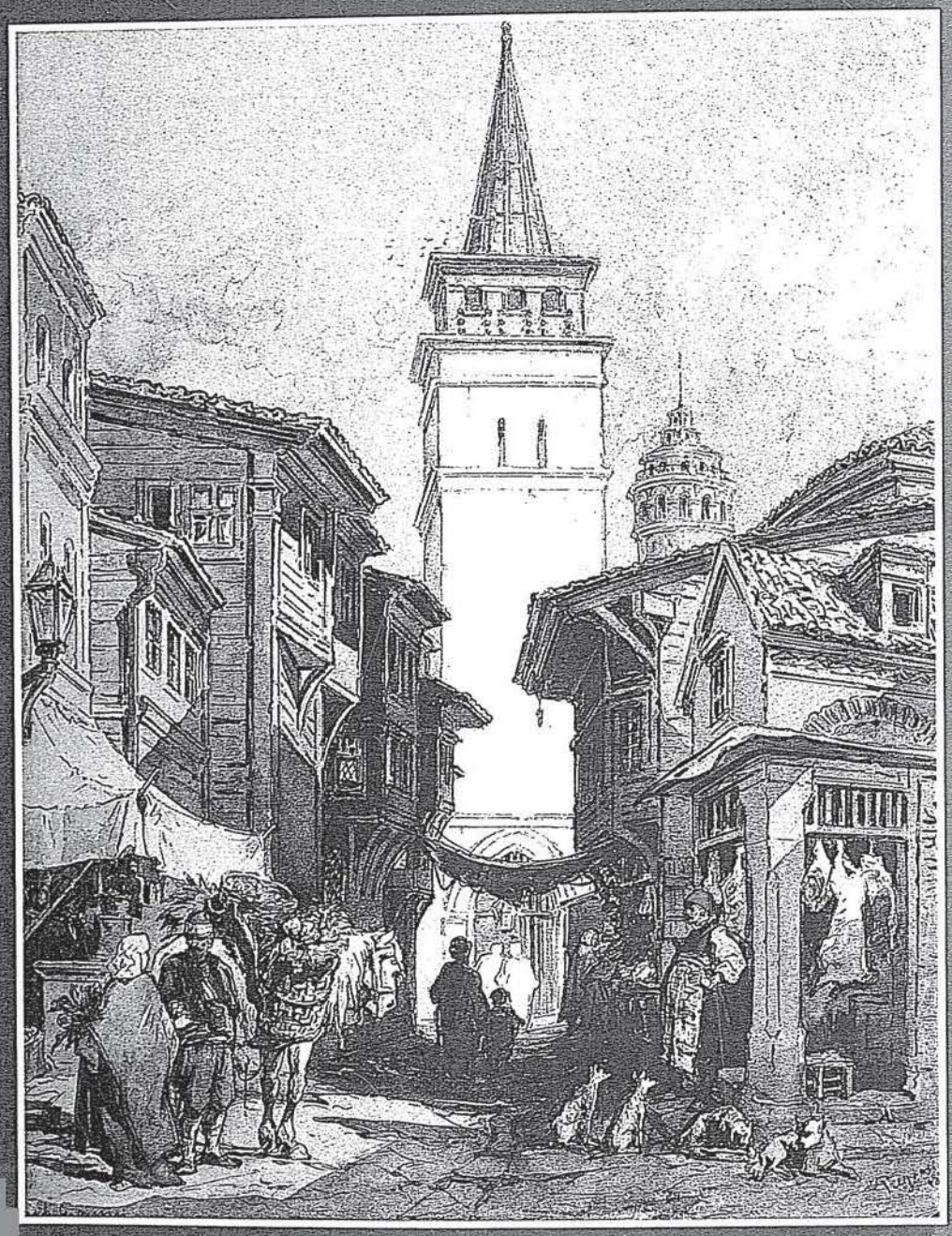
ISTANBUL AS SEEN FROM A DISTANCE

Centre and Provinces in the Ottoman Empire



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SWEDISH RESEARCH INSTITUTE IN ISTANBUL

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Constantinople and the Early Islamic Conquests

JAN RETSÖ

The Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453 was the fulfilment of a project that had already been launched by the first Muslim conquerors in the first century of the hijra. Arabic sources refer to two major attacks on the city. Indeed, an additional attempt was reported as early as the year 644 under 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Khalid, who did not reach the city proper but stopped at Pergamon.[1] The report is a short notice in Ṭabari and it is difficult to judge its historical value. But the two others were, according to both Arabic and Byzantine sources, real sieges of the city: the Muslim armies actually stood before the walls. The first most likely took place between 667 and 672, thus lasting almost six years.[2] This attack is of a particular renown since Abu Ayyub Khalid ibn Zayd al-'Ansari, who had carried the Prophet's standard in the battle of Badr in 624, fell in it and is said to have been buried before the walls. The present tomb was "discovered" during the siege in 1453, but had already been referred to by Ibn Qutayba in the middle of the 9th century.[3] He mentions that it was known to the Byzantines, who venerated it.[4]

The second siege was undertaken during the caliphate of Sulayman ibn 'Abd al-Malik in 716-17 and was led by his brother Maslama.[5] The siege is surrounded by legends and the foundations of the Galata tower as well as the Arap Camii are said to have been laid out during this event, although there is still no archaeological confirmation of this.

The two sieges of Constantinople were remarkable military achievements, even if the Muslims did not succeed in taking the city. When Mehmet Fatih finally made the city part of *dar al-islam,* a *hadith* was circulated in which Muhammad is reported to have said, "You [the Muslims] shall conquer Qustantiniyya; peace be upon the prince and the army to whom this shall be granted!" According to Mordtmann, this *hadith* cannot be traced back earlier than *al-Suyuti* (5th century).[6] It can, however, be found in Ahmad ibn Hanbal's *Musnad,* one of the six

1 Tabari, *Annales auctore Abu Djafar Muhammad ibn Djarir at-Tabari,* ed. M.J. De Goeje et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1879-1901), II: 86.

2 Theophanes, *Theophanis Chronographia* I-II, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Hirtel, 1883, 1885), 353ff.; Tabari, *Annales,* II: 86, 163.

3 Ibn Qutayba, *al-Ma'arif li-bn Qutayba,* ed. Th. 'Ukasha (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1377 H/1969 CE), 274.

4 Tabari, *Annales,* III: 2324.

5 Theophanes, *Cronographia,* 886-99; Tabari, *Annales,* II: 1314ff.; J.H. Mordtmann "Qustantiniyya: Tothe Ottoman conquest (1453)," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam,* 2nd ed. V: 532-4.

6 Mordtmann, "Qustantiniyya," 532.

canonical books compiled in the 9th century CE, and there the prince is identified as Maslama ibn 'Abd al-Malik.[7]

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

As far as the general causes of the conquest are concerned, several explanations have been suggested.[8] A along and widely held idea was that the aim was conversion: the conquests aimed at spreading the new religion from Arabia and making the world Muslim. The concept of jihad, "the holy war", was consequently seen as essential among the forces behind the conquests. A variation of this interpretation is the idea that while the ideological pretext was religious, the main forces were economic. The religious motivation was an intellectual superstructure legitimising a gigantic razzia. The motive force was the cupidity and lust for booty characteristic of the "Bedouin". This explanation was advanced by two leading scholars during the first half of the 20th century, L. Caetani and C.H. Becker.[9] The former especially rejected the importance of ideology, claiming that the "Arab nomads" had no sense of religion at all.[10] An even more "secularised" model was suggested by H. Winckler, who saw the expansion of the Arabs as the last great invasion of nomadic Semites from the Arabian peninsula, the first of which had been the Akkadians in 2400 BCE, then the Amorites around 2000 BCE, followed by the Aramaeans (including the Israelite invasion of Palestine) around 1200 BCE.[11] Undoubtedly, these explanations reflect the orientation towards economy and social structure as the main forces of history so characteristic of Western historiography since the end of the 19th century.

There were, however, dissenting voices. In two articles published in the 1950s, G.H. Bousquet voiced scepticism about the prevailing abstract economic models for the conquest.[12] He emphasised what the sources actually say, namely that Islam was a religious movement founded by a prophet who was not a military man and that the whole culture created by the conquests was permeated by ideas and ideals ultimately stemming from this prophet and the circle around him. To deny the religious, or rather, ideological factor is a blatant denial of what the sources state. Certain subsequent scholars tried to develop explanations that included the ideological factor alongside the main "secular" causes. One important line of thought, advanced by M. Hodgson, F. Donner and H. Kennedy, is that Muhammad actually created a new kind of political entity in Arabia founded on

7 Ibn Hanbal, *Musnad Ahmad ibn Hanbal* (Amman/Riyad: np., 2004), 4: 335 no. 19165.

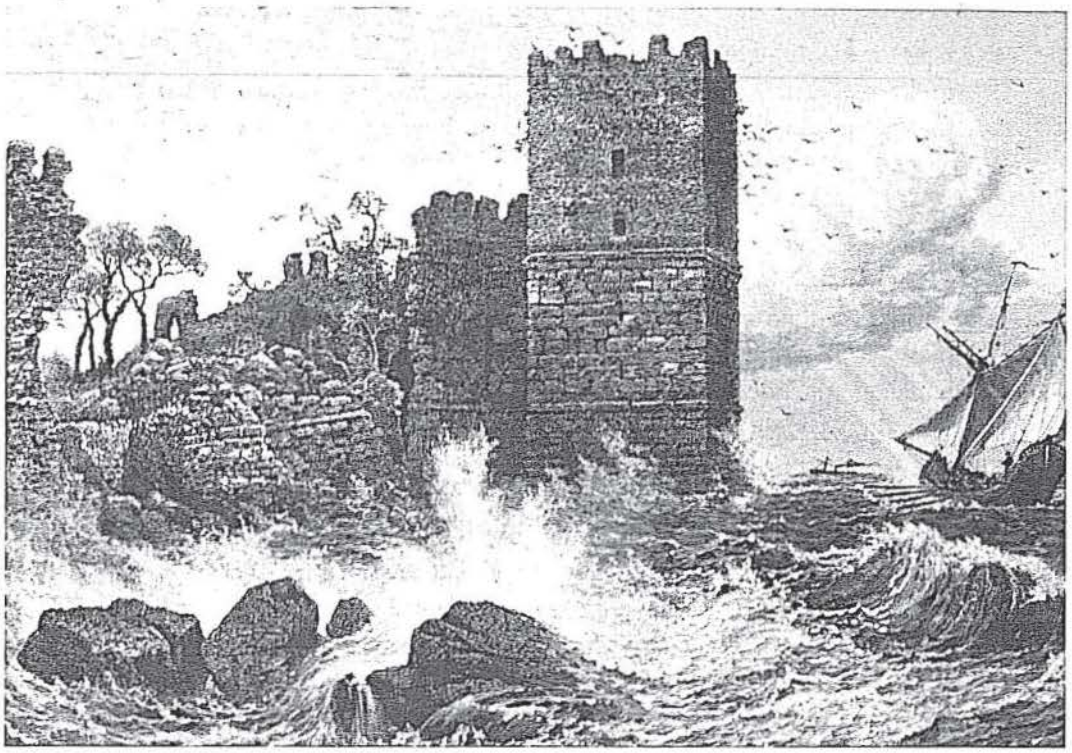
8 Fred McGraw Donner: *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 3-19; Fred McGraw Donner (ed.), *The Expansion of the Early Islamic State*. vol. 5: *The Formation of the Classical Islamic World* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2008).

9 Donner, *Expansion of the Early Islamic State*, xix-xx.

10 Ibid., 1-13.

11 Ibid., xix.

12 Ibid., 15-35.



Once impregnable fortresses? The Marble Tower of the Constantinople city-walls (*surlar*).
Engraving reproduced in the journal *Malumat*, 21 October, 1895, Vol. 22.
Cengiz Kahraman Archive, Istanbul

the new religion.[13] This entity transformed the role of the nomadic tribes: they had to stop warring among themselves. Instead, their energy was directed outwards towards the Fertile Crescent. The ideology was able to institutionalise traditional booty-taking, which, however, remained a main factor in the mobilisation of the tribes.

The ideological factor was radically reintroduced by P. Crone and M. Cook in their now famous *Hagarism. The making of the Islamic World,* published in 1977. Based on their reading of contemporary non-Arabic sources, they claimed that early Islam was a kind of a Jewish revival movement located in northwestern Arabia aiming at the conquest of Palestine and the rebuilding of the temple. This triggered the first conquests, which were later transformed into something else. Bousquet had already emphasised the different stages of the conquest.

Hagarism met with fairly strong criticism from several scholars, and its authors seem later to have backed away from certain quite provocative statements in the work. It has also prompted renewed work with the sources, Arabic and non-Arabic, for the first century of Islam. The result has been a substantial number of expert studies on several aspects of the conquest, including, for instance, the splendid series of publications named *The Formation of the Classical Islamic World.*

13 Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam. Conscience and History in a World Civilization.* vol. 1: *The Classical Age of Islam* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 207ff; Donner, *Early Islamic Conquests,* 55, 251-71; Hugh Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests. How the spread of Islam changed the world we live in* (Philadelphia: Da Copa Press, 2007), 56f.

Without denying the non-ideological factors behind the conquest, it is obvious that ideology played a central role. The emphasis on this aspect is the lasting result of Crone and Cook's work. However, their construction of a Jewish revival movement in *Hagarism* is not very convincing. Nonethless, there is evidence in addition to that pointed out by them that may shed new light on a very important factor for our understanding of the Islamic conquest.

One major problem concerning the conquests in general is the lack of contemporary Arabic sources for the period. The main testimonies were written down more than a century after the events, even if these sources often quote older ones dating to the period. This makes the matter of source criticism both crucial and difficult. There is one source discovered fairly recently that sheds dramatic light on the ideological aspect of the events. It is the *Kitab al-Fitan* (The Book of Tribulations) written at the beginning of the 9th century by Hammad ibn Nu'aym, a respected *hadith* scholar (d. 842 CE). This book is a compilation of eschatological statements by different authorities. A substantial part of it originates among Yemenis belonging to the community of Yemeni Muslims in the city of Hims in Syria at the end of the Sufyanid period in the Second Civil War around 690 CE. There is no reason to doubt the basic correctness of the attribution of these sayings to the people of Hims, as has been convincingly shown by W. Madelung in a groundbreaking article in which he presented the text for the first time.[14] Subsequently, the text, which is preserved in one manuscript, was edited a couple of times. The text offers a unique glimpse into the thinking and ambitions of a substantial part of the Muslim community in Syria during the early stage of the conquests. The sayings show how the Yemeni Muslims envisaged the final stage of world history, an event they obviously considered themselves to be part of and witness to. The sayings do not describe a distant eschatological scenario but a cataclysmic event that was unfolding before their own eyes.

The scenario is as follows: Mu'awiya ibn Sufyan, founder of the Umayyad dynasty, is the great hero. He is part of a series of seven rulers, the last of whom will be the *amir al-'usab*, "the prince of the hosts", a messiah of Qahtanid descent, that is, a Yemeni. This figure is given the title *al-mansur,* "the victorious one", and *al-mahdi*, "the guided one", two designations that thus have a Yemeni origin. He will put an end to the reign of Quraysh and will rule until the end of the world. He is the one who will face the final battle with the main enemy of Islam and he will fulfil the ultimate purpose of the message of the Prophet – the conquest of Constantinople and the final defeat of Rome. The great battles, *al-malahim al-'uzma,* are described in glowing colours and in great detail. An *umma* of the people of Musa and, in another saying, the descendants of Qadar, that is, both Israelites and North Arabians, will join the people of Saba in the final battle which will take place on the plain of al-'Amq at Antioch, followed by the capture of Constantinople.[15] After that, 'Isa ibn Maryam will descend at the eastern gate of Damascus.

The portrayal in the *Kitab al-Fitan* is completely clear: for the Yemenis in Syria, the main goal of the Islamic project was the conquest of the Roman empire

14 Wilferd Madelung, "Apocalyptic Prophecies in Ḥimṣ in the Umayyad Age," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 31 (1986): 141-85.

15 Ibid., 158-9.

and its capital, Constantinople. The sayings preserved in the book originate in the context of the ascendance of other rival groups in Syria during the Sufyanid caliphate. There is, for instance, a violent polemic against the Syrian Quda'a-tribes, which later became the allies of the Yemenis after the battle of Marj Rahit in 684 CE. The sayings are thus earlier than this date.[16]

These ideas among the Yemenis of Syria could be of limited importance, representing the local ideals of one group among many others in the early Islamic movement. However, it should be noted that the Yemenis played a crucial role in the conquest of Syria. They are said to have been a decisive factor in the first wave of conquests.[17] It is said that when the order to mobilise was given by Abu Bakr, the Yemenis were very keen on taking part in the Syrian campaign, whereas it was more difficult to engage them against Iraq and only a few tribes joined that campaign.[18] The details cannot be presented here, but the impression is that the Yemenis had a special urge to advance on Syria – the Roman empire.

One other element should be pointed out. Yemen looms large in the early Islamic quasi-historical picture of the history before the 6th century. In the genealogical system, the Yemenis are identified with the "real Arabs", for they are the ones who first received the Arabic language and most of the prophets mentioned in the Qur'an whose historical domicile was uncertain or unknown, such as Hud, Salih, Luqman and Dhu'l-Qarnayn,[19] the people of *tubba'*,[20] are traced to Yemen. These elements are accepted as canonical history in the entire corpus of classical Islamic historiography, but they do not correspond with the political standing of Yemen after the first century of the hijra, for from 720 the Yemenis were successively marginalised and have remained so until this day. The picture of Yemen's prominence must thus have been formed very early, in the first century, and it can therefore be assumed that it reflects the prominence of the Yemenis during this early period of the conquest of Syria. What seems to have been the first world history in Islamic literature, written by the Yemeni scholar Wahb ibn Munabbih in the 720s CE and now extant in the *Kitab al-Tijan* edited by Abu Muhammad 'Abd al-Malik ibn Hisham one century later, is a most eloquent document concerning the early Yemeni view of their role in history.[21] The conquests of the Umayyads are there presented as mere repetitions of the (unhistorical) conquests by the pre-Islamic kings of Yemen. The univocal acceptance of these Yemeni views in ensuing Islamic historiography up to this day is also remarkable, and may indicate that the Yemenis should not be seen as one group among many but as a leading element in the early Islamic movement.

The Yemeni eschatology documented in the *Kitab al-Fitan* should be read in this context. It is most likely not only the wishful thinking of groups beginning to lose their prominence (thus Madelung), but also contains elements that were basic incitements in their heyday, namely during the initial stages of the Islamic

16 Ibid., 180ff.

17 Tabari, *Annales*, I: 2612; 'Abd al-Muhsin Mad'aj M. Al-Mad'aj, *The Yemen in Early Islam. A Political History* (London: Ithaca Press, 1988), 69-75; Madelung, *Apocalyptic Prophecies*, 183f.

18 al-Mad'aj, *The Yemen in Early Islam*, 65-69.

19 The Qur'an, 18: 83 ff.

20 The Qur'an, 44: 37.

21 Jan Retsö, "Wahb b. Munabbih, the *Kitab at-tijan* and the History of Yemen", *Arabia* 3 (2005-06): 227-36.

conquest. And we have seen that there is no doubt about the goal of that project: the defeat of Rome and the conquest of Constantinople. If this was the ideology inspiring the Yemeni faction in the Islamic movement, and if their position in that movement indeed was that of central military leadership, one may begin to wonder where these ideas originated.

I suggest that the background should be sought in the pre-Islamic history of Arabia, especially the recently uncovered empire which ruled over Arabia under a monotheistic religion for more than two centuries before the rise of Islam. The realisation that the kingdom of Himyar was not a Bedouin entity, like the Lakhmids in al-Hira or the Ghassanids in Syria, but a real imperial project, based on an ancient agricultural society with an urban culture and many contacts with the surrounding world, that established itself as the leading power in Arabia during the 5th century CE, reaching Roman lines in Syria around 500,[22] is likely to change our understanding of the rise of Islam considerably, to say the least.

There are two factors that should be singled out in this context. The first is the religion of Himyar, which definitely was monotheistic and, according to later Arabic historiography, Jewish.[23] What kind of Judaism was practised in Himyar may be debatable, but there is little doubt about the connection to the great monotheistic biblical tradition. The tracing of the Queen of Sheba to Yemen is documented for the first time by Philostorgius at the beginning of the 5th century,[24] and it is tempting to see this as a reflex of self-understanding in Himyar. The Himyarites were, of course, not Israelites, but the story of the Queen of Sheba as the righteous gentile was well established by the Christians and, when identified with the Yemeni Saba, gave the Yemeni monotheists a great predecessor and a place in the sacred history.

Let us assume for a moment that monotheistic Himyar indeed identified itself with Sheba of the Old Testament. Admittedly we have no contemporary document from Himyar itself indicating this, although the identification is well established in the *Kitab al-Tijan* and most likely in the Qur'an (cf., suras 34 and 27). Since Saba' was the old name of the most renowned kingdom in South Arabia and was preserved in the official title of the kings of Himyar, the identification with Sheba in the Old Testament must have been almost compulsory. It is difficult to imagine a judaising monotheistic ideology in historical Sheba not exploiting this fact. In the Hebrew Bible, there are some passages in which Sheba is given an eschatological role. In Isaiah 60:1-11 and in Psalm 72:11 it is told how Sheba at the end of days shall come to Jerusalem with perfumes, myrrh and frankincense and innumerable camels to pay homage to the king of Israel. It should be remarked that the Christian kings on the other side of the Red Sea used similar biblical references, such as Psalm 72:9 and 68:32 in order to legitimate their own claims to be a new Israel. The glorious role of Sheba in the salvation history is indicated by the saying of Jesus in Matthew 12:42. According to these biblical passages, Sheba will be among the foremost representatives of those

22 Irfan Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century* (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library, 1989), 120ff.

23 Christian Julien Robin, "Le judaïsme de Ḥimyar," *Arabia* 1 (2003): 97-172; Iwona Gajda, *Le royaume de Himyar à l'époque monothéiste* (Paris: L'académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres, 2009), 223-54.

24 *Philostorgius Kirchengeschichte* hrsg. J. Bidez, 2 Aufl. (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1972), 3, 4.

loyal to the monotheistic faith. It was not difficult for Yemenis to envisage an eschatological role for themselves even in the new religion, Islam, which after all, was not that different from their own monotheistic faith. As a matter of fact, the telling of the story of the Queen of Sheba in sura 27 of the Qur'an may indicate that Yemeni monotheism was recognised and already accepted in Islam during the time of the Prophet

The other factor is the dramatic developments in South Arabia around 520 CE. According to the historian Procopius, the Romans prevailed upon their allies in Ethiopia to take action against the Jewish kingdom of Himyar, which obviously had become a major threat to Roman interests in Arabia and the Red Sea.[25] The Ethiopian invasion in 525 CE was a major event in the history of the age, with great repercussions in the Christian world and in Arabia.[26] We have no certain literary documents showing the reactions in Yemen proper, but an attack by a Christian power against a New Israel must have generated a strong ideological response. It was not the first Roman and Christian attack against Israel and its allies. On two occasions in the past, Israel had received support from Iran: in the time of Cyrus the Great and during the Parthian invasions in 40 BCE, still reflected by the presence of the Magi in the birth story in the gospel of Matthew. The anti-Christian Yemeni sought support from the Sassanian ruler in Ctesiphon, and the Iranians took action and finished off Ethiopian rule in Yemen around 570 CE.[27] The new Yemeni king, enthroned with Iranian support, Sayf ibn Dhi Yazan, is even now surrounded by legends and is seen in later Arabic tradition as one of the main promoters of the *din Ibrahim*.[28] He is even said to have been the first to prophesy that the small boy Muhammad would become the greatest of prophets, a Yemeni countering of the *Bahira* legend.[29]

The question is now, was there a Yemeni idea of revenge against the Christian empire that had crushed theirs in 525 CE? We do not have univocal contemporary evidence, but the joining of Yemen with the Islamic state in Western Arabia around 630 CE created a main new political power in Arabia, which in many ways was surprisingly similar to the ancient kingdom of Himyar.[30] Until then, Islam had mainly been a local Hijazi phenomenon. Following the events leading up to the year of delegations (630 CE), a new power had risen in Arabia. The Yemenis were, as we have pointed out, quite keen on the Syrian campaign. Did they have a political and ideological agenda? The sayings preserved in the *Kitab al-Fitan* point in that direction. The remarkable position of Yemen in earliest Islamic historiography until this day could indicate that its role was much more prominent than is usually recognised. Among the learned Yemenis of Hims in the mid-7th century, there seems to have been no doubt: the

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25 *Procopius History of the Wars* I-II, ed./transl. by H.B. Dewing (Loeb Classical Library 48) (Cambridge MA and London: Loeb, 1996), I, 20.

26 Gajda, *Le royaume de Himyar*, 82-10: Norbert Nebes, "The Martyrs of Najran and the End of the Himyar: On the Political History of South Arabia in the Early Sixth Century," in *The Qur'an in Context. Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'anic Milieu*, ed. A. Neuwirth, N. Sinai and M. Marx (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 27-59.

27 Irfan Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*. vol. I: *Military history* (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library, 1995), 365-72; Gajda, *Le royaume de Himyar*, 149-56.

28 J.-P. Guillaume, "Sayf ibn di Yazan," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, IX:101-2.

29 *Kitab al-tijan li-Abi Muhammad 'Abd al-Malik ibn Hisham*, ed. Zayn al-'Abidin al-Musawi (Haydarabad: np., 1347 H/1927-28 CE), 306-10.

30 *Pace* Donner, *Early Islamic Conquests*, 55.

conquest was a joint Israelite-Yemeni attack against the arch-enemy, the Roman empire. The conquest directed against Rome generated other conquests – Iraq and Iran, Egypt – as side-effects. However, it seems that the central thrust was against Rome in Syria.

If this is true, then the Islamic conquest must be placed in a new perspective. The struggle between monotheism and the Mediterranean empire (or empires) had started already with the Maccabaean insurrection of 167 BCE and culminated in the Jewish uprisings of 70 and 132 CE. The hatred against Hellenistic world domination is a central theme in Jewish thinking over the centuries, and is evident, for instance, in the Book of Revelation. With the rise of the judaising Himyarite kingdom, the ideological struggle was renewed.

The position and role of Constantinople in Islam had thus been crucial from the beginning: the capital of the arch-enemy of the pure monotheistic heritage. The great attack in the first Islamic century failed, although it came close to succeeding. A prophecy that the Yemeni messiah, consequently the conqueror of Constantinople, would be a man with three letters in his name was already circulating in about 700 CE.[31] It could refer to the name of the second caliph, 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, but also to the name Muhammad. In the latter case, the prophecy was at last fulfilled in 1453.

31 *Akhbar 'Ubayd ibn Shariya al-Jurhumi,* ed. Zayn al-'Abidin al-Musawi (Haydarabad: np., 1347 H [1927-28 CE]), 478.