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CROSS ROADS

TRAVELLING THROUGH THE MIDDLE AGES, AD 300–1000

W BOOKS

CONTENTS

THE THREE MONOTHEISTIC RELIGIONS

JEWS, CHRISTIANS, AND MUSLIMS FROM LATE ANTIQUITY TO EARLY MIDDLE AGES

Barbara Roggema

INTERTWINED HISTORIES

The three great monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, not only share their core belief in one God, they also have common roots in the social realities and the spiritual and intellectual traditions of the Near East. Although their very beginnings lie centuries apart, much of their formation took place in parallel contemporaneous developments. In Antiquity Jews settled in most of the large cities around the Mediterranean. From Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages there are indications of Jewish presence in many parts of Europe. Rabbanite Judaism, which was to become mainstream Judaism in later history, postdates the rise of Christianity. It evolved in the period from the second to the sixth or seventh century, when the Babylonian Talmud was compiled. During the same time period, Christianity spread around Europe and parts of Asia and Africa. The definition of Christian orthodoxy ('correct belief') was a long and tortuous process, leading to the creed agreed upon at the Council of Chalcedon (451). Arian Christianity, condemned as a heresy in 325, nevertheless survived in Europe for centuries.

Many parts of the Christian world never came to accept the Chalcedonian creed. In the Near East, Africa and Asia, the burgeoning Christian communities adhered to divergent creeds. The Church of the East ('Nestorians' or 'duophysites') emphasised Christ's humanity as distinct from his divinity, whereas the 'miaphysites' or 'monophysites' believed that Christ's divinity engulfed his human nature. This became the doctrine of the Coptic Church in Egypt, the Syrian-Orthodox Church in the Fertile Crescent, and the Armenian and Ethiopian Churches. The theological differences that caused the rifts between the various Churches were also expressions of autonomy and self-determination on the part of Christian communities far removed from Rome and Constantinople.

The complete separation of Christianity from Judaism was a process that was completed only about a century before the rise of Islam, although references to moments of shared worship, such as Christians attending Jewish festivals in Syria, have survived from as late as the eighth century. In the earliest Christian responses to Judaism, Jews were accused of rejecting Christ as the Messiah, of killing him and of being blind to the deeper meaning of the Hebrew Bible. At the same time, the Jews were regarded as witnesses to Christ's life and as a living remembrance of his identity. The acceptance of Christianity in the Roman Empire under Constantine the Great, in the early fourth century, made the Church's rejection of Judaism more definitive. Legislation regarding the Jews became more discriminatory in the following centuries, especially under the Byzantine emperor Justinian (r. 527–65). In the early seventh century both the Visigoths and the Byzantines ordered forced conversions of the Jews.

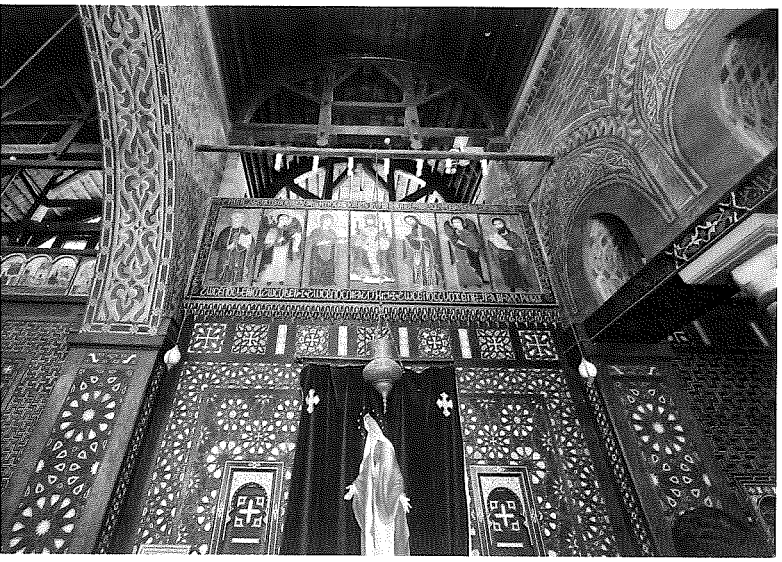
The balance of power suddenly changed when Islam emerged in the Middle East in the seventh century. Within decades, much of the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East was conquered by Arab armies. In the early eighth century this new movement reached as far as the Iberian Peninsula in the west and up to the Indus River in the east. The conquests often entailed negotiated surrender rather than bloodshed or forced conversion. Jews and Christians could in many ways proceed with life as before. Because they were monotheists with their own holy scripture, they counted as 'People of the Book', who could live as 'protected people' or *dhimmis*. For this they had to pay an extra tax, however, and they had to accept some discriminatory measures. Some of

the stipulations resembled older Christian regulations with regard to the Jews: the *dhimmis* were not allowed to testify against Muslims, to proselytise, or to build new places of worship.

In the early phase, Islam profiled itself as a religion for the Arabs. The building of the Dome of the Rock (c.692) in Jerusalem is seen as a decisive step towards Islam as a universal religion, triumphing over all other religions. This building project took place during the Umayyad Caliphate (661–750), which had chosen Syria as its centre. The Dome of the Rock not only occupied a symbolic location on the Temple Mount but it also contained inscriptions of verses from the Qur'an that criticise Christians for their belief in the Trinity and the Incarnation and summon people to true monotheism. From this time on, Middle-Eastern Christians began to formulate responses to the claims of Islam, while on the Muslim side the ideas of Muhammad as the final prophet and the restorer of Abrahamic monotheism were elaborated. Jews and Christians were portrayed as stubborn and quarrelsome corruptors of the revelation they had originally received. Fortunately such confrontations of ideas did not often lead to deterioration in the relations between rulers and ruled. On the contrary: the follow-

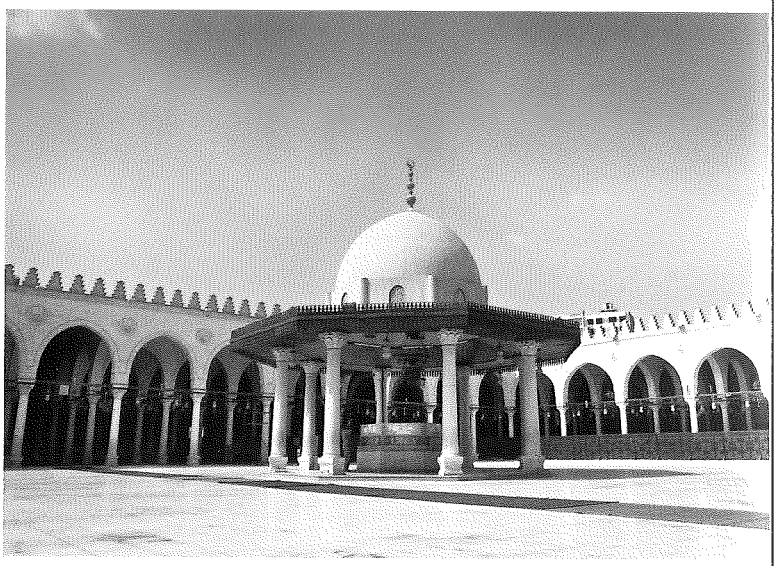
OLD CAIRO: THE BEN EZRA SYNAGOGUE

The Ben Ezra Synagogue in Fustat (Old Cairo) probably goes back to the 9th century. It was destroyed in the early 11 century during Caliph al-Hakim's attacks on Jews and Christians in Egypt. In the 19th century the structure was rebuilt on its ancient foundations. In a walled-off chamber functioning as a storage room for writings, the so-called *genizah*, about 140,000 documents were found that shed light on the history of medieval Egypt and on Jewish life in particular.



OLD CAIRO: THE HANGING CHURCH

The Church of the Virgin Mary or al-Mu'allaqa, 'the Hanging Church', is the most famous church in Cairo. It belongs to the Coptic Orthodox community and probably goes back to the time when Fustat (Old Cairo) was founded after the Muslim conquest in the 7th century. It was likely built on the site of an older church; the nave is suspended over a Roman fortress. It is famed for its elaborate mosaics, icons, coloured marble, and ivory-inlaid wood panelling with geometric patterns.



OLD CAIRO: THE MOSQUE OF AMR IBN AL-AS

View of the courtyard and ablution fountain of the Mosque of Amr ibn al-As in Old Cairo. The mosque goes back to the 640s, immediately after the Muslim conquest of Egypt. Numerous rounds of expansion and restoration have left little of the original, much smaller structure. Until today Old Cairo is characterised by the close proximity of buildings belonging to the three monotheistic religions: a testimony to interreligious encounters in medieval Egypt.

ing centuries can be characterised as a time of cooperation between the religious communities.

BAGHDAD, CORDOBA, CAIRO: CULTURAL BLOOM AND *CONVIVENCIA*

In the middle of the eighth century, a revolution from the east overthrew the Umayyad Caliphate in Syria. The new Muslim rulers, the Abbasids, created a capital in Iraq: the 'City of Peace', more commonly called Baghdad. From this time onwards, non-Arab Muslims received a social status equal to Arabs and conversion to Islam intensified. The region of Iran and central Asia opened up to Baghdad — soon to be a city of global importance. The rich agriculture of Iraq as well as the international trade in gold, silver, slaves, hides, paper, silk and other commodities brought immense wealth, creating a fertile ground for the cultivation of art and scholarship. The Abbasid Caliphs took a personal interest in learning, partly out of humanistic curiosity and partly with an eye to the legitimisation of their rule in universal terms that transgressed religious boundaries. They famously sponsored the translation of Greek, Syriac and Pahlavi texts into Arabic. Works of Euclid, Galen, Ptolemy and Aristotle were translated and saved from oblivion. For these translations the Abbasids hired many Christian (and other non-Muslim) scientists, who were well versed in Greek, Syriac and Arabic. Hunayn ibn Ishaq (d. 873), a Christian, was one of the most famous translators. As chief physician to the court he also had a close personal relationship with the Caliph. Jewish physicians were well respected too and were frequently found at Muslim courts, both in the Islamic East and West. Religious difference does not seem to have stood in the way of a good career. Nevertheless, there are incidents of interpersonal relations breaking down because of occasional mistrust of non-Muslims in high-profile positions.

This Golden Age of the early Abbasids was soon to be mirrored by the prosperity and cultural bloom in two different Muslim centres of power. Quite well known is the Umayyad period in Iberia (Spain), especially during

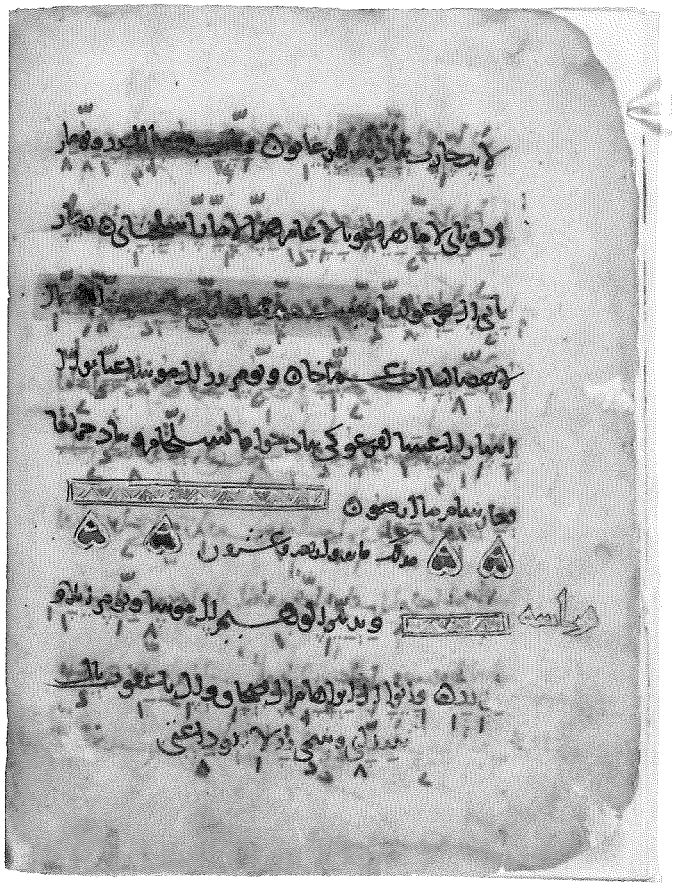
the tenth century. The caliphs resided in the city of Cordoba, which they transformed into a centre of secular and religious learning. One of the remarkable aspects of the time that modern interpreters have consistently commented on is the exceptional symbiosis between Muslims and Jews. The Jewish community thrived, in contrast to the late-Visigoth period in which Jews were forced to convert to Christianity. Hasday ibn Shaprut (d. 975) is a splendid example of a Jewish dignitary at the Umayyad court. His dynamic career as physician, customs official, diplomat, translator, head of the Jewish community and Hebrew scholar is dazzling. He is famed for his edition of Dioscorides' *De materia medica* (*Materials of Medicine*, first century AD) in collaboration with a Greek monk. His career also reveals the contemporary network of long-distance relations. Not only was he in contact with the Christian rulers in the north of the peninsula but also with the emperor of East-Francia, the Byzantine emperor, the Khazars and the Jews in Iraq. For Jewish learning contact with the scholars in Baghdad had been important up to his time, but due to Hasday's efforts Jewish learning in Iberia became a world of its own.

In between these two great centres, Baghdad and Cordoba, lay another powerful capital: Cairo. In the tenth century the Ismaili (Shi'ite) Fatimids had come to Egypt to found a counter-caliphate to that of the Abbasids. Notwithstanding their radical and elitist view of Islam — which was at odds with egalitarian Sunni beliefs — as well as almost incessant hostilities with the powers around the Mediterranean, they created the perfect circumstances for a prosperous society that thrived on trade over the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. The Fatimids actively pursued learning too, and, with the exception of the Caliph al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah (r. 996–1021), they gave much freedom to *dhimmis* and non-Ismaili Muslims. Their most famous legacy today is the Azhar University, which was founded in the 969 as an Ismaili college.

ARABISATION OF JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY: THE GROWTH OF A COMMON CULTURE

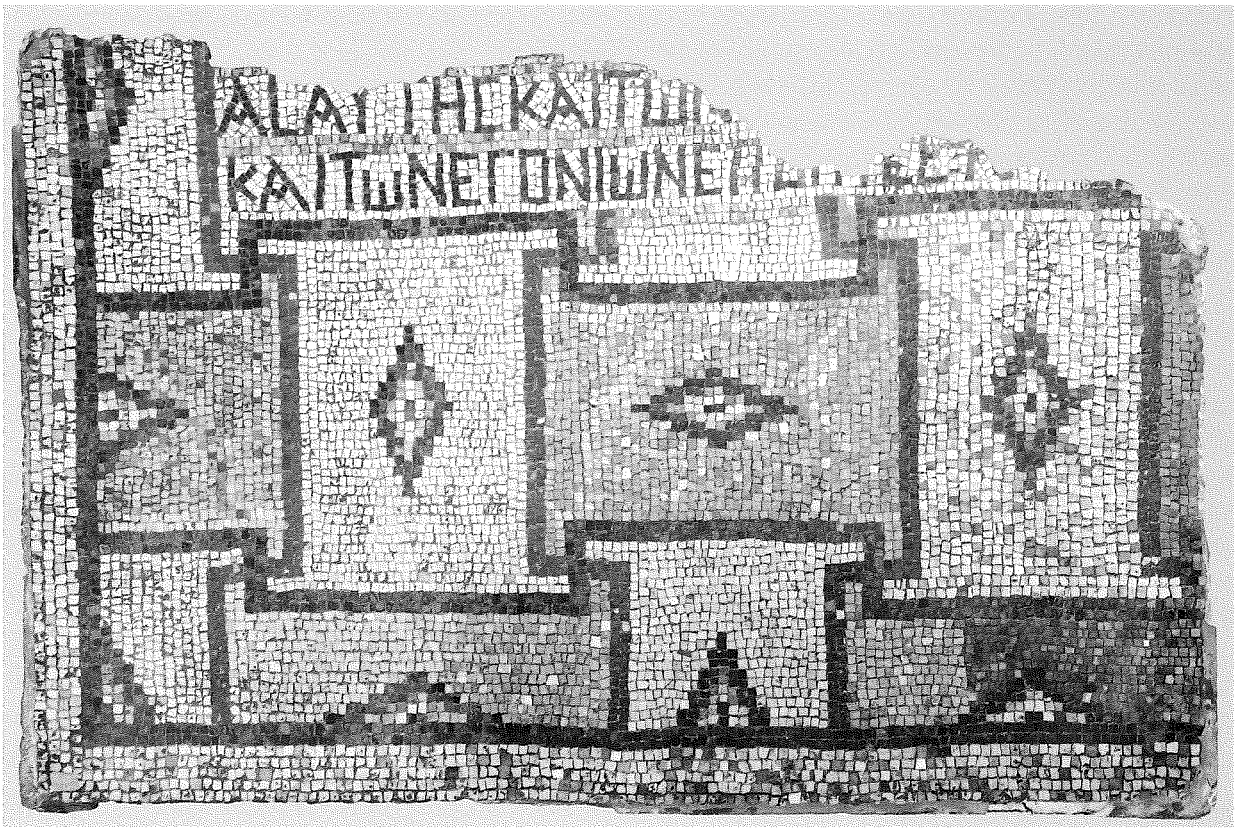
These prosperous cultures around the Mediterranean were ruled by Muslims, but *dhimmis* contributed to many aspects of society and were part of what has been called 'Islamicate' culture. The main reason why Jews and Christians managed to become assimilated to this extent was the fact that they spoke Arabic. With the early expansion of Islam, Arabic had become an increasingly important language. When the Islamic rulers subjected the Sassanid Empire and large parts of the Byzantine Empire in the seventh century, Arabic soon replaced Persian and Greek as the administrative language used in the centralised caliphate.

In the following centuries, the populations in the caliphate began to use Arabic increasingly and some languages, such as Coptic and Greek, gradually disappeared. This change was occasionally lamented by *dhimmis* who resisted conversion to Islam, regarded Arabs as foreign, and associated the language with the Qur'an. Yet the adoption of a common language created channels of



TORAH IN ARABIC SCRIPT

Leaf from a 10th-century manuscript of Exodus 1:1–8:5. The text is in Hebrew written in Arabic characters, with Hebrew vowel-points (in red) and the accents (in green). It was common for Jews in the Middle East to speak Arabic and to write it with Hebrew letters.



SYNAGOGUE MOSAIC FROM SYRIA

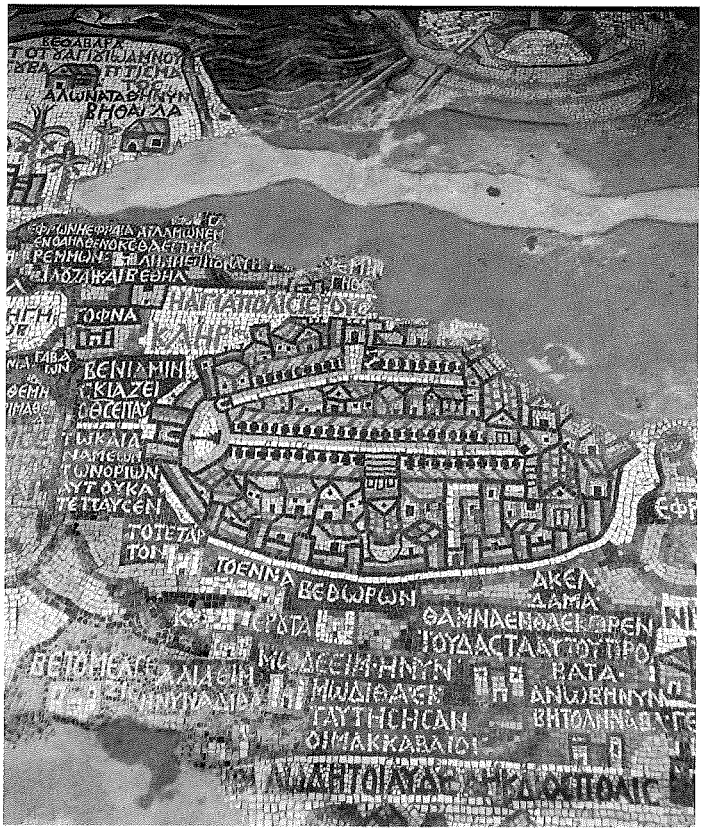
Part of a geometric mosaic floor from a synagogue in Apamea (Syria), AD 392. The inscription tells us that a woman donated the mosaic for her own and her children's and grandchildren's salvation. It is one of nineteen well-preserved donation inscriptions from this synagogue. Half of the donations were made by women, who participated actively in the life of the synagogue. The Jewish community maintained good ties with the other communities of this thriving city on the Orontes river. The synagogue is one of hundreds of Late Antique diaspora synagogues across the Mediterranean and the Near East.

social and geographical mobility and of intellectual exchange. Both in the east and the west of the Islamic world, members of the three faiths exchanged ideas. Jews and Christians translated the Bible and wrote commentaries in Arabic. This meant that Jews, Christians and Muslims could read each other's works. The Arabic translation of the Torah and its commentary by the Jewish scholar Saadia Gaon (d. 942), for example, was used and copied by Coptic Christians. Muslim scholars were very interested in the Bible. They used the Arabic translations to search for ancient predictions of Muhammad and for narrations of the ancient prophets to which the Qur'an merely alluded. They also read the Bible closely to prove that it had suffered corruption during its transmission. Jews and Christians, on the other hand, became thoroughly acquainted with the Qur'an and pointed out contradictions in it. It may well be that this is why the *dhimmis* were prohibited from teaching the Qur'an to their children. Here one sees how detailed knowledge about one religion that was available to members of another often could lead to fierce polemics. Yet such confrontations also fuelled the search for a common rationality through which ultimately the one truth could be expressed. A group of Jews in Iraq, probably following the ideas of Anan ben David (d. c.795), called for a rational exegetical approach to the Bible and for the abandonment of the Talmud. From them grew the Karaites, 'scripturalists', who became a major branch of Judaism throughout the world, in opposition to the Rabbanites whose beliefs and practices the Karaites largely rejected. A rational approach to theology became common among members of all three religions, who exchanged ideas in

public debates and studied with the same masters. Conversions from one faith to the other were not a rare occurrence. A common philosophical terminology was used by followers of all three religions. In addition, it has often been stressed how Jews and Muslims shared their intense love for Arabic poetry, which was undoubtedly the most enduring common cultural expression.
Another aspect of the status of Arabic as *lingua franca* was its convenience in international trade, where it must have contributed to the prosperous economy in the whole Muslim world of the time. The role of Jews in this trade and in Muslim society at large can be reconstructed by means of the thousands of Judaeo-Arabic documents that have been recovered from the storehouse (*genizah*) of the Ben Ezra synagogue in Old Cairo (Fustat). Detailed studies of these documents create vivid images of a world dominated by long-distance contacts and intercommunal communications.

CRISES IN INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS

This society in which Jews, Christians and Muslims had common tastes and ideas which they could expresswithout hesitation, despite religious difference, can be labelled 'pluralist'. In comparison with Christian Europe, these periods in Islamic society can be characterised as tolerant. Some modern interpreters have gone so far as to speak of an 'interfaith utopia'. This is surely an exaggeration, because Islamic society maintained symbolic and tangible ways to mark Jews and Christians as inferior. Nonetheless, the infrequency of violence and persecution deserves to be stressed.
However one characterises the interreligious dynamics of the period up to the year 1000, there is no doubt that they changed soon after that. The eleventh century was a turning point in the history of the relations between the three religions. The Fatimid caliph al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah (r. 996–1021) transgressed Islamic law by instigating attacks on Jews and Christians and forcing them to convert to Islam or to leave. In 1066 the Jews in the Berber Kingdom of Granada were massacred as punishment for the allegedly arrogant behaviour of the Jewish chief political adviser to the king. From the Christian side a more sustained effort was made to rid Europe of non-Christians. Jews, Muslims, and heterodox groups



MADABA MAP

The Madaba Map is part of a floor mosaic with the oldest surviving cartographic depiction of the Holy Land. The map may partially have served to facilitate pilgrimage, as it depicts the itinerary leading to Jerusalem. Originally, it measured 21 by 7 m and contained over two million *tesserae*. Its current dimensions are 16 by 5 m. A combination of folding perspective and aerial view depicts about 150 towns and villages, all of them labelled in Greek. Detail of the Madaba Map depicting Jerusalem, in the Early Byzantine Church of St George at Madaba, Jordan, AD 560.

RED MONASTERY >>

This is a part of the magnificent wall paintings that adorn the Church of the Red Monastery near modern Souhag, Egypt. Remarkably, these vivid paintings have been preserved underneath later layers of paint and soot. They were restored to their former splendour by the American Research Center in Egypt as part of the Red Monastery Project, directed by Elizabeth Bolman. This section shows the colourfully patterned architectural painting as well as niches with portraits of the Evangelists. They appear to gaze directly into the viewer's eyes and were meant to inspire the monks who came to celebrate the liturgy.

suffered massacres during the Inquisition and the Crusades. In the aftermath of the crusading period stronger Islamisation began in the Middle East. However, the delicate fabric of intercommunal relations in the Middle East survived by and large, only to be thoroughly disturbed by the political crises of the last hundred years.

A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE ON THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

The early period of Islam is often called a 'golden age', on account of its prosperity and cultural achievements, as well as a 'renaissance', on account of its revival of ancient thought and its humanistic ideals. It cannot be stressed enough that there is no dark age here. Viewing the golden age of Iberia not as an exception to the Dark Ages of Europe but as part of the wider Mediterranean Islamicate culture will help to create a more nuanced picture of the historical developments that shaped Europe. Including the Mediterranean and the Middle East into the framework of Western history will also contribute to a more holistic view of the transformation of Antique culture as an uninterrupted process of the first millennium.

< INCENSE BURNER

Incense burners were used in liturgical practices in the ancient Egyptian churches; they are still in use today. The incense was burned to purify the sacred space of the church, and it was thought that the smoke would help carry the prayers up to heaven. Upon closer examination the strange-looking rough figures depict scenes from the life of Christ. Egypt, 'Coptic' (AD 600–1000), bronze, h. 9.4 cm.

OIL LAMP FILLER

This kind of oil lamp filler was very common in Antiquity. In the Late Antique period (AD 300–600) such lamp fillers were decorated with animals, Christian symbols, or human figurines. This lamp filler, however, has a geometric design with circles and lines. This allows us to date it to the Islamic period. Bronze, diam. 17.2 cm, AD 650–800, Egypt.

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Caption to p. 202
HORUS ON HORSEBACK
This exceptional window fragment shows the Egyptian god Horus in the dress of a Roman cavalryman killing the evil god Setekh in the guise of a crocodile. As Egyptian deities traditionally were never portrayed on horseback, this scene reflects the influence of Graeco-Roman models. Terracotta, h. 46.1 cm, 4th cent. AD.

COLOPHON

Publisher
WBOOKS, Zwolle
info@wbooks.com
www.wbooks.com
In collaboration with
Allard Pierson Museum
Amsterdam
www.allardpiersonmuseum.nl

Exhibition
Caroline Verweij (project manager)
Marieke van den Doel (exhibition curator)
Birgit Maas (loans registrar)
Platvorm, Amsterdam (design)

Publication manager, Images and captions editor
Paulien Retèl

Translation, Copy editor
Noctua Text & Translation, Corinna Vermeulen
www.noctua-text-translation.eu

Design
Miriam Schlick, Amsterdam
www.extrablond.nl

This is volume 7 in the Allard Pierson Museum Series. Previous titles on the Etruscans, Egypt, Rome, Troy, the Crimea, and Sicily.

ISBN 978 94 625 8224 8 (English)
ISBN 978 94 625 8223 1 (Nederlands)