

# Shrines and Banners: Paleo-Muslims and their material inheritance\*

*Elizabeth Key Fowden*

In memory of Oleg Grabar  
Αἰώνια ἡ μνήμη

## *Introduction*

Ernst Herzfeld retired from the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton in 1944, so he was quite naturally not in the room when fifty-one years later in the Classics Department at Princeton University I defended my dissertation on the cult of Saint Sergius between Rome, Iran and the Arabs.<sup>1</sup> But the scholars who were there represented at least part of the wide vision of Near Eastern Studies Herzfeld commanded: there were the historians Peter Brown, Glen Bowersock, Brent Shaw and Garth Fowden; the Islamic art historians and archaeologists Oleg Grabar and Thomas Leisten; the Byzantine architectural historian Danny Curčić, the epigrapher Pierre-Louis Gatier – not to mention the classicists. After my presentation, discussion quickly focused on the al-Mundhir building outside the walls of Syrian al-Ruṣāfa. After some lively and detailed discussion Josh Ober, a historian of classical Athens, asked in bemusement why exactly this small and somewhat unassuming building was so important. Twenty years later we are still asking that question.

Those of us who have been concerned with the al-Mundhir building agree that we cannot understand the structure's Roman architectural forms, Greek inscription and Arabic proper name in isolation, but must see it in its wider context: in the context of the pilgrimage city of Sergiopolis, outside whose north gate it stands, in the context of the frontier zone between Rome and Iran, and in the context of Christianizing Arab culture on the eve of Muḥammad's birth.<sup>2</sup> But one difference today, as opposed to twenty years ago, is that we more commonly frame our questions about pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arab culture *together*. This is still not always the case, however, and the problem of the conceptual divide between *jāhilīya* and Islam is central to what I would like to say in the context of these papers commissioned for the Ernst Herzfeld Gesellschaft. Our understanding of the imaginative world through which

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1 Published four years later as *The Barbarian Plain: Saint Sergius between Rome and Iran* (Berkeley 1999).

2 For assessment with bibliography, see Genequand 2015, 175–176, 186–187, 202–205; also Fisher 2011, 52–56 (It should be noted that the building was published subsequent to the completion of this paper, see now M. Konrad and T. Ulbert in Ulbert 2016).

late antique persons might have encountered al-Ruṣāfa has expanded in recent years more than one had dared dream, and in ways that I believe Ernst Herzfeld would have appreciated, although he might not have foreseen them. Two areas of research have been especially fruitful: epigraphy and Qur'anic studies. Greek, Aramaic and Arabic epigraphic discoveries in Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, have revealed religious practices and beliefs circulating in the late antique world into which Muḥammad was born that diverged widely, drawing on influences from a wide geographical span, from Ethiopia to Mesopotamia and beyond, as well as from different regions of Arabia. We speak more often now of Judaizing and Christianizing, of Judaisms and Christianities, in order to try to capture the areas of individual and local variation. In a complementary fashion, the flowering of inter-textual Qur'anic studies is also bringing to life the wide range of late antique legends, scriptures, and liturgical poetry integrated in the many registers of Qur'anic discourse.

Thomas Leisten once identified Ernst Herzfeld's discussion of Mushatta as the first recognition of what he called the 'additive and experimental character of early Islamic art'<sup>3</sup> – and we might add the term 'integrative' used by Martina Müller-Wiener and Lorenz Korn in their conference description. In the light of the epigraphic and inter-textual advances in the study of late antiquity – within which I include early Islam – we can extend this additive, integrative and experimental character to describe not only art and architecture, but also the associated scriptural and religious culture. And in order to understand the raw materials for this experimentation, it is essential that we reach back in time to include the pre-Islamic Arabs. This step backwards is important because attention to pre-Islamic use of sacred space and ritual objects can help us to recapture some sense of what was familiar, what was re-oriented, and what was a radical break from the past in this Paleo-Islamic period of reformulation, before 'Islamic tradition' could be evoked. Stepping back to get a wider picture of the sixth and seventh centuries may also help us in addressing some of the themes about the interrelationship of the sacred and the profane that this volume aims to discuss. My main concern will be the role of experimentation and also of misunderstanding in the first century after the *hijra*. I will begin and end my discussion in Kūfa, a town often remembered as the matrix of many formative tensions in the Islamic world. In order first to evoke the intertwined nature of religious, political, social and economic practices at Arab shrines I will very briefly highlight a few examples from the widespread pattern of rival shrines in the Arab sphere. With this pattern in mind, I will then discuss some examples of experimentation as well as some misunderstandings that resulted from Paleo-Muslim re-formulation of three material symbols: the banner (*rāya*), the canopy (*qubba*) and the ark (*tābūt*).

### *The shadow of the past over newly-founded Kūfa*

In the year 66 Anno Hijri, 685 of the Christian Era – or roughly 100 years after al-Mundhir's death – the revolutionary al-Mukhtār ibn Abī 'Ubayd assembled his followers for congregational prayer in Kufa and ceremoniously unveiled 'Alī's Chair, *al-kursī*. He proclaimed: 'Nothing has existed among past communities whose likeness will not also exist in this community... Among the Children of Israel there was the Ark, in which there was a remnant of what the family of Moses and the family of Aaron left behind. Among us, this is like the

3 Leisten 2005, 375, commenting on Herzfeld's seminal article 'Die Genesis der islamischen Kunst und das Mshatta-Problem' in the first volume of the new journal *Der Islam*, published in 1910.

Ark.<sup>4</sup> Al-Mukhtār and his followers – ‘valiant men who had seen and experienced war’<sup>5</sup> – would advance into battle with the Chair, which was veiled and mounted on an ass. Their victories they attributed to God’s favor.

Al-Mukhtār was a scion of the prominent Banū Thaḳīf of his native al-Ṭāʾif, 100 km east of Mecca. He had fought valiantly with ʿAbd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr to defend the Kaʿba in Mecca against Umayyad attack in the year 64/683. A life-long rebel, al-Mukhtār was soon afterwards in Kūfa building up a power base of ʿAlid supporters who joined in his armed struggles, by this time against both Umayyad and Zubayrid claims to the caliphal throne. But al-Mukhtār did not resort only to arms. Like both of his rivals, he also made use of material symbols – such as ʿAlī’s Chair – to instill legitimacy and strengthen his authority. It is a commonplace that political leaders communicate through symbols. But this practice entails a risk, for two reasons. First, the audience must share the imaginative world that gives symbols the power to communicate a message; and second, the symbol should not be too ambiguous, capable of meaning too many things. But there were many seventh-century audiences, and one of the fundamental tasks of the first generations after the *hijra* was to re-form the imaginative world, through experimentation in both ideas and practices. Modern historians have perceived al-Mukhtār’s pious spectacle at Kufa as a curious moment in the convoluted story of al-Mukhtār’s political ambitions and a colorful event along the road toward the Shiʿa / Sunni schism. One might, with more benefit, consider the episode in the wider context of late antique relics and political power. One of the questions I pose in this paper is: for the people who witnessed the veneration of ʿAlī’s Chair at Kufa, was this an odd thing for al-Mukhtār and his followers to have done?

As I have already noted, it is now widely accepted that to appreciate the narrative inventiveness, theological reflexivity and creative dynamism of the Qurʾan we need to discover the local and more widespread legends and scriptures (both written and oral) that circulated in the Qurʾanic milieu. The same can be said about al-Mukhtār’s veiled and mule-borne ritual object. Even eye-witnesses seem to have interpreted it in various ways – with both reverence and ridicule – as a chair, throne, ark of the covenant, or golden calf. The interpretive responses the object triggered had not only religious but also political and social implications. If we today aspire to recognize the range of responses, we need a deeper and wider knowledge of not only the textual but especially the visual repertoire with which persons in seventh century Arabia, Mesopotamia and Syria would have been familiar. Religious symbols, verbal and visual, formed the language of political rivalry and political action.

I will return again later to al-Mukhtār’s chair, but would like here simply to note that some scholars have understood his gesture as an appeal to potential supporters from Yemen,<sup>6</sup> and in this vein we might see al-Mukhtār’s gesture as an attempt to tap into the Yemeni Arabs’ familiarity with Jewish symbolic language on account of the long-standing Jewish and Judaizing presence in South Arabia that is emerging more clearly thanks to recent epigraphical discovery and study.<sup>7</sup> Others have drawn attention to Iranian throne imagery that may have spoken to al-Mukhtār’s Iranian supporters.<sup>8</sup> We might also discern an allusion to Ethiopian

4 Paraphrase of *sūra* 2:248, reported by the Kufan Maʿbad ibn Khālid (d. 118), Ṭabarī 1879–1901, II, 703; Eng. tr. XXI, 70.

5 Ṭabarī 1879–1901, II, 701; Eng. tr. XXI, 67.

6 Morony 1984, 480–497; Crone 2004, 78–79; Newman 2013, 19–21.

7 For a recent overview of this fast-developing field, see Robin 2015.

8 Shaked 1986, 81–82; Morony 1984, 495–497.

throne imagery that drew on a mixture of Jewish, Christian and non-monotheist symbolism. A single object need not have evoked a single or identical meaning for all viewers. To the contrary, in order for us to recapture the impact that the deliberate re-use of material symbols and related gestures – like the scriptural re-formulations in the Qur'an – had on contemporaries, we need to consider their multiple meanings in their distinct contexts. It may seem a truism to say that to grasp the newness of Muslim political and religious life, and of their artistic and architectural choices, we must know what came before. I am not just thinking of the habit, current among historians of the Islamic world, of including an introductory nod toward the late antique background before proceeding, with few backward glances. In their desire to fuse beliefs and practices, Muḥammad and his increasingly varied followers chose to re-use and re-formulate objects and architecture, and to perpetuate long-established patterns of use, precisely because these things and buildings had a resonant past that could be recalled in the present. These physical objects were recognized for what they had signified, and their power to communicate lay in their recognizability. Without understanding pre-Islamic uses of material symbols, we are simply deaf and blind to how these symbols were used in new ways and contexts that marked a change from the past.

'A truly contextual reading of the Qur'an ...', write Angelika Neuwirth and Nicolai Sinai, 'must not content itself with dissolving the Qur'an into its Christian, Jewish and other "sources", but at least allow for the possibility that the Qur'an may turn out to be ... a series of diachronically contiguous discourses ... deemed by the community of its adherents to out-class and outbid previous competitors.'<sup>9</sup> I will consider here not so much the way in which texts represent 'diachronically contiguous discourses', but how physical materials – stones and buildings, mosaics and textiles – were also part of these evolving discourses. Competition was the driving force behind the subtle re-settings and radical breaks expressed in both the Qur'anic pronouncements of renewal and change, and the material manifestations of them. But first a brief word about terminology.

### *Paleo-Islam and Paleo-Muslims*

In 2014 two books by Aziz Al-Azmeh appeared that are highly relevant to our topic of 'encompassing the sacred': the slim *The Arabs and Islam in late antiquity: a critique of approaches to Arabic sources*, and the 527-page essay, *The emergence of Islam in late antiquity: Allāh and his People*. In a manner compatible with my own approach, Al-Azmeh espouses an understanding of Islam in its late antique matrix that emerges from ideas in *practice*, or as he frequently states it: 'at the point of application'.<sup>10</sup> His work adds its weight to the growing tendency among scholars to reinstate the careful use of Arabic writers such as Hishām ibn al-Kalbī<sup>11</sup>, whose *Book of idols* deserves, as I hope to show, to be valued for the changes in architectural and ritual practices it recounts. In a gesture of experimentation, I have decided to put Al-Azmeh's new coinage 'Paleo-Islam' into use here as a way of denoting and highlighting the period from Muḥammad to the early Umayyads during which Al-Azmeh traces the interpenetration of an Arab cultic foundation with narratives inspired by the varieties of

<sup>9</sup> Neuwirth/Sinai 2010, 12–13.

<sup>10</sup> Al-Azmeh 2014b, 50.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, esp. 50–54.

scriptural monotheism that flourished in late antiquity.<sup>12</sup> But let me first allow him to explain in his own words what he means by Paleo-Islam:

In religious terms, [it] designates an evolving repertoire of ritual, doctrinal and mythological possibilities; it was a regime of exploration, innovation, adaptation, adjustment and assimilation, specific to a time and place. Elements later hardened into fixed doctrinal positions and standard rituals, ultimately as inflexible as rituals need to be – in the fullness of time, these together became traditions. Paleo-Islam is the emergent condition of the new religion prior to its exegetical and doctrinal elaboration, and prior to the social and political conditions of dominion that made such a durable elaboration and crystallization possible.<sup>13</sup>

With this said by way of introduction, let me now turn to rival shrines. I will be forgiven, I hope, for including some familiar material, but it is a necessary part of a larger picture I hope to produce by the end of my discussion.

### *Rival shrines*

Hishām ibn al-Kalbī was born into a prominent Kufan family in about the year 120/737, roughly a century after the city's foundation near the great *Kulturmetropole* of al-Ḥīra on the Middle Euphrates.<sup>14</sup> His grandfather al-Sā'ib ibn Bishr al-Kalbī had fought on 'Alī's side in the Battle of the Camel in 36/656 and later on the side of Ibn al-Zubayr against al-Mukhtār, dying on the field in 71/690. In the Paleo-Muslim period, memory was visceral, and glory recited: it is important to remember that Hishām's grandfather al-Sā'ib would very likely have seen al-Mukhtār's Chair with his own eyes. Hishām's father was Muḥammad ibn al-Sā'ib al-Kalbī, who lived from roughly 66 / 683 to 146 / 763 and, like his son Hishām, was a learned man who wrote in various modes. Hishām ibn al-Kalbī was admired especially for his memory and curiosity, both of which supported his vast and subtle knowledge of Arab genealogies, but also his research into pre-Islamic culture, drawing especially on oral history – notably from his father – as well as the monastery archives in nearby al-Ḥīra. I will come back to Ibn al-Kalbī at the end of my discussion, but will start with his book on Arabian cult, the *Kitāb al-Aṣnām* or *Book of Idols*.

Assessment of the *Kitāb al-Aṣnām* continues today to span the entire spectrum from extreme skepticism to uncritical exploitation that mines the work as if for raw materials. But if we read it in parallel with other accounts that describe how sacred enclosures worked and how their functions and symbols were translated from polytheism to Christianity in Arab spheres as far afield as Syria and Mesopotamia, the *Kitāb al-Aṣnām* seems less a retrojection of eighth-century notions of *jāhiliyya* and more of a familiar late antique story. Ibn al-Kalbī opens his account of the Arab goddess Allāt, for instance, by describing Muḥammad's defeat of the upland city of al-Ṭā'if, east of Mecca:

Allāt was in al-Ṭā'if... She was a cubic rock beside which a certain Jew used to prepare his barley porridge. She was in the custody of the Banū 'Attāb ibn Mālik of the Thaḳīf, who had built an edifice (*binā'*) over her. The Quraysh, as well as all the Arabs, were wont to venerate Allāt. They also used to name their children after her, calling them Zayd-Allāt and Taym-Allāt.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 358.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 358.

<sup>14</sup> Toral-Niehoff 2014.

She stood in the place of the left-hand minaret of the present-day mosque of al-Ṭāʿif. She is the idol which God mentioned when He said, “Have you not seen Allāt and ‘Uzza?” [*sūra* 53:19]...

Allāt continued to be venerated until the Thaqīf embraced Islam, when the Apostle of God dispatched al-Mughīra ibn Shuʿba, who destroyed her and burned her [shrine] to the ground.<sup>15</sup>

The cubic rock; the specificity of place, connected with a religious figure; tribal custody of the ritual object; a tribal shrine built over the object; pan-Arabic reverence (perhaps an indication of pilgrimage?); the habit of naming children in honor of the deity; the scriptural quotation; the destruction of the cult object and its house; the replacement of the pre-existing shrine by a new one: remarkably similar features, practices and associations appear in two late antique Christian texts, both describing Arab holy places. These texts are not usually considered together, but the striking parallels with Hishām ibn al-Kalbī’s accounts of conversion of people and holy places provide us with the sort of material we need in order to reconjure the world in which Muḥammad initiated a complex re-orientation of how people lived.

In the first account, a Syriac-speaking metropolitan of Takrīt named Aḥūdemmeḥ (d. 575) set out to learn Arabic and convert the steppe-dwelling pastoral tribes to Christianity. His anonymous hagiographer, like Hishām ibn al-Kalbī, found just the right scriptural reference to validate the conversion account: Jesus’s words to Simon Peter at John 21:15 “Feed my lambs”, piqued Aḥūdemmeḥ’s conscience and set the evangelical scene for the reader, just as the Qur’anic “Have you not seen Allāt and ‘Uzza?” allows Ibn al-Kalbī to pinpoint al-Ṭāʿif’s importance by reminding his reader that the question refers to the shrine whose fate he is describing.<sup>16</sup> Aḥūdemmeḥ destroyed the Arabs’ stone idols, but substituted for them churches under the protection of tribal chiefs. He gave careful attention to their catechism, instructing them in the new ways of worship and belief. We glimpse such instruction in the new ways in Jerome’s account of the fourth-century monk Hilarion who destroyed the stone idol and shrine of al-‘Uzza located at Elusa in the Negev, blessed her former worshippers, and signed her now Christianized former priest with a cross to mark physically his changed allegiance.<sup>17</sup> At Elusa a new church was laid out for the Arabs in the place of their old temple, again parallel to the conversion two hundred years later of the Allāt shrine in al-Ṭāʿif, where memory of where the former temple had once stood was still preserved in Ibn al-Kalbī’s day.

In both Christianization stories re-education about what and how to worship went hand in hand with re-creation of where to worship. But Aḥūdemmeḥ’s story recounts more than the simple cultic substitutions we find in Jerome’s account. In Aḥūdemmeḥ’s mission we discover the rival shrines and rival pilgrimages that are vital features recognizable in the social and political patterns of Arabian shrines as described by Ibn al-Kalbī and in the *Sīra* tradition. After establishing tribal churches, Aḥūdemmeḥ constructed a shrine dedicated to Saint Sergius and, alongside it, a monastery “because”, explains the anonymous hagiographer, “these Arab peoples bore great devotion to [Sergius’s] name and had recourse to him more than to all others...He made it resemble the shrine [of Saint Sergius at Ruṣāfa in Syria] so that its beauty might hold them back from going to the other.”<sup>18</sup>

15 Ibn al-Kalbī 1969, 40c–41b (Eng. tr. 40–41).

16 History of Aḥūdemmeḥ 1905, III, 15–51. Hainthaler 2007, 106–109; Fowden 1999, 121–128.

17 Jerome 2007, 16. See Fowden 2015, and Klein 2015, who offers a lengthy consideration of the *Life of Hilarion* and Arab cultic practices in the *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*.

18 Cf. above, note 16.

This open rivalry over Mar Sarjīs, the rider saint most beloved by the Arabs, finds a striking parallel in the story of Aḥūdemmeh's exact contemporary, the Christian king of Ḥimyar, Abraha (active c. 535–565), whose legendary church in Ṣanʿāʾ was established in precisely such a competitive move to re-direct pilgrimage and absorb the established authority of the shrine or *bayt* at Mecca. Abraha had been the viceroy of the Aksumite negus Kālēb before assuming control of the South Arabian kingdom in his own right. Hishām ibn al-Kalbī reports that Abraha built a *bayt* in Ṣanʿāʾ, 'a church [*kanīsa*] which he called *al-Qalīs*' [from ἐκκλησία] and records Abraha's boast to the negus of Aksum that 'I have built you a *kanīsa* the like of which no one has ever built. I shall not let the Arabs alone until I divert their pilgrimage away from their *bayt* to which they make pilgrimage.'<sup>19</sup>

Upon learning about Abraha's plan, Mecca's intercalators would have been fully aware of what their own *ḥaram* had to lose both in prestige as a regional pilgrimage center and in wealth extracted from pilgrims. The story goes that they sent two youths to Ṣanʿāʾ to defecate in Abraha's church. The offense provoked Abraha's famous failed attack on Mecca, immortalized in *sūra* 105, 'The Elephant', as a misguided assault on divine will – in Al-Azmeh's just phrase an 'event transfigured by mythical redaction'.<sup>20</sup> Aḥūdemmeh's explicit construction of a rival sanctuary to divert Arab pilgrims from Syrian al-Ruṣāfa and Abraha's contemporary architectural machinations in Arabia are not normally seen together as part of the Arab sphere. But the report of Aḥūdemmeh's activities lends credence to the Arabic literary account of Abraha's parallel techniques and his contemporary aspirations that have been strongly supported, in any case, by recent epigraphical investigation revealing that Abraha's political sway extended over much of the Arabian Peninsula, including Yathrib.<sup>21</sup>

A third contemporary figure with a notable role to play at pre-Islamic *buyūt* is the Jafnid leader al-Ḥārith ibn Jabala (active c. 529–569). Al-Ḥārith was a fiery leader involved in anti-Chalcedonian circles and active as a mastermind of military and diplomatic encounters in the Roman-Iranian frontier zone. His son al-Mundhir (active c. 569–581) was cut from the same cloth. Al-Mundhir's assertive association of his own political and military prowess with the *baraka* of Saint Sergius was monumentalized in the building constructed just outside al-Ruṣāfa, very likely on the site identified with his martyrdom. Around the building's eastern apse was inscribed the Greek inscription Νικῆ ἡ τύχη Ἀλαμανδάρου, roughly rendered "Victory to al-Mundhir", and it is tempting to understand this as a pre-Islamic battle cry translated into Roman architecture.<sup>22</sup> Saint Sergius was a great soldier whose supernatural support in battle, as well as at other times of need, was widely sought. The shrine and its *ḥaram* at al-Ruṣāfa had grown into a focal point for the social and economic symbioses between soldiers, pastoralists, farmers and merchants that overlapped at the pilgrimage shrine. It was this sort of strong convergence that Aḥūdemmeh and Abraha hoped to create at their own pilgrimage shrines and their associated festal markets.

Statements were made at fairs. One thinks of the aged Naṣrid princess Hind who had retired to a monastery at al-Ḥīra after her poet-diplomat husband 'Adī ibn Zayd was executed in the late sixth century. Her life crossed the imagined boundary between *jāhiliyya* and the Qur'anic event, and if we were to bring back to life two people to help us understand what

19 Ibn al-Kalbī 1969, 40c–41b, (Eng. tr. 40). Cp. Ibn Ishāq 1858–60, 29 (Eng. tr. 21) and Ṭabarī 1879–1901, I, 934 (Eng. tr. V, 217 with Bosworth's n. 539).

20 Al-Azmeh 2014b, 146.

21 Robin/Ṭayran 2012

22 Fowden 2000.

changed and what remained the same, Hind and Muḥammad would surely make an illuminating pair. The story goes that she refused a marriage proposal made to her by the governor of newly-founded Kufa on the grounds that it was ridiculous to marry an old crone, but that he simply wanted to display her at a fair as a trophy from the great Naṣrid kings now vanquished.<sup>23</sup> Hind knew better than anyone how politics, poetry and ritual life overlapped inextricably at tribal churches, for it was at a church dedicated to Saint Sergius in al-Ḥīra that the daughter of al-Nuʿmān III met her future husband, whose poetic imagination recognized no boundaries when drawing on myths and symbols from Roman, Arab, Jewish and Christian traditions, with an inventiveness in playing off religious narratives and related images rivaled only by the Qurʾān.<sup>24</sup>

The tribal churches of the Arabs at the time of Muḥammad's birth were celebrated places where piety and poetry competed to produce a religious identity infused with genealogical and mythical belonging that took very tangible and colorful form:

Three groups (*buyūt*) of Yamanite Christians used to compete with one another in the construction of churches (*biyaʿ*) with attention to their decoration and the beauty of their structures: the house of al-Mundhir in al-Ḥīra, and Ghassān in al-Shām, and Banū al-Ḥārith ibn Kaʿb, the Ḥārithids in Najrān... They used to have the furnishings of these structures made of gold and silver and their curtains of brocade. In their walls they had mosaics and in their ceilings gold.<sup>25</sup>

To al-Ruṣāfa the shrine housing the relics of the powerful saint Sergius had attracted precious donations – silver vessels and priceless fabrics, just as in this description – from the highest-ranking political figures, including the Roman emperors Anastasius and Justinian, and also Khusrau II and his Christian wife Shīrīn. Aḥūdemmeḥ would have hoped to reproduce at his own Sergius monastery at Qaṣr Sarj the flood of pilgrims, from shepherd to king, that coursed towards al-Ruṣāfa's *haram* with its luxuriously decorated shrine inside the city walls. Arab shrines operated on the basis of like attracts like: as the authority and power of the shrine and its honored saint grew, so the gifts and their stories accumulated.<sup>26</sup>

Abraha, probably the first leader in Arabia to create a supra-tribal realm, might well have harbored such ambitions for his own splendid church in Ṣanʿāʿ, legendarily adorned with material brought from Maʿrib that associated him with the great Queen Bilqīs (the 'Queen of Sheba'), remembered as Makeda in the Ethiopian *Kebra Nagast*.<sup>27</sup> It would hardly be surprising if Abraha had aspired to cultivate Maʿrib too as a pilgrimage site since it possessed many

23 Talib 2013, esp. 136–147.

24 For example ʿAdī ibn Zayd, *Dīwān* 3.10, swearing by the Cross and the Lord of Mecca. See Al-Azmeh 2014b, 259–263. ʿAdī's reworking of the Arab heroine Zabbāʾ/Zaynab (Zenobia in the Graeco-Roman world) stimulated a long chain of mytho-poetic adumbrations in which she was merged with the even more ambiguous Queen of Sheba, Bilqīs. See Powers 2011. One might even wonder whether Hind had in mind the humiliation Zenobia was made to endure when displayed as a defeated queen before Aurelian and his awestruck men. I am not the first to have imagined pairing Hind and Muḥammad, see al-Ḥalabī al-Shāfiʿī, *al-Sūra al-Ḥalabiyya* 3.454, for a variation of the story in which Muḥammad proposes marriage, only to be refused because 'a queen does not give herself to a tradesman', quoted by Al-Azmeh 2014b, 125.

25 Al-ʿUmarī, *Masālik al-abṣār* 1.309 citing al-Iṣfahānī, who in turn drew on Hisham ibn al-Kalbī's work on Arab monasteries. See Fowden 2007, 4–5 with n.22 and especially Toral-Niehoff 2014, 174–183.

26 One thinks of the celebrated treasures at the shrine of Manāh, including the sword of al-Ḥārith ibn Jabala: Ibn al-Kalbī 1969, 12a; cp. 56c.

27 al-Azraqī 1858, I, 111. On Makeda, see *Kebra Nagast* 1905, esp. 87 ff. (German tr. 88 ff.); Bowersock 2013, 80–91.

features of the South Arabian *ḥaram*: the potent combination of a holy site (here a church and monastery), an important water supply, and a venue for political leaders to publish their success. The Christian Axumite king Kālēb had erected inscriptions at Maʿrib<sup>28</sup> and was followed by Abraha who erected an inscription commemorating his repair to the famous dam and another monumental inscription describing a tersely expressed sequence of events in 547: first his quelling of a rebellion of his deputy over the Kinda tribe, who were at least in part nomadic, then the consecration of a church (*bʿt*), naming as its priest the abbot of his monastery,<sup>29</sup> and finally his hosting of a meeting of delegates from the rulers of Aksum, Rome and Iran, and also of the Arab leaders al-Mundhir III of Lakhm, al-Ḥārith ibn Jabala and Abūkarib ibn Jabala. The wide political and cultural horizons of this meeting resemble those of another occasion, at Ramla in 524, when news was announced of the massacre of Christians at Najrān by an earlier occupant of Ḥimyar’s throne, the Jewish king Yūsuf.<sup>30</sup>

From the fourth century onward, political claims across Arabia and the Red Sea cultural arena were increasingly reinforced by Jewish and Christian language and legend, and expressed at holy places. The massacre at Najrān only served to bring to a wider stage this practice of portraying political acts against a backdrop of religious difference. Echoes of this practice, as well as an allusion to the Najrān assault, sound throughout the Qurʾān, and recent scholarship has added tremendously to our understanding of the rich imaginative background of Muḥammad’s Arabian milieu.<sup>31</sup> We are coming to appreciate in greater detail how leaders in the Arab world from Ḥārith to Abraha developed distinctive expressions of power drawing from Roman, Sasanian, Jewish and Christian forms and gestures infused into the receptive matrix of Arab culture.<sup>32</sup> Such a process involved the intertwining of political action, including warfare, together with religious authority and inherited symbols. Those who mastered this complex balance were the leaders who themselves would become legends. Such men acted on their awareness that political stability rested on the maintenance of fragile interdependencies, linked to the recognition of authority sealed by association with a holy figure. Recognition of authority was expressed through the overlapping means of myth and ritual gesture, but also news-telling, gossip and poetry: all these converged and were articulated in and around the *bayt*.

### *The bayt as storehouse of myth and symbol – the ambiguity of objects*

Each rival shrine was made of materials with a story to tell just as each shrine housed objects that signified a communal identity. How the decoration of the Kaʿba in Mecca mirrored in material form the Qurʾānic dialogue with the past need not detain us for long, as it has

28 Bowersock 2013, 98–103.

29 *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum* 4, III, 541: The religious vocabulary is Syriac rather than Ethiopic in origin, see Gajda 2009, 121–122 and 135–136 on the meeting; also Robin 2008, 180–181, and Fowden 2013, 411, n. 63–64.

30 Bowersock 2013, 87–91; Lee 2011, esp. 83 on Ethiopian religious ‘inconsistencies’, as viewed from outside.

31 Robin/Tayran 2012; Bowersock 2013, esp. 78–105. See now Fisher 2015 *passim*; 363–367 on Najrān.

32 See especially Fisher 2011; and, in particular, Montgomery 2006, 58: ‘That “Bedouinizing” *qaṣīda* poetry at its height, the emergence of the Arabian sanctuary of the Ibrahīmīc Kaʿba and an “Arabic Qurʾān” are coterminous hardly seems a coincidence: these discourses cross-fertilized each other remarkably, as their coexistence was explored, articulated and experimented with. In a simple sense, the Arabic of the *qaṣīda* poetry was a necessary condition for a divine revelation in Arabic.’ and 75 n. 122.

been often discussed.<sup>33</sup> I will take my cue from the tradition about Muḥammad's selective preservation of images of Jesus and Mary inside the Ka'ba, and his re-organization of cultic patterns at Mecca in which he re-used pre-existing pilgrimage rituals like *spolia*,<sup>34</sup> and now consider some objects that were still found useful by Muḥammad and his early followers, but whose connections with the Arab and monotheist past had to be re-worked in order to fix their new meanings.

Once Muḥammad had outbid rival prophets and rival shrines to take up his position as arbiter of material symbols at Mecca and Medina, he began the long process of re-orienting the cultic patterns of those who gradually proclaimed their allegiance to him. Hishām ibn al-Kalbī in his *Book of Idols* related Muḥammad's defeat of tribes and settlements through a pattern of military conquest focused on the destruction of the tribal idol, its *bayt*, its tree and its custodian. What we find is the competitive substitution of new salutations, new ritual gestures and new cult drapery. In Ibn al-Kalbī's narration this pattern may seem to us as suspiciously repetitive – almost reminiscent of Baal-smashing in the Book of Kings. But his picture of competitive substitution should dissuade us from disregarding his account when set against the larger patterns of late antique rival shrines already discussed.

I will offer just one example each, drawn from many, of the new salutations and new ritual gestures, before turning to the new cult drapery. Ibn Ishāq notes that after the Thaḳīf accepted the conditions Muḥammad had set, Abū Bakr 'taught them how to salute the apostle, for they were used to the salutation of paganism'.<sup>35</sup> The auditory dimension of political, social and religious interaction is difficult to recreate from our written and archaeological remains, although work on the distinctive orality of Arabic poetry and Arabic scripture is an area of creative advance in scholarship today.<sup>36</sup> We can add to this Al-Azmeh's subtle treatment of oaths and salutations.<sup>37</sup>

For the new ritual gestures, I return to al-Ṭā'if and the shrine of Allāt with which I began. Ibn Ishāq preserves a poignant scene when the Thaḳīf had accepted allegiance to Allah and his apostle and were discussing the terms:

Among the things they asked the apostle was that they should be allowed to retain their idol Allāt undestroyed for three years. The apostle refused, and they continued to ask him for a year or two, and he refused; finally they asked for a month after their return home; but he refused to agree to any set time. All that they wanted, as they were trying to show, was to be safe from their fanatics and women and children by leaving her [the idol Allāt], and they did not want to frighten their people by destroying her until they had accepted Islam. The apostle refused this, but he sent Abū Sufyān ibn Ḥarband al-Mughīra ibn Shu'ba to destroy her. They also asked that he would excuse them from prayer and that they should not have to break their idols with their own hands. The apostle said: "We excuse you from breaking your idols with your own hands, but as for prayer there is no good in a religion which has no prayers." They said that they would perform them though it was demeaning.<sup>38</sup>

33 Rubin 1986 and Shalem 2007, both with extensive bibliography.

34 Al-Azraqī 1858, I, 111. On the paintings, see King 2004, 219–229.

35 Ibn Ishāq 1858–60, 916 (Eng. tr. 615). Ibn al-Kalbī opens his *Kitāb al-Aṣṅām* with the sounds of worship and tribal identity: Ibn al-Kalbī 1969, 4a–5a, (Eng. tr. 4–6).

36 See, e.g., Schoeler 2006; Neuwirth 2010; Griffith 2013.

37 Al-Azmeh, 2014b, 141–43, 214–15.

38 Ibn Ishāq 1858–60, 916 (Eng. tr. 615–616).

It is easy to be distracted by dissecting ‘fact’ from ‘fiction’ in such accounts. But we must not forget that for at least the first two generations after the *hijra* memory of how things used to be done was ever present, even as it became more impressionistic with time. Smashing idols was as loud a break from the past as one could get, but the re-learning process demanded constant reinforcement until the new way emerged (of course such unanimity was illusionary and many new ways emerged). Re-learning was incremental and personal, while at the same time communally reinforced. Muḥammad led prayer in part to reinforce by example and repetition. But it was easy to misinterpret or to revert – deliberately or inadvertently – in this period when the practices were under construction.

Closely related to the verbal and gestural shifts there were also visual shifts, not just monumental destructions, but also small-scale changes that were possibly just as strong, or stronger, because people interact very personally with small things. And once we start looking, we notice that textiles were widely used to mark sanctity, before and after Muḥammad.<sup>39</sup> Faymiyūn the Christian holy man found a palm tree hung with votive garments at Najrān<sup>40</sup>; Ibn Hishām begins his edition of Ibn Ishāq’s biography of the Prophet, restorer of the Ka’ba, with two rabbis from Medina who restored the *bayt al-ḥarām* in Ṣan‘ā’ and draped it.<sup>41</sup> One may protest that in Arabic historiography Christian and Jewish holy men are paper cut-outs made to represent a stage along the way, now superseded. But this worry should not make us miss the fact that Ibn Ishāq chooses to use cultic drapery to join past and present and hold together the mythical genealogy he presents. Fabrics are frequently mentioned in descriptions of shrines and are still, of course, an important part of Muslim cult today, not just the *kiswa* on the Ka’ba but on every saint’s tomb. I will return to the abiding place of textiles at shrines in my discussion of two final veiled objects, Muḥammad’s *minbar* and ‘Alī’s *kursī*. But first a brief turn to the battlefield.

### *Banners and relics*

Fabric banners were not a Paleo-Muslim invention. We usually think of banners as symbols of authority and identity; but we should not forget their emotional and sensual impact: early Arabic poetry evoked the sight and sound of banners, for instance. Of course, they were also practical for orientation on the battlefield, their color and motifs were intimately identified with the tribe. Banners like battle cries evoked directly the greater power – whether animal, hero or deity – that fighters hoped would support them.<sup>42</sup> In armed conflict what is useful is seized and what is not is left behind, sometimes to reappear in other circumstances. Not just in shrines but even, or especially, on the battlefield we find the re-working of symbols drawn from the polytheist, Jewish and Christian traditions familiar – or half familiar – to the Arabs. It was in between the soldier’s palpable knowledge of mortality’s edge and the experimentizing of the worshipper and poet that symbols were constantly reworked.

The talismanic quality of the commander’s flag (*liwā’*) and the banner of a kinship group (*rāya*) was now re-directed to banners tied to Allāh and his apostle. The re-direction may

39 Golombek 1988, esp. 32.

40 Ibn Ishāq 1858–60, 22 (Eng. tr. 15).

41 Ibn Ishāq 1858–60, 13, (Eng. tr. 7); cp Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra* 15 (Eng. tr. 9): the Yemeni king, generically called Tubba’, is distinguished as the first to drape (*kasā*, from which *kiswa* derives) the Meccan *bayt* with fabrics, on the advice of the two rabbis.

42 E.g. Ibn Ishāq 1858–60, 811 (Eng. tr. 546).