**The Romans and their Empire in Muslim Arab Historical Memory and Imagination**

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The peoples of the Arab peninsula have always been in contact with the world of the Mediterranean.[[1]](#footnote-1) In the Roman period these contacts were marked by Roman efforts to penetrate the difficult terrain to the southeast of their Syrian border, beginning in the time of Augustus, and, as becomes increasingly clear, in later centuries as well. The cities and other polities in the south-eastern borderlands of the Empire entered into a more or less tight relationship with the Romans, most famously Petra and Palmyra. In Late Antiquity, princes of regional federations such as the Kinda federation or the Ghassanids, could become Roman clients (at least temporarily).[[2]](#footnote-2) We do not really know how these groups saw the Romans, as our only sources in this context are inscriptions that are few and far between although ever more of them are discovered lately. Arab literary sources from pre-Islamic times, i.e. old Arab poetry, are often of doubtful authenticity and at any rate don’t tell us much when it comes to how the Arabs saw their Roman neighbours.

While many pre-Islamic speakers of Arabic[[3]](#footnote-3) were part of the Roman world (most famously the Emperor Philippus Arabs), Roman history was not part of the intellectual make-up of most of them. Nor indeed was any history apart from their own reconstructed tribal genealogies, local lore about famous sites and versions of Christian and Jewish stories. The past, that of the peninsula - and even more that of neighbouring regions - was thus constantly receding from memory. Nevertheless, Roman history became part of the later Muslim Arab culture and its lively historical consciousness.

1. The Romans in Nascent Islam

The Romans are given short shrift in the Quran. Although the Muslim holy book is full of legends concerning biblical figures, nowhere does the Quran mention that Jesus, according to Islam the last prophet before Muḥammad, lived under Roman rule. This fits well with the notion that the pre-Islamic Arabs did not have much of a historical interest. The same holds true for the persecution of Christians. The Quran tells the story of the Seven Sleepers but without providing information about the historical or geographical backdrop. We hear nothing about Ephesus or Decius, nor for that matter about the Christian Emperors under whose rule it became safe for the sleepers and their dog to awake.[[4]](#footnote-4) The Romans were not alone in that their history was of no interest to the Quran: Some of the Quranic prophets before Muḥammad were connected to a specific place (e.g. the legends of Moses and Joseph are set in Egypt as they are in the Bible), but neither was their life tied to any chronology, nor are the stories that are told about them in any way set in a concrete world with political or social structures. The same holds true for the ancient Arab prophets unknown to the Bible but mentioned in the Quran. The ruins of bygone cities that are conveniently scattered over many parts of Arabia are associated with stories to prove that, already in olden times, God had never failed to punish the arrogant who would not listen to his prophets’ word. Nonetheless, the Quran never informs the reader at which time these cataclysmic events had happened.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The Quranic world was a world of little institutionalised religion and fluid tribal communities, not one of imperial structures, stable monarchical polities or institutionalised churches whose history was remembered by their subjects for its own sake. Such entities all had their ways of counting time (according to rulers, mostly). The tribal world remembered great battles or tribal genealogies but rarely in a chronologically fixed way. This explains why historical occurrences in the Quran are of interest not as such, but only insofar as they prove the truth of Muḥammad’s message. There was no need for concrete dates or information about the social order wherein ancient prophets lived. The prophets and audience constantly re-enacted the same old story: a group of people are sinners, a prophet is sent to admonish them, they would not listen and are then duly punished. These stories are told not in order to inform the audience about what happened in history, but as a theological argument. Prophets never have been accepted by their own people. The refusal of most of Muḥammad’s countrymen to believe in him becomes proof of the veracity of his mission. The old prophets’ adversaries and followers are not depicted as historical people. Rather they are more or less Muḥammad’s Meccan countrymen in disguise.

The link which in some Biblical books exists between a systematic rendering of concrete history and God’s actions is thus much less prominent in the Quran. This holds true not only for legends about the prophets of old but also for Muḥammad himself. Not even the name of the prophet’s hometown is mentioned in the Holy Book. Of course, everyone in Muḥammad’s audience knew the story, so why tell it in what was seen as divine revelation? This very absence of information on Muḥammad in the Quran might be seen as a proof of Muḥammad’s authorship of the Holy Book. Had it been a later compilation, not a text put forward by someone known to all and sundry around him, people would have felt a need to provide information on the prophet. The Quran being a finished corpus of texts, early Muslims could not insert historical information on the prophet into a book that, for all practical purposes, was already complete. They had to invent the genre of *sīra*, the biography of the prophet, to collect information on Muḥammad similar to the texts that Christians found in the Gospels.[[6]](#footnote-6)

While the Quran is therefore more or less silent about current events, there still are some rare passages that are referring to what was happening in the world around the early Muslims, albeit only as if through a glass, darkly. The most prominent example is *Surat al-Rūm*, the Sura “The Romans”. This sura is commonly held to refer to the great war between Rome and Sasanian Persia in the early 7th century:

“The Romans have suffered defeat in a land nearby. But, after their defeat, they will triumph after some years. The course of events is completely in God’s hands. On that day the believers will rejoice.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

After this short passage, the text goes on to preach obedience to the Almighty, fear of the day of reckoning and the like. The Romans and their victories are not mentioned for their own sake but are proof of God’s power to change events in such a way that the believers, even if in dire straits at times, will triumph in the end. What seems clear, at any rate, is that the believers see themselves in solidarity with the Christian Romans. Lecker has recently argued that Muḥammad’s community and the Romans were indeed allies during the early days of Muḥammad’s mission, suggesting that the *hijra*, Muḥammad’s exodus from Mecca to Medina, was the result of Roman intervention.[[8]](#footnote-8) Be this as it may, it seems quite likely that for a long period of his life Muḥammad thought of himself as being close to the Christians and therefore to the Romans, the foremost Christian power.[[9]](#footnote-9) This seems to have changed only at the very end of his life.[[10]](#footnote-10)

During the first centuries of Islam, the Romans were the most important foreign enemy of the Muslims. This explains why the Quranic verses mentioned above have acquired, over time, a second reading. As the Quran in its formative period was written without any diacritical marks, active and passive voice could not be differentiated. Thus, it was possible to give the opening verses of *Sūrat al-Rūm* a completely different meaning:

“The Romans have triumphed in a land nearby. But, after their triumph, they will suffer defeat after some years. The course of events is completely in God’s hand. On that day the believers will rejoice.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

It may seem surprising that this interpretation of the text, which at times had been quite popular with Muslim scholars, has not prevailed in the end. It should have been much more to the taste of post-conquest Muslims who were often very conscious of their Iranian descent and certainly no friends of the Christian Romans. In the first centuries of Islam, the anti-Roman reading had a strong *Sitz im Leben* with a clear in legitimising function for anti-Roman warfare.[[12]](#footnote-12) How then can we explain that the pro-Roman reading finally came out on top? It seems to me that a strong tradition of this version as the original one was so widespread within the Muslim community that it could not easily be suppressed, although, to the Muslims of later ages, it wasn’t of practical use anymore.

While, with all due misgivings as to the exact wording of the text, we can be rather sure that the Quran is more or less a product of the early 7th century, the same can’t be said about the historical tradition of the Muslim conquests. Certainly, the main outline of the story the Muslim sources tell dovetails nicely with what we know from other sources about the history of the 7th century.[[13]](#footnote-13) But still, research in the last 50 years has shown pretty clearly that many of the details of the story presented in the Muslim accounts are full of *topoi* and contradictions, the latter of which can be interpreted as the result of interest groups[[14]](#footnote-14) trying to use history for their purposes.[[15]](#footnote-15) What is more, history as told by Muslim historians is always to a large degree *Heilsgeschichte*. This holds true of what we learn about Muḥammad and the early Muslims’ relationship with the Romans after the unification of much of the Arabian Peninsula under Muslim rule in 630/634.

Muḥammad is said to have sent the *Qayṣar*, Heraclius, and the rulers of other parts of the world letters summoning them to Islam. Heraclius immediately recognises the truthfulness of Muḥammads claim. Unfortunately, his subjects don’t want to follow him. Heraclius, in al-Yaʿqūbī’s rendering, declines the invitation to convert to Islam by answering as follows:

“To Aḥmad, the messenger of God, announced by Jesus from Caesar, the King of the Romans. I have received your letter brought by your ambassador. I confess that you are the messenger of God. We find you(r prophethood announced) in our Gospel. Jesus, son of Mary, announced you. I did ask the Romans to believe in you but they refused. Had they obeyed, it would have been better for them: I wish I were with you to serve you and wash your feet.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

The stubborn refusal of the *Rūm* prevents Heraclius and, in some versions, also the patriarch of Constantinople (who seems as convinced of the truthfulness of Muḥammad’s claim as the emperor) from turning Rome into a Muslim polity.[[17]](#footnote-17)

According to Muslim historiography, it is not the letter alone that makes Heraclius recognise the prophethood of Muḥammad. Muslim traditions tell us that already earlier, hearing that a Prophet has appeared amongst the Arabs, Heraclius tries to gather more information. After his reconquest of Jerusalem, the Roman ruler meets Abū Sufyān, a Meccan leader who at the time was still an enemy of the believers, and interrogates him about the religious figure that has started preaching among his people in order to see if he has the attributes of a prophet. Abū Sufyān answers all the questions in such a way that Heraclius immediately knows that Muḥammad is really God’s messenger. This story is not told because Muslims were interested in Rome or Roman history. Abū Sufyān was the leader of the Umayyad family who ruled over the Muslim empire from 661-750. Most of the family, including Abū Sufyān, were opponents of the prophet during most of his life. The story of an Abū Sufyān who nonetheless acts as defender of Muḥammad’s prophetic role vis-à-vis the emperor may therefore have served to legitimise the rule of his family.[[18]](#footnote-18) This is, of course, not the only possible function of the story. One might as well read it in an anti-Umayyad way: Even the Christian emperor and ruler of the people who later were the sworn enemies of the Muslims recognises what the leading Umayyad of the day stubbornly refuses to see.

Whatever the story’s original intention, Heraclius and his patriarch who recognise Muḥammad’s role are simply two further versions of the stereotypical figure of the honest and knowing Christian who bears witness to Muḥammad’s prophethood. Islamic lore has a number of Christians who hold fast to what according to Islam is the true teaching of Christianity. Among the most prominent are Waraqa b. Nawfal, a Meccan Christian and relative of Muḥammad’s first wife Khadīja;[[19]](#footnote-19) Bahīra, a hermit who sees the signs of prophethood in Muḥammad when Muḥammad, as a boy, passes by Bahīra’s hermitage together with a caravan;[[20]](#footnote-20) and the Negus of the Abyssinians.[[21]](#footnote-21)

What is setting Heraclius apart from these other figures is that he is the only one among these Christian witnesses to Islam (and, in the Muslim view, true Christianity) who is not a more or less legendary figure but well known from non-Muslim sources. The accounts of his near conversion to Islam are embedded in a context that proves that a certain amount of information about Heraclius and his rule was available to early Muslims. Heraclius is rightly presented as having overthrown Phocas, triumphed over the Sassanians and reconquered Jerusalem and finally lost Syria to the followers of Muḥammad (very much to his regret). This tragic end notwithstanding, he remains a positive figure throughout.[[22]](#footnote-22) Heraclius may have been even better suited as paramount witness to Muslim truth, as the great emperor was an ambiguous figure in Byzantine historical memory because of his marital problems and, in the view of Orthodox Christians, his heresy.[[23]](#footnote-23) With Abū Sufyān and Heraclius, two men who at certain times of their lives were important political opponents of the prophet or the Muslim community acknowledged his role as God’s messenger. If even they bore witness to Islam’s truth, who would dare to contest it?

1. Roman Past: Subject Matter

A proper historiographic tradition emerged in the Muslim world quite early on. In the beginning, this tradition was focussed on the life of the prophet. Soon, however, the conquests and the conflicts within the community became subject to Muslims’ historical interest in their own right. The late 9th century saw the beginning of a tradition of histories of the world as the Muslims perceived it. Within this framework, Muslim historians started covering Roman history as well. Rather early on, a standard narrative of Roman history developed in the Arab East that was incorporating the Romans within a Biblico-Quranic genealogy of peoples. A case in point is the 9th century historian al-Yaʿqūbī who begins his chapter on Roman history as follows:

“After the Greeks, the sons of Yūnān, son of Japeth, son of Noah, kingship passed to the Romans who were descendants of Rūm, the son of Samāḥīr, the son of Hūba, the son of ʿAlqā, the son of Esau,[[24]](#footnote-24) the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham. They occupied the country, spoke the language of the people, and became known as the Romans, the people of the city of Rome.[[25]](#footnote-25) The Greek language disappeared except for a remnant of their wise sayings that remained in the hands of these people.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

Having inserted the Romans more or less firmly in the Biblical world, the late-9th-century Muslims’ interest in Roman history was expressed in a list of emperors interwoven with the history of Christianity, as given by al-Ṭabarī in his monumental History of the Prophets and Kings. At the end of his account of the life of Jesus he mentions that the Romans were overlords of Palestine at the time of Jesus and responsible for his trial. The trial ends, in line with Muslim tradition,[[27]](#footnote-27) with a Jew named Joshua who was mixed up with Jesus being crucified. This is the occasion for al-Ṭabarī to present more information about the Romans:

“The Roman rulers, according to the Christians, reigned over Palestine from the ascension of Christ to the age of the Prophet Muḥammad ... They assert that after Tiberius, Palestine and other parts of Syria were ruled by Gaius, son of Tiberius, for four years. He was succeeded by another son, named Claudius, for fourteen years, following which Nero ruled for fourteen years. He slew Peter and crucified Paul head down. For four months Vitellius ruled thereafter. Then Vespasian, father of Titus whom he sent to Jerusalem, ruled for ten years. Three years after his rise to power, forty years after the ascension of Jesus, Vespasian sent Titus to Jerusalem. Titus destroyed it and slew numerous Israelites in his wrath over the fate of Christ.”[[28]](#footnote-28)

After this plain and at times erroneous narrative follows a more or less correct list of emperors down to Heraclius with no further information but their years of rule. This then allows al-Ṭabarī to count the years from the rebuilding of the temple up to the hijra of the prophet. The chronology of the prophets rather than Roman history is what is of interest to him. For the rest, he mentions Roman history only when the Sassanians, who are very much in his focus, wage war against their western foes, and later on in the context of Muslim history (i.e. Muḥammad’s letters to foreign rulers and the Arab-Muslim conquests).

Al-Yaʿqūbī, a near contemporary of al-Ṭabarī, in his account of the pre-Christian Romans included some material on philosophical schools, in line with his tendency to provide not so much a history of Greeks and Romans, but a outline of some of their scientific and philosophical opinions. The rest again consists of lists of rulers as in al-Ṭabarī, interspersed with short mentions of “Apollonius of Tyana, the master of talismans” and the explosion of the Vesuvius.[[29]](#footnote-29) Al-Yaʿqūbi’s interest in scientific knowledge that was not strictly part of the Muslim religious tradition reflects a wider trend in Muslim society during the 9th and 10th centuries. He was an early representative of the so-called Renaissance of Islam when Muslim literati, steeped in the philosophical and scientific tradition of Late Antiquity, tried in different ways to integrate the world of Classical Antiquity and Arab and Iranian religious and secular traditions.[[30]](#footnote-30) The most important historical work of this trend was al-Masʿūdīs *Murūj al-Dhahab* (“The Meadows of Gold”) and in our context his *Tanbīh* (“Admonition”). Al-Masʿūdī, who also writes about other peoples beyond the Roman world, not least the Franks in western Europe, adds significant details to the Muslim picture of the pre-Christian Romans, such as the story of Romulus and Remus[[31]](#footnote-31) or that of Cleopatra and her dramatic death.[[32]](#footnote-32) He provides some dry factual information on the pre-Christian and the later Eastern Roman Emperors, and is more detailed on councils of the Christian church under their rule.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Of course, church history told from a Muslim perspective differed from how most Christians saw their history. In accordance with what is implied in the Quran (5,116), al-Yaʿqūbī, who in his accounts of Christian Rome focusses to a large degree on church councils, has some fathers at Nicaea declare the divinity not only of Christ but also of Mary.[[34]](#footnote-34) Another example of Muslim bias in telling the story of Christianity relates to Constantine. He plays a certain role in Muslim historical lore, primarily of course as the first emperor to convert to Christianity. An ambiguous figure already in parts of the Roman tradition,[[35]](#footnote-35) Constantine is subjected to an even more ambivalent interpretation in Muslim historians. Here, we find a twist that is lacking in Christian sources: Those Muslims who depict Constantine in a negative way see him as introducing the deification of Christ, a most terrible abomination in Muslim eyes.[[36]](#footnote-36) It is therefore no surprise that some Muslims accepted the story that Constantine had been suffering from leprosy.[[37]](#footnote-37) Of course, we also find the more common story that the emperor became Christian after he was promised victory through the sign of the cross.[[38]](#footnote-38)

In the Muslim West, most of all al-Andalus, the situation was markedly different. Here, a strong literary tradition started in the 10th century when the Umayyads and their ministers succeeded in centralising power in Cordoba. The Andalusian Caliphs presided over a brilliant court that was home to all kinds of intellectuals. It is here that works were produced that opened up new perspectives on Roman history. Amongst a number of mostly late antique texts, the most influential work in this context was *Kitāb Hurūshiyūsh*, a translation of the *Historiae adversus paganos* of Orosius.[[39]](#footnote-39) It seems that Orosius’ text came to Cordoba as a present of the Emperor Romanos I (?) of Constantinople and was then translated at the Caliph’s court together with other books presented, most notably the Pharmacopeia of Dioscorides.[[40]](#footnote-40) Western Muslims therefore had extraordinarily detailed information on Roman history up to the 4th century at their disposal. For the first time, the Republican period and especially the Punic wars became part of what Muslims knew about Roman history. The information gleaned from the work of *Hurūshiyūsh* was widely used by many later authors like the geographer al-Bakrī, the ethnographer Ṣāʿid al-Andalusī, and the historian and sociologist Ibn Khaldūn. It became clear that once upon a time the Romans had spoken Latin, not Greek, that they had been governed by magistrates and assemblies instead of Kings, and that they had fought wars against people based in North Africa who had invaded their country through footholds in Spain. This information was in part confusing, and even a genius like Ibn Khaldūn was not always capable of untangling the contradictions in the texts he used.[[41]](#footnote-41) While there was thus an explosion of knowledge on early Roman history in the West thanks to *Hurūshiyūsh,* knowledge about the later Romans did not improve very much on what we find in al-Masʿūdī.

1. Information and Identity: An Attempt at Analysis

How are we to explain the way Arab historians treated the Roman Empire and its history? In the first place, the barrenness of most of what Arab historians, especially in the East, have to tell is a consequence of the sources at their disposal: that is to say Christian scholars in the Muslim Middle East and what they had read. The lack of interest in the Roman Republic is not a specific trait of Muslim scholarship, it is already a mark of the work of Malalas, who was read in the Syriac tradition. Not many classical historians were much read among speakers of Syriac and even less translated into Arabic.[[42]](#footnote-42) The lack of possible sources of information certainly was a central reason for the comparatively low knowledge the Arab Muslims had about the Roman Empire.

What else can we say? Is the Muslim Arab rendering of Roman history a further example of disinterest in the history of the other on the part of the overly self-confident disciples of Muḥammad? Up to a certain point, it is. But this lack of interest is not peculiar to the Muslim Middle East.[[43]](#footnote-43) Apart from small minorities in modernity, people of all cultures and epochs are more interested in what they regard as their own history rather than that of groups perceived as strangers. This holds true for medieval Muslims in the same way as for medieval Europeans or ancient Romans. Before the 16th century, people all over the world developed an intense interest in the history of others only when these others became subject to a dynamic of cultural identification. Romans were interested in the history of the Greeks since they saw them as their cultural forebears. The Chinese started writing about the Buddhist past of Central Asia and India from the moment they became Buddhist and regarded Buddhist tradition as their spiritual home;[[44]](#footnote-44) medieval (and modern) Westerners cared about Biblical history.

For both Western medieval Christians and Byzantines, Roman imperial history was *their* history, as they thought of themselves as still living in or with the Roman Empire. Muslims, different from people further to the West, did not identify their polity with Rome. Why should they have kept historical memories of a foreign empire? When it came to Empires, their model polity was the Sasanian Empire; many members of the elite saw their families and their tradition of rulership stemming from the Sasanian predecessor. The rest was interested in pre-Islamic Arab culture and polities.[[45]](#footnote-45) Pre-Islamic Arab and Sassanian history figures prominently in the Muslim tradition. Most of what we know about the Sassanians we know from Muslim sources.[[46]](#footnote-46) For the Romans by contrast, Medieval Muslims did not care more than Westerners (even today) did and do for the Sassanian Empire.

Seen in this light, it is no coincidence that the Muslims of al-Andalus were fascinated by *Hurūshiyūsh* at a time when the Umayyads started to create their own imperial tradition that was to set them apart from the world of the Muslim East. *Hurūshiyūsh*, by consequence, was not so much used as a source for Roman history than as a source for the history of al-Andalus in pre-Islamic times. The literary tradition of al-Andalus breaks up what is found in *Hurūshiyūsh* to show what happened in individual cities of the Muslim West, esp. Toledo.[[47]](#footnote-47) The elites of Muslim al-Andalus were interested in their country’s pre-Islamic past since they saw it as theirs. They were very conscious of the Gothic and Spanish background of many leading Muslim families in al-Andalus, including, on their mothers’ side, the Umayyad Caliphs. In the Muslim West, elites could see their world as deriving, in part, from local Hispanic, Punic and Gothic polities. Before the Berber invasions[[48]](#footnote-48) Muslims in al-Andalus were therefore open to the history of these groups although by far not to the same degree as Muslims in the East were open to Sasanian history.[[49]](#footnote-49)

In the end, however, Muslim identity even in the East was only to a small part constructed around the imperial memory of the Sasanians. More than empire, religion was what counted in the pre-modern Muslim world. Religiously the Muslims were part of the Abrahamic world, and the history of the prophets was of huge interest to Muslims. This explains that the contexts where Muslims showed any kind of deeper involvement in Roman history, it was mostly with respect to Church history. This holds true for the time of Christ and the Apostles but even more for the great church councils. As Christianity is seen by Muslims as a legitimate even if distorted version of God’s religion these things are not the history of foreigners, but part and parcel of the history of their own tradition: Islam.

Apart from religious and imperial heritage, Muslims identified with the heritage of Hellenistic philosophy and science. This certainly was something many Muslim intellectuals saw as a central part of their own culture. But they did not identify Hellenistic science with the Roman Empire, nor indeed any political entity. Within the mainstream of Muslim narratives, ancient science is more or less separated from polities, be it the Greek city states or the Roman Empire. The ancient Greeks as seen by Muslim scholars were to a large degree beyond political history. A typical example of this is again al-Yaʿqūbī’s section on the Greeks that is not a history at all but rather a digest of scientific lore, mostly from Hippocrates.[[50]](#footnote-50) The only ruler of the Greeks known to al-Yaʿqūbī is Alexander the Great, often identified by Muslims with the Quranic prophet Dhu l-Qarnayn and therefore a part of Muslim *Heilsgeschichte*.[[51]](#footnote-51)

The Roman philosophers al-Yaʿqūbī mentions are, apart from some short remarks on the Aristotelians, not the scientists and philosophers the Muslims cherished. According to him, insofar as the pagan Romans were at all interested in science and philosophy, they were disciples of the sophists and the materialists and therefore not the real forbears of Muslim *falāsifa* (philosophers in the Hellenistic tradition).[[52]](#footnote-52) Al-Masʿūdī acknowledges a great scientific interest of the Romans, but this, he tells us, ended with their adoption of Christianity.[[53]](#footnote-53) Being either considered as separate from political history altogether, or dissociated from the Christian Romans, Hellenistic science was not contaminated by the political enmity the Muslims and the Byzantines harboured for each other. Muslim philosopherscould therefore identify with this tradition without being traitors in a political sense.

As we have seen, apart from the special conditions in al-Andalus during the 10th and 11th centuries, the medieval Muslims neither had the information at their disposal nor, in the context of identity building, an incentive to show more than a limited interest in the Roman Empire. Recent work with a strong focus on the Western Muslim tradition has highlighted that Muslims knew a good deal more about Rome than has been hitherto acknowledged, most of it based on the Hurūshiyush’s rich information on pre-Christian times, especially the Republic.[[54]](#footnote-54) This doesn’t mean that knowledge about the Romans – beyond a few very specific points – was part and parcel of what a cultivated Medieval Muslim knew or was supposed to know. The same, of course, holds true for cultivated Europeans today with respect to the pre-colonial history of the World outside the Ancient Mediterranean, Europe and North America.

1. Coda: The End of Rome, the End of the World, and Nationalistic Resurrection

While the ancient Romans were suffering from an understandable lack of interest on the part of medieval Muslims, the latter did show interest in what happened in the contemporary Byzantine Empire until the final fall of Constantinople in 1453.[[55]](#footnote-55) The power of the Romans and the awe they still inspired might explain not only that interest but also why one strand of early Muslim apocalyptic thinking focused on the final downfall of the Roman Empire at the hands of the Muslims at some point in the future. This was the case especially when the capture of Constantinople became less and less likely after the end of the 8th century. The fall of Constantinople was foretold in prophetic tradition as portend of the end of times.[[56]](#footnote-56) It finally came about in 1453 through the Ottoman Empire in an epoch of intense millenarianism within the Muslim world but obviously did not bring the end of the world.[[57]](#footnote-57)

That the fall of Constantinople brought an end to the Middle Ages is a later invention (as are the Middle Ages themselves) and an idea now mostly forgotten in the West.[[58]](#footnote-58) It is not so much in the West but rather in the context of Turkish nationalism that the fall of Constantinople, the new Rome, is still very much remembered as marking the end of medieval darkness: Turkish nationalists see themselves as ushering in modernity by subduing a decadent Rome.[[59]](#footnote-59) Again, historical traditions are all too often a product of identity-constructions rather than of pure scientific curiosity.

1. Our knowledge of Arab Muslim views on the Romans has been put on a new basis thanks to three important studies: Nadia Maria El Cheikh: Byzantium Viewed by the Arabs, Cambridge Mass. 2004; Marco di Branco: Storie Arabe di Greci e di Romani. La Grecia e Roma nella storiografia arabo-islamica medievale, Pisa 2009; Daniel G. König: Arabic-Islamic Views of the Latin West, Oxford 2015. Most of what I have to say can be found in more detail there. If my interpretation stresses questions of identity primarily, it is at my own risk. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Fisher (2011). On all questions concerning the pre-Islamic Arabian Peninsula, the numerous contributions of Christian Robin are of the utmost importance. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The question of Arab identity before Islam is very much debated of late. Here as in other contexts a constructivist position has come to the fore, most prominently with Webb (2016). Some of the problems raised by Webb are critically discussed by Hoyland (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Quran, Sura 18, 9-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Sura 27, 48sq and passim; 11, 50-57 and passim. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Wim Raven: Art. *Sīra and the Qurʾān.* In: Jane McAuliffe (Ed.): *Encyclopaedia of Qur’an.* Leiden 2001–2006, vol. 5, p. 29–51, esp. p. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The Quran, Sura 30, 2-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Lecker (2015). On the relationship between Arabs and their neighbours more generally see Fischer (2011) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Quran 5,82, Sure 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Kaegi (1992), p. 66-87. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Quran 30, 2-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The debate on the meaning of these verses is well summarised by El Cheikh (2004), 24-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The best collection of Christian sources on early Islam is Hoyland (1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. E.g. to prove the heroism of their forbears, the early alliance of their group with the Muslims etc. and to use this to support claims. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. A convenient overview of research trends can be found in Micheau (2012) and Borrut (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Al-Yaʿqūbī (1960), 77-78 (my translation). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The story of Heraclius‘ near conversion in its different versions is discussed by El Cheikh (2004), 39-54 and Leder (2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Leder (2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Robinson (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Roggema (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Erlich (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. El Cheikh (2004), 39-54. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Imperial propaganda from well-known authors like George of Pisidia presenting the emperor as new Constantine and new David had its readers, Howard-Johnston (2010), 16-35. On the other hand hisincestuous second marriage and his Monothelitism made him an ambiguous figure in Chalcedonian and Miaphysite quarters, cf. Sirotenko (2018). On the legitimation of rulership under Heraclius (and much else besides) cf. also Meier (2020), pp. 1035-1046. The ambiguity of Heraclius in Christian lore is transmitted to the Muslims in al-Zuhrīs account of Heraclius dreaming that a circumcised people will destroy his empire, leading him to persecute the Jews. This story that is found in a similar way in Pseudo-Fredegar and is therefore obviously of Christian origin, cf. Anthony (2000), kindle-edition position 3964-4616. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The Romans were seen as the *Banu Aṣfar*, the descendants of the Red, the Edomites. The Muslims were following a Jewish tradition from the time of the destruction of the second temple on this point; di Branco (2009), 110-112. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The translation in Gordon (ed.) that I follow for the rest has “related themselves to the city of Rome” for *intasbau ilā al-Rūmiyya*, which in my opinion is not what is really meant. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Al-Yaʿqūbī (2018b), 432-433. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. According to the Quran Jesus was not crucified but someone of his likeness, Quran 4, 157sq. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Al-Ṭabarī (1881/82, p.742; p. 126 transl. Perlman). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Al-Yaʿqūbī (1960, p. 146-147; p. 433 transl. Gordon ea.). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Der Begriff stammt von Adam Mez (1922). Eine jüngerer Überblick findet sich bei Joel Kraemer (1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Al-Masʿūdī (1893), 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Al-Masʿūdī (1966), 27-31 (=§707-712). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Al-Masʿūdī (1966), 41-52 (=§ 734-754). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Al-Yaʿqūbī (1960), 153-156. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Most of all Zosimus. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Poggi (1993), 823-834. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. For this Muslim rendering of the Christian legend found in the *Actus Sylvestri* see: al-Masʿūdī (1893), 137-138. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Al-Yaʿqūbī: (1960), 153; al-Masʿūdī: (1966), 43 (=§ 737). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Penelas (2001), on the sources cf. also di Branco (2009), 166-189; König (2015), 83-87. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. All this is less than sure. For opposing scholarlyopinions cf. di Branco (2009), 147-158. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. di Branco (2009), 189-222. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. On the sources of Muslim knowledge on Rome and models of Muslim historical writing cf. e. g. di Branco (2009), p. 24-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. A universal history of writing the history of foreigners is, as far as I can see, as yet to be written. In a scientific way it was a product of the European 19th century and even in Europe has stayed marginal up to this day. For this and a short discussion of the beginnings of the sciences of the foreign in Europe (and there alone) see Osterhammel (2009), p.1158. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Al-Bīrūnī’s interest in India by contrast, seems not to have been motivated by questions of identity and is with its remarkable openness certainly an exception anywhere in the pre-Modern world, East or West. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. This strong all-encompassing interest in the pre-Islamic Arabs, their history and culture in comparison to even the Persians is most visible in al-Yaʿqūbī (1960), 195-271, Al-Yaʿqūbī (2018b, p. 195-271; p. 498-594 transl. Gordon ea.). [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. On the Middle Persian historiography on which this is based now see the critical remarks in Stickler (2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. König (2015), 109-110, 136, 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. After these invasions the interest in pre-Muslim Spain is lost. On the scarcity of information in later authors cf. König (2015), 141. I would like to ascribe this to a change in identity in later al-Andalus. But this needs further inquiry. That Ibn Khaldūn by contrast shows a remarkable interest in and knowledge of Greek and Roman history (cf. the analysis of Marco di Branco (2009), 220) says more about his genius than about general trends in Middle Eastern thought. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Berger (2018), 41-50. On the Goths in Muslim memory see Lutz Berger (2016), 683–692, whose main thesis remains valid in my eyes, although much of it would have to be reworked based on broader research.

The Sasanians of course played a greater role in the East than the Romans or Goths in the West. The cultural dominance of the Muslim East forestalled all efforts in Muslim Westerners int creating their own tradition notwithstanding, from severing their identity ties from the East completely. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. al-Yaʿqūbī (1960, p. 95-143 ed. Gordon; p. 359-428 transl. Gordon ea.). [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. al-Yaʿqūbī (1960, p. 143-145 ed. Gordon; p. 428-432 transl. Gordon ea.). Al-Masʿūdī, for his part, gives a list of Ptolemaean rulers in the same chapter where he tells the legends concerning Cleopatra’s death, al-Masʿūdī (1966), 24-26 (=§699-705). [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Al-Yaʿqūbī (1960, p. 146-152 ed. Gordon; p. 432-440 transl. Gordon ea.). [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. al-Masʿūdī (1966), 45-46 (=§741). [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. See n. 1 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. This story, well told by Nadia Al-Cheikh in her 2004 study, is not within the scope of the present paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. El Cheikh (2004), 60-71, 215; more generally see Cook (2002), 54 and *passim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Fleischer (1992), 159–177. Glassen (1979), 167-179. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. On this, from very different points of view, Le Goff (2014), Heers (2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. This is a very common theme in Turkish nationalism. E.g.: Türkiye Cumhuriyeti *Cumhurbaşkanlığı Resmî Sitesi* (2015). This of course is not how Europeans in the 19th and 20th century would have told the story: they would have credited Greek scholars fleeing ‘Turkish barbarians’ with bringing Greek scholarship to the West and ushering in therenaissance. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)