the imperial administrative structure to run. The exchanges of these collaborators were mostly made up of letters, reports, and accounts, but through sustained collaboration and the creation of official documents they also contributed to developing and sharing expertise.

The relationship between practice and knowledge was therefore twofold. The documents mentioned above contributed to shaping the early Islamic political system because they disseminated technical and specialized knowledge. The local writers' ability to use multiple administrative languages – which were also languages of literary production and of religious knowledge – played an important role in this respect. In turn, such documents are visible traces of knowledge translated into practice; ideas about how to rule transpire not only through literary works but also through documentary letters such as petitions, complaints, and even tax receipts. In all cases, the theoretical knowledge, the technical expertise, and the practices of Islamic rule spread and took root in various parts of the caliphate in part thanks to the work of scribes and administrators from different religious groups who in many local contexts (whether they liked it or not) worked next to each other as colleagues.

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28 The references are, respectively, to an early Abbasid source preserved in the »History of the patriarchs of Alexandria« (*HPSH*, 145); and to a letter on papyrus edited by Petra Sijpesteijn (*Shaping a Muslim State*, 26). See Palombo, Local clergy and ties.

References

Abbreviation

HP = History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria, ed. Basil T. Evetts

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List of Figures

Figure 1: A basket of papyrus fragments from excavations at the Monastery of Apa Epiphanios, near Thebes, Egypt. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 12.180.422. The Met's Open Access Program, Public Domain.

Figure 2: Fragmentary Arabic letter on papyrus, early Abbasid period. Leiden University Libraries, Digital Collections, Or. 12.885. Made available by Leiden University, Creative Commons.

Figure 3: An example of scholarly multilingualism: from a manuscript containing an Arabic translation of the Gospels in rhymed prose, with marginal notes in Arabic and Syriac, and the university's book labels in Latin (fol. 2). Leiden University Libraries, Digital Collections, Or. 561. Made available by Leiden University, Creative Commons.

Figure 4: A Quranic fragment on papyrus, containing verses from Sura 7, possibly as a writing exercise, Umayyad or early Abbasid period. Leiden University Libraries, Digital Collections, Or. 8264. Made available by Leiden University, Creative Commons.