The disciplinary diversity of this conference, including contributions from scholars of art, archaeology, literature, history, and others, proved to be more than just a veneer. Organizers Andrew Marsham and Alain George (both from the University Edinburgh), together with fourteen other scholars, applied their wide-ranging expertise to various dimensions of the Umayyad period. The work of these scholars was divided into eight panels of two papers each: “Rulership in the Late Antique Context,” “Sacred Art,” “Christians and Muslims,” “Papyri and Social History,” “Historiography,” “Land Tenure and the Economy,” “The ‘Desert Castles,’” and “The Umayyads in Modern Times.” By and large, the organizers divided the papers along disciplinary lines, however group discussion rendered productive connections between the different fields of inquiry. Both this cross-fertilization and new findings on the part of several researchers are promising indications of the vibrancy of Umayyad studies.

The panel “Rulership in the Late Antique Context” paired the work of two scholars, “Persian Traces in the Umayyad Khamriya,” by Dominic Brookshaw (University of Manchester) and “‘God’s Caliph’ Revisited: Umayyad Political Thought and Its Late Antique Context,” by Marsham. These papers investigated the flow of Iranian cultural traditions and Byzantine political institutions, respectively, to the Umayyad world. They see the flow of ideas from Byzantium and Sasanian Iran less as acts of deliberate appropriation, but rather as a virtue of each polity inhabiting a common cultural and political ecosystem. In Brookshaw’s case, he identified contact with the Persian world as a key to the development of the khamriya (wine poetry) as a distinct genre. Marsham associated the Umayyad-era fashioning of the caliph as deputy of God (khulafa’ Al lah) with the Byzantine practice of defining its emperor along similar lines.

Alain George and François Déroche (École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris) spoke on two facets of Umayyad religious patronage as contributors to the panel “Sacred Art.” In his paper, “Paradise or Empire? On a Paradox of Umayyad Art,” George concentrated on the visual programs of the Dome of the Rock, the Great Mosque of Damascus, and the Sanaa Qur’an pages, arguing that visual motifs in the mosaic programs of the two buildings and the Qur’an pages should be read as conflated depictions of Qur’anic paradise and the earthly dominion of the Umayyads. Déroche, in a presentation entitled “A Qur’anic Script from Umayyad Times: Around Marcel 13,” presented findings from his work with several Qur’an fragments at the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art in Istanbul. He charted formal similarities between the Qur’an fragments and another fragment (Marcel 13) known to be dated to the Umayyad period. He suggested that there might have been a centralized place of production for these manuscripts, which would hint at both an Umayyad codification of script and its diffusion within a master-disciple mode of production. Both speakers implied sacred art had an implicitly political dimension.

“Christians and Muslims” was a panel made up of two historians concerned with societal constructions and identity formation of Christian communities in areas under Muslim rule. Jack Tannous (Dumbarton Oaks), in a paper entitled, “All Mixed Up: Thinking about Christians and Muslims in the Umayyad Period,” questioned what it meant to be a member of a Christian majority ruled by a Muslim minority. He highlighted the complex questions of identity that arose when Christian converts to Islam maintained their Christian devotional

The panel “Papyri and Social History” addressed related concerns by asking to what extent the early Islamic papyrus record can contribute to an understanding of subaltern communities under Muslim rule. Robert Hoyland, in his paper, “Papyrus Nessana 77 and the Concept of dhimmah Allah,” identified what might be the earliest occurrence of the term dhimmah Allah in a papyrus fragment dated ca. AD 688. Petra Sijpesteijn (Leiden University), in her paper, “Converted and Arab Muslims in the Papyri: New Ideas,” highlighted occurrences of the term mawali (clients) in a number of Egyptian papyri. Both papers emphasized that these terms were not mere abstract constructions, but were employed in daily use, even at the nascent stages of the Islamic state.

For the panel “Historiography,” Antoine Borrut’s (University of Maryland) paper, “Historical Writing under the Umayyads,” and Nicola Clarke’s (University of Oxford) paper, “Caliphs and Conquerors: Images of the Marwanids in Narratives of the Conquest of Spain,” both examined the transformations that personages and events undergo, as they pass from one historical tradition to another. Clarke spoke of the complex shifts in the retelling of anecdotes related to the Umayyad conquest of the Iberian Peninsula. Borrut proposed ways to excavate the vestiges of Umayyad historical traditions in later Abbasid-era works.

The work of the archaeologist Derek Kennet (Durham University), entitled “The Archaeology of the 8th Century AD in the Gulf,” and that of the historian Hugh Kennedy (School of Oriental and African Studies, London), entitled “Private Landownership in the Umayyad Period: The Uses and Abuses of the qatī’a,” made up the panel “Land Tenure and the Economy.” Kennet surveyed archaeological work conducted at various sites in the Persian Gulf region, including Kush, Ras al-Khaimah, Khadhima, and al-Muqhairah. He connected the Umayyad-era use of these sites to the Indian Ocean trade network. Kennedy charted the history of landownership among the conquering Islamic forces. He emphasized that the qatī’a, a type of land allotment, was not a fief, but rather a heritable and alienable landed estate subject to a low level of tax, and was most often applied to “dead land” that needed physical modification in order to be made fertile.

The panel “The ‘Desert Castles’” offered two approaches to the Umayyad desert residences: one archaeological and one art historical. Art historian Robert Hillenbrand (University of Edinburgh), in his paper, “Hisham’s Balancing Act: The Decoration of Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi,” observed a deliberate balance of Byzantine and Sasanian visual motifs in the artistic program, with the scale tipping to Sasanian end. He argued that the patron, said to be the Umayyad Caliph Hisham, was expressing the desire for co-existence of these two esteemed traditions under the auspices of Islam. The archaeologist Denis Genequand (University of Geneva) in his paper, “Building E at Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi: Form, Decoration and Function,” spoke of his team’s most recent findings at the site. This season they excavated a large residence to the north of the monumental structures excavated by Oleg Grabar’s team in the 1960s, finding indications of two building phases and several figural compositions.

nineteenth- and twentieth-century fate of the Great Mosque of Damascus together with changes undergone by the religious establishment.

Umayyad studies is shrouded by one topos above all others: that all relevant written source material available on the subject was produced post facto, and reflects the biases of the later Abbasid period historians. The program crafted by George and Marsham can be seen as an effort to address this conundrum. Effort was made to include the work of specialists who engage the material and artistic record, investigate subaltern source texts, or treat the aforementioned later textual sources as permutations of Umayyad-era historical traditions. Despite these efforts, it is surprising that only two of the eight panels, “Sacred Art” and “The Desert Castles,” relate to art-historical concerns. As the only unmediated access to the Umayyads is through their visual culture, it would make sense to prioritize new art-historical research.

When listening to the papers in other fields, I was struck by the frequency of occasions when one could make art-historical analogies to the given material under discussion. Borrut and Clark spoke of the malleability of history, almost as if it were an artistic medium. Tannous discussed Muslim converts continuing to receive the Eucharist and use Christian talismans; in other words, they negotiated their identity within the domain of the visual and visible. Even the two papers in the panel “The Umayyads in Modern Times,” which could seem out of place in a conference on medieval history and culture, raised important concerns. Pierret addressed the all-important premise that buildings have afterlives, and Skovgaard-Petersen spoke to how a caliph can be transformed into an icon for values deemed important by a given society.

Of the three art historians, I believe Déroche’s findings were the most ground breaking, as they have great implications for an understanding of Qur’an manuscript production in the Umayyad period. George’s reading of the artistic programs of the Dome of the Rock, Great Mosque of Damascus, and Sanaa Qur’an as conflating depictions of heaven and earth, while nuanced, is by no means definitive. Hillenbrand’s study of the artistic program of Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi leaps too quickly from stylistic analysis to speculation about the patron’s political motives. Despite these deficiencies, the intellectual stimulation gained from the inclusion of art-historical topics was invaluable, and shown to be crucial for the advancement of the field at large.

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