

MODERN GREEK STUDIES
(AUSTRALIA & NEW ZEALAND)

Volume 14, 2010

A Journal for Greek Letters

*Pages on the Crisis of Representation:
Nostalgia for Being Otherwise*

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GREEK DESTINIES AMONG ARABS:
RUMI MUSLIMS IN ARAB-ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION

To Juliana Chrysostomides... an overdue tribute, with much affection.

INTRODUCTION

In the broader historical sweep, Greek-Arab contacts go back at least to the times of Alexander the Great; and we can find early references to the Arabs and Arabia in Herodotus' *Histories*. There is no doubt that the rise of Islam (in the 7th century CE) marked a turning point in such historical contacts. Original sources written in Arabic are thus of special significance.¹ The dynamically influential place of the Hellenistic intellectual, scientific and artistic legacy in Arabic-Islamic civilization stands out as a significant chapter in the annals of cultural encounter.² While Byzantine-Arab military and political relations, and to a lesser extent Arab-Byzantine mutual perceptions before and after the rise of Islam, have received reasonable scholarly interest,³ the human dimension of such contacts and perceptions have attracted little or hardly any attention.

In this study, I attempt to highlight the place and role of Arabized individuals of Greek (Byzantine or *Rumi*) background in Arab-Islamic civilization (7th to 12th centuries CE) as an aspect of this human dimension. My main sources are the rich Arabic biographical compilations. A research desideratum would be a parallel study of the position and role of Hellenized individuals (and groups?) of Arab (Christian and Muslim) background in the life of Byzantium during the same period.⁴

The present essay is only a bare sketch of the contributions to classical Arab-Islamic civilization of a number of Muslims of Greek-*Rumi* background. I hope this would contribute to the study of cultural human history away from old reductionist and stereotyping approaches and towards an appreciation of an important and unacknowledged aspect of the pre-modern history of the Arab-Greek encounter. It

is true that any serious student of Arab history should be conscious of the significant role of ‘Hellenizing’ or philhellenic Arabic intellectuals, particularly Christian Arabic translators from Greek and Syriac, and Christian and Muslim philosophers and physicians who wrote original works in Arabic. I hope in this instance to highlight the role of a number of prominent Arabized Muslim individuals who are clearly described in the Arabic sources as being of Greek-*Rumi* background, in an ethnic, or at least a cultural sense. I attempt to situate these within the historical and socio-cultural context of the first six centuries of Islamic history (7th-12th centuries of the Christian era). It will become clear that the range of their contributions spanned the whole spectrum of human activity – political, military, administrative, economic, social, religious, cultural, intellectual, literary and artistic. Such an investigation would perhaps imply certain underlying questions. For example, to what extent did these individuals feel integrated? Were they seen by their contemporary Muslim co-religionists as belonging to Arabic-Islamic society and culture; or were there some niggling identity tensions or crises somehow?

A COMPANION OF THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD OF GREEK HERITAGE

My survey begins with the first three decades of Islamic history. The name of Suhayb (son of Sinan) al-Rumi (died circa 657 CE) stands out as a prominent Companion (*sahabi*) who played an important role in the life of the first Muslim community. Culturally and linguistically he is without doubt identified as of Greek background, although Muslim historical traditions record that Suhayb himself maintained that he was of Arab parentage. Apparently his father, Sinan, was from the tribe of al-Namir Ibn Qasit and his mother, Salma, from the tribe of Tamim. Suhayb is said to have been taken captive as a child from Nineveh in Upper Mesopotamia by Byzantine soldiers, when his father (or uncle) was in the service of the Sasanian Persian Empire. In any case, all sources agree that Suhayb was brought up in Byzantine Anatolia from a fairly young age before he ended up in Mecca as a freedman of a prominent Arab patrician from the tribe of Quraysh. He thus became a *marwla*, i.e. an honorary member of Muhammad’s tribe and indeed a close friend of the latter, some years before his prophetic career. He is counted as one of the first four adult men ever to believe in Muhammad’s call and to embrace Islam (soon after 610 CE). Suhayb is described in Arabic sources as a man of extremely fair, rather

reddish, complexion, who spoke Arabic with a recognizable 'Greek accent (*lukna Rumiyya*)'. He is credited with skillful archery, a pleasant sense of humour, genuine piety, spiritual charisma and unwavering commitment to the Muslim community.

That he was highly esteemed by Muhammad can be seen by the fact that the Prophet often exchanged pleasantries with him and when he embraced Islam he bestowed upon him the epithet of '*Abu Yahya*', that is Yahya's father, even before he was married. This is a double endearment since Yahya is the Qur'anic name for John the Baptist. After the early Muslims' Flight or Migration (*Hijra*) from Mecca to Medina, Suhayb married a woman who was Muhammad's close relative, Rayta, sister of Umm Salama, his second wife.⁵ Indeed Suhayb al-Rumi is said to be the subject of some verses in the Qur'an as well as several sayings of the Prophet. For example, when he embraced Islam, Muhammad dubbed him 'the Forerunner of the Greeks (*Sabiq al-Rum*)' [i.e. on the way to paradise]. When he unhesitatingly set out to migrate to Medina to join Muhammad and other Muslims, choosing to forsake his wealth (which the pagan Meccans confiscated), Muhammad's response was, 'Suhayb's bargain shall prosper' or 'may Suhayb's bargain prosper'.⁶ Historical traditions handed down through his descendants depict him as always very close to the Prophet Muhammad in all his expeditions and other activities, invariably eager to assist and protect him.

Suhayb is also described as close to the first two caliphs. When the second caliph, 'Umar, convened the historic al-Jabiya conference in the Golan, after the conquest of Syria, Suhayb was at his side and he assigned him a number of important tasks. When the same 'Umar was dying he instructed Suhayb to be the prayer leader (*imam*) of the Muslims in the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, and to help in supervising the selection of his successor as the next caliph. Both are highly significant tasks. Upon 'Umar's death a few days later, the Muslim leaders asked Suhayb to officiate at the caliph's funeral prayer service. He continued as leader of the congregational prayers in that mosque until the selection of the third caliph, 'Uthman, a few days later. It is clear that Suhayb was viewed as a respected leading figure in Medina. He remained neutral during the disputes that followed 'Uthman's death and the succession of 'Ali as the fourth caliph, although he later sympathized with 'Ali against Mu'awiya.⁷

As a prominent disciple of Muhammad, Suhayb was naturally considered an authority on the Prophet's Traditions (*Hadith*) by later Muslim generations. Because of this and his qualities and contributions, he figures prominently in all Islamic

biographical compilations, historical annals and other classical Arabic sources. Three of his seven sons are also among the early transmitters of Traditions of the Prophet on the authority of their father. That Suhayb was seen as the first Muslim of Greek-*Rumi* heritage in the first Muslim generation, is evidenced by the Prophet Muhammad's description of him as 'The Forerunner of the *Rum*', just as Bilal was the Forerunner of the Abyssinians and Salman of the Persians. Among Suhayb's household was a freedman of *Rumi* origin named Yannis, as he would call him in his distinct Greek pronunciation.

EARLY MUSLIM RELIGIOUS SCHOLARS OF GREEK ORIGIN

In the second and subsequent generations of prominent Muslims, particularly among those who contributed to the study and transmission of the Qur'an, Traditions (*Hadith*) and Jurisprudence, we find a number of important scholars who were of Greek background. As a rule, these were freedmen (that is ex-slaves, mostly ex-prisoners of war or ex-captives) who eventually achieved not only social mobility and integration, but also fame and prominence in Arabia, Syria, Egypt, Iraq and elsewhere.

One of those from the second generation of Muslims was Abu Firas, Yazid Ibn Rabah (died before 700 CE), who was a Greek freedman of 'Amr, the first Arab Governor of Egypt, and became a disciple of his master's son, 'Abdullah, one of the most prominent scholars of the Prophet's Traditions (*Hadith*). Ibn Rabah was able to establish himself as a respected scholar of Traditions, having his own disciples in Egypt, particularly after he endeavoured to travel to the Prophet's city, Medina, to collect further sayings of the Prophet. He was able to meet – that is study with or 'interview' – prominent Companions such as the Prophet's second wife, Umm Salama, and 'Abdullah Ibn 'Umar, son of the second caliph.⁸

In the next generation, we find a certain Yuhannis (Yannis) son of Abu Musa, described as being of Greek origin, who related Traditions of the Prophet on the direct authority of 'Aisha, the most learned wife of the Prophet, whom he met in Medina as well as other Companions of Muhammad. Yannis is described as an authoritative and reliable scholar of Muslim religious Traditions.⁹

Among scholars of *Hadith* Traditions of the third generation, the name of 'Abd al-Malik Ibn Jurayj (c. 688-770 CE) occupies a prominent place in Muslim annals and biographical works. His father, 'Abd al-'Aziz Ibn Jurayj, was also an acknowledged scholar of the Prophet's Traditions. His grandfather Jurayj (Arabic diminutive

of Georgius or Gregorius) was a Greek freedman of the Umayyad family, founders of the first Islamic dynasty centred in Syria (660-750 CE). 'Abd al-Malik was named after the famous Umayyad caliph of the same name, who built the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (692 CE) and minted the first Arab gold and silver coins, and who himself apparently started as a scholar of religious Traditions in Medina before he became caliph in Damascus. The young Ibn Jurayj undertook extensive studies with many prominent second-generation scholars in Medina and Mecca, travelling extensively elsewhere for this purpose. He taught in both holy cities and in Iraq.

Arabic sources describe this grandson of Gregorius the Greek as a most meticulous, reliable and pious Muslim scholar. He is credited with compiling the earliest books of *Hadith* Traditions in Islamic history ever, and is considered as 'one of the great figures' of the Medina School in both Jurisprudence and Traditions of the Prophet, to the extent that he is usually compared to his contemporary Malik Ibn Anas, founder of the Medina School of Islamic Jurisprudence.

Ibn Jurayj himself tells us that in his earlier career as a scholar he was attracted to the study of ancient Arabic poetry and genealogy, before specialising in religious scholarship. This is not unusual among prominent Muslim scholars of his and subsequent generations, for whom an extensive knowledge of philology and poetry was considered essential. Conversely, there were those who mastered religious studies but made their name as men of letters and philologists. Ibn Jurayj had a great number of students in Muslim religious sciences. He seems to have been identified with certain unconventional interpretations and style of life which were seen as somewhat 'unorthodox'. He is thus credited with accepting the principle of 'short-term marriage (*mut'a*)', and indeed of practising it himself, having reportedly contracted such temporary marriages with numerous females (some say as many as 60!) at different times during his long life of scholarly peregrinations.¹⁰ This, however, does not seem to diminish his scholarly standing.

Among the contemporaries of Ibn Jurayj we find another, though less celebrated, scholar of Greek origin, named 'Umayra Ibn Abi Najjiya who was active in Egypt (d. 772 CE). He was the son of a Greek freedman and grew up as a devout Muslim scholar and ascetic and was apparently known to weep frequently and ardently during prayer. His father was also learned in Islamic religious Traditions. 'Umayra himself is described as a philanthropic scholar, who always cared for the welfare of orphans and needy people. He also apparently participated in naval warfare (against the Byzantine fleet) in the Mediterranean.¹¹

During the early 'Abbasid period we find a most prominent scholar of the Qur'an who was of Greek origin. 'Isa son of Minas (738 – 835 CE), nicknamed *Qalun*, was the son of a Greek freedman, who is unanimously described in Arabic sources as 'the Qur'anic scholar of Medina par excellence'. It was his teacher Nafi', himself a freedman of Persian background and the prominent disciple of 'Abdullah Ibn 'Umar, who nicknamed him *Qalun* (Καλον), in recognition of his accurate reading and excellent style of reciting the Qur'an.¹² This Greek word was obviously familiar enough in Medina at the time. 'Ali, first cousin of the Prophet Muhammad and later the fourth caliph, apparently used it on occasion to express his appreciation of what is good. *Qalun's* method is still acknowledged as one of the most accepted ways of Qur'an recitation. In North Africa in particular, his style is the most popular and his name often appears to this day on the title page of printed copies of the Muslim Scriptures as a leading authority of the Medina School of Qur'an reading and recitation.

GREEKS IN ARAB-ISLAMIC PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Throughout the classical Islamic period, many Muslim freedmen and women of Greek origin contributed to diverse spheres of life, in Syria, Iraq, Egypt and elsewhere, under the caliphates of the Umayyads (660-750 CE), 'Abbasids (750-1258 CE) and Fatimids (900-1170 CE) respectively. Like other Muslims (and indeed non-Muslims) of diverse ethnic or linguistic backgrounds, they played varied economic, political, military, social, artistic and other cultural roles in their wider Arab-Islamic milieus.

It is important to remember that the three above-mentioned royal households counted numerous (sometimes thousands) slaves and freedmen and women. Many of these seem to have come from Byzantine territories (particularly between the mid-7th and late-10th centuries CE). For example, the Fatimid caliph, al-Mu'izz (mid-10th century), proudly refers to skilful Greek-Rumi artisans in his realms (North Africa and eventually Egypt and southern Syria-Palestine) and acknowledged their important economic and cultural role.¹³

Under the 'Abbasids in Iraq, we can find a significantly indicative index of the composition of the ruling elites from a survey of the identity of mothers of successive caliphs. Thus 33 out of 37 'Abbasid caliphs were born to freed women of non-Arab origin. Between the mid-9th and mid-10th centuries, at least six out of thirteen

'Abbasid caliphs were sons of Greek mothers. All of them had names common to former slave-girls, although they automatically became free women upon giving birth to a son; and were elevated to the high rank of 'Lady (*al-Sayyida*)', and 'the Mother of...' when the son became the caliph. These were *Habshiyya*, mother of al-Muntasir, *Qabiha*, mother of al-Mu'tazz, *Qurb*, mother of al-Muhtadi, *Ghusn*, mother of al-Mu'tadid, *Shaghab*, mother of al-Muqtadir, and *Dirar* (or *Haqir*), mother of al-Mustakfi. All these six queen mothers seem to have played significant political roles, two of them (mothers of al-Mu'tazz and al-Muqtadir, respectively) being the real power behind the throne.¹⁴ Some of the other caliphs' mothers as well as other influential women of the royal household were most probably also of Byzantine background.

At another but related level, the 'Abbasid caliphs' households (from as early as about 800 CE) included Greek freedmen who played active roles as personal bodyguards and confidants of the ruler or of the queen mother. Some became official palace chamberlains. Among these the name of a certain Qustantin (Constantine) al-Rumi figures in the annals of al-Tabari and other histories as a chamberlain of the caliph al-Ma'mun, where his participation in a plot to assassinate the caliph's chief minister is highlighted.¹⁵ His sister, Qustantina (Constance) was the hand maid of Umm Habib, daughter of al-Ma'mun who became the wife of 'Ali al-Rida, the 8th Shi'a Imam. Both brother and sister were identified as prominent members of the caliphs' household between 813 and 865 CE.¹⁶

Among other associates of the 'Abbasid caliphs, we find a Qustantin (Constantine) Ibn 'Abdullah al-Rumi, who was a freedman and confidant of the caliph al-Mu'tamid (late 9th century CE). He is mentioned as one of those attending circles of learning in the fields of *Hadith* and history in both Baghdad and Damascus.¹⁷

On an entirely different and more crucial plane, historical annals highlight the role of at least two Muslim admirals of Greek origin. One was Lawn (Leo of Tripoli in Byzantine sources), the celebrated (or notorious) admiral of the Muslim fleet (c. 890-908 CE) who masterminded the attack on Thessaloniki in 904 CE. The other was Damiana, admiral of the Muslim fleet who led several expeditions, notably against Cyprus, c. 912 CE).¹⁸ It is significant that both admirals are well known by their Greek names in Arabic historical annals. As their activity was only in the navy, their names do not figure in Arabic biographical compilations. Leo of Tripoli was personally known to the Arab historian al-Mas'udi (d. 956 CE), who interviewed this Greek Muslim admiral seeking information from him on the eastern Medi-

terranean, the Bosphorus and the Aegean, and on naval warfare, including particularly the expedition against Thessaloniki.

We also find several political and administrative Muslim officials of Greek origin in the 10th century, including financial officers and provincial governors in Egypt and Syria-Palestine. One of these was Abu Shuja' Fatik al-Rumi (died 943 CE). He is identified further by the epithet the Great or the Elder (*al-Kabir*), partly to acknowledge his status, partly to distinguish him from another lesser Fatik, who was also of Greek origin. Fatik the Great was initially the freedman of the Governor of Palestine before being attached to Muhammad al-Ikhshid, Governor of Egypt. This Fatik al-Rumi the Great, also known as *al-Majnun* (the Mad), due to his bursts of bad temper, appears as a very ambitious and gallant knight in the works of contemporary Arabic historians and poets. He was for a while treasurer and chancellor in the Ikhshid's administration in Egypt, and owned rich estates in the Fayyum region, amassing much wealth. He was a companion, and later a rival of Kafur, the Black African Governor of Egypt after al-Ikhshid's death. Fatik himself was appointed Governor of Damascus for fifteen years, with the typically Arab honorific title of *Amir* (Prince).¹⁹

A remarkable episode in the biography of this Fatik al-Rumi is his encounter and friendly relations with the celebrated and proud Arab poet, al-Mutanabbi, perhaps the greatest classical Arab poet, who was for some years the laureate of Sayf ad-Dawla the Hamdanid, the *Amir* of Aleppo. Al-Mutanabbi is also known for lampooning Kafur, the last Ikhshidid ruler of Egypt. However, his poems on Fatik al-Rumi are full of admiration and praise, contrasting him favourably with Kafur and showing that al-Mutanabbi considered Fatik al-Rumi not only a patron but also a true friend. These poems are no doubt responsible for at least some of the interest accorded Fatik in classical Arabic literature, particularly his fame as a generous and benevolent *Amir*. As may be expected, Fatik loved horse racing, wine and music. When Fatik died, al-Mutanabbi composed a moving elegy on him in over forty lines of profound and eloquent verse, highlighting his positive traits, comparing him to legendary world kings and praising his care for the poor and needy.²⁰ This poem has become famous in Arabic literature – some of its lines are still quoted as wise aphorisms. However, little import is usually attached by historians and critics to the Greek background of the subject of this elegy. There is no doubt that we owe much of our knowledge about Fatik and his career to al-Mutanabbi's poems.

The Fatimid caliphs, who established themselves first in Tunisia in the early 10th century, then in Egypt after 969 CE, relied on a wide range of individuals (and sometimes ethnic groups) of various backgrounds, including Arab, Berber, Greek, Slavic, Armenian and so on, as personnel for their military, administrative and industrial enterprises. Perhaps the most prominent individual of Greek background in the Fatimid caliphate was Jawhar Ibn 'Abdullah *al-Siqilli al-Rumi* (the Greek Sicilian), Commander of the Fatimid armies, who succeeded in conquering Egypt from the pro-'Abbasid Ikhshidids in 969 CE. He was obviously so integrated as an Arabic speaker and pious Muslim that he gave orations (this would perhaps be more accurate than 'sermons' in this instance) on the pulpit of the main mosque in Egypt's old capital. After this he supervised the building of the new city of Cairo as the Fatimid caliph's royal domain and Egypt's new capital (969-75 CE). He also annexed Palestine and most of Syria to his master's realm. Jawhar was in charge of Egypt's administrative and fiscal affairs for many years. His epithet *al-Katib* (Secretary) attests to both his mastery of Arabic style and his administrative ability. He was famous for his benevolence to the poor and needy, so that when he died there was no known poet in Egypt who did not compose an elegy on him.²¹

From 10th century 'Abbasid Baghdad, Bushra Ibn Massis, known as Abu'l-Hasan al-Rumi, became a celebrated scholar of *Hadith*, rather than a state functionary or a mere palace officer. He tells his own story which gives us a glimpse of possibilities for social mobility, integration and the reaction of his Byzantine family. Bushra (whose Arabic name means good tiding) had been taken prisoner (apparently in his late teens) by the Hamdanid army. As he puts it, 'one of the Hamdanid princes presented me as a gift to Fatin, the caliph al-Muti's confidant'. Fatin, who was most probably himself of Rumi origin, took care of him and gave him a good education, and Bushra seems to have adjusted quite well. Bushra tells us that Fatin 'enabled me to learn *Hadith*; and when my father came secretly to Baghdad to arrange to take me back, he found me well-established as a Muslim and well engaged in learning that he gave up on me and returned'.²²

Bushra al-Rumi's teachers included several leading figures of the time; and he eventually became so prominent as a reliable and respected scholar of *Hadith* in Baghdad that his students included the celebrated al-Khatib al-Baghdadi. Bushra is also described as the most senior of the masters of the equally celebrated Ibn Makula, the prince from the prominent 'Ijl tribe, and author of the authoritative *Ikmal* on *Hadith* transmitters.²³

GREEK WOMEN IN ARAB ISLAMIC SOCIETY (IMAGE AND REALITY)

Arabic literary and historical sources have much to say about women of Greek origin. Some of what they say would more properly belong to stereotypes and folklore. However, there are certain biographical observations of real women and generalizations that seem to have a basis in reality or stem from practical knowledge. The 10th-century Christian Arab physician, theologian, cleric and man of letters from Baghdad, al-Mukhtar (Yuwanis) Ibn al-Hasan Ibn Butlan, better known to modern scholarship as the author of the (illustrated) *Physicians' Symposium*, wrote a short epistle on the 'Buying and Examination of Salves'! His remarks pertain mostly to female slaves.²⁴ He may generalize about females of Greek origin as being of fair complexion, long hair, and blue eyes and so on. But he claims to rely on practical knowledge of experts and old sages (including Aristotle!), in his general characterization of *Rumi* women. On the whole, they are affectionate, responsive, supportive, ready with good counsel, loyal, honest, thrifty, excellent housekeepers, careful treasurers, and invariably adept in manual skills, such as weaving and embroidery.²⁵

GREEK MOTHERS OF PROMINENT ARABS

Apart from famous or notorious mothers of caliphs, indicated above, a number of prominent Arab warriors, leaders, scholars and poets were sons of Greek mothers. During the 7th and early 8th century, these included Khalid al-Qasri, a famous general and governor of Iraq under the Umayyads; and Shabib al-Shaybani, a celebrated warrior, tribal leader and eventually a rebel against Umayyad rule. It is significant that in spite (or perhaps because?) of the high status of both of these two Muslim Arab noblemen, their Greek mothers remained Christian, either to the end, or at least for many years. Khalid al-Qasri actually built a magnificent Christian chapel for his mother. Arabic sources agree that both of these Christian Greek women were tall, fair, stunningly beautiful and of strong character. Shabib's mother, named Jahiza (pronounced Jaheeza), eventually converted to Islam and fought beside her son when he led a rebellion against the Umayyad Governor of upper Mesopotamia.²⁶ It should be remembered that the Shaybanis were for long a leading and proud Christian Arab tribe in Iraq since pre-Islamic times; and in Islamic times they continued to play a leading role, producing several generals and governors under the early 'Abbasids.

A particularly significant figure in the annals of Arab-Byzantine relations in the 10th century, who was the son of a Greek mother, was Abu Firas al-Hamdani. Prince, knight, fine poet, and first cousin of Sayf ad-Dawla, Abu Firas was twice taken prisoner by the Byzantines. He was kept in captivity for a total of more than five years. More than half of his poems are described by his contemporaries and later literary historians as the '*Rumiyyat*', because he composed them while in captivity in the land of Byzantium – actually in Charsianon and Constantinople. In several of these poems he addresses his mother, or mentions her, with great yearning and affection. She evidently was fluent in both Arabic and Greek.

Abu Firas was certainly one of the heroes of the Arab-Byzantine epic wars during the reign of his cousin Sayf ad-Dawla (contemporary of Nikephorus). These wars have been immortalised by his poetry and that of al-Mutanabbi. Scholars such as Schlumberger, Vasiliev, Canard and other modern historians have written in detail about these epic wars, utilising Arabic and Greek sources. Abu Firas's *Rumiyyat* poems offer significant insights into the atmosphere of these wars. More importantly for my purpose, they tell us a lot about the human situation of a warrior poet of mixed Arab-Greek parentage, who spent five years as a distinguished royal captive on the Greek side, his mother's people or his 'maternal uncles', as he puts it in one of his celebrated poems. In my view Abu Firas may be described as a real historical example of a *Digenis Akritis* from the Arab side of the frontier.²⁷

In one or two of his *Rumiyyat*, Abu Firas alludes with some indignation and protestation to discussions he had with Nikephorus Phocas, who once bragged that the Arabs were only good in poetry, literature and scholarship, but no longer in warfare.²⁸

More generally, the Arab-Byzantine frontier region during the 10th century, in particular cities such as Tarsus and Adana, included many mixed families, usually with Greek women married to Arab Muslim men, or households with Byzantine slaves and slave-girls. For example, on the eve of the fall of Tarsus (or its capture by the Byzantine forces under Nikephorus) the number of Greek wives and mothers in that city was too numerous to be estimated. This is according to Yaqut, the 12th-century Muslim encyclopaedist, himself of Greek background, who was most probably relying on the lost contemporary account of Abu 'Amr of Tarsus. Apart from the frontier region, there were other women of Greek origin living as wives, or freed women or slaves in the towns of Syria, Iraq and Egypt. Such a situation was perhaps mirrored, at least partially, on the Byzantine side, if we are to accept historical

accounts about the numbers of captives from the Arab side taken by Byzantine armies during the same period.

Women of Greek background are sometimes presented in glimpses of positive and personalised light in Arabic poetry, not only in general stereotypes of female beauty, but also as descendents of a distinguished people, the *Rum*. One such example is known from the work of Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani, author of the multi-volume Book of Songs (*Kitab al-Aghani*). He is known to have composed many fine poems, including a short piece in honour of a newly born baby in Basra (mid-10th century CE). The father was Chief Minister al-Muhallabi; the mother was a Greek dame (*Rumiyya*):

Enjoy the blessed new-born / A full moon / Brightens up the night's wings /
A delight at an auspicious time / Born of a chaste mother /
A daughter of the 'Golden Kings' / The pride of two lofty pinnacles /
Al-Muhallab and Caesar / When the early morning Sun /
Is joined to the Full Moon / Jupiter was ascendant.²⁹

Curiously, we know of this poem only from a much later Arabic literary source, as al-Isfahani's *Aghani*, which is philological in approach and rich in material for literary and socio-cultural history, is neither concerned with his own poetry nor with any poets or singers after about 850 CE.

A MAJOR ARABIC POET OF GREEK ORIGIN

In the history of Arabic creative literature, of which poetry is the most significant, the name of Ibn al-Rumi (9th century CE) occupies a special place. 'Ali Ibn al-'Abbas Ibn Jurayj (Georgius or Gregorius) al-Rumi was born and educated in Baghdad and was able to shine as a major modernist poet of his time. He was also well versed in philosophy and most branches of learning, a trait he shared with some other contemporary Arab poets, notably Abu Tammam. Indeed, al-Mas'udi who admired both Abu Tammam and Ibn al-Rumi, says of the latter, 'Poetry was the least of his offerings'. Ibn al-Rumi's poetry is unusual in that he often shows concern with ordinary everyday social scenes and problems, including not only disasters such as a civil war or a fire, but also images of poor and down trodden individuals in the large city – for example, a blind man, a porter, a pastry baker and so on. On the other hand, his sharp and ironic satires are still famous even today.

What deserves to be highlighted here is the fact that Ibn al-Rumi, who was a third generation Greek in Baghdad, a *mawla* or honorary affiliate of the 'Abbasid royal house itself, and a prominent Arabic poet, was openly proud of his Greek origin and sometimes alluded to this in his poetry. A man once asked him in jest, 'What do you know about poetry? How come you compose such good poems? Are you really an Arab or pretending to be one?' 'It is you who is the pretender', Ibn al-Rumi retorted, 'You claim an Arab pedigree but cannot compose a good verse.' Then he extemporized:

Beware of provoking me / For Greeks may create fine poetry /
Which an Arab may not surpass³⁰

On another occasion, he justifies his ambiguous praise for a minor contemporary philologist who shared the same name with an earlier more famous one:

If I as a Greek were to compare the two / in Eloquent Arabic diction /
As an outsider (gharib) to both / My judgment would be fair /
If I were to make an unfair judgement / I wouldn't be called a
philosopher or a Heraclius (or Hercules?)

PROMINENT GREEK MUSLIM SCHOLARS

A number of individuals of Greek origin have contributed significantly to Arabic scholarship in various fields of knowledge, including, jurisprudence, grammar, philology and literary criticism. I have already discussed a number of them in the area of *Hadith* and other religious disciplines in particular. One of the most celebrated Muslim jurists and philologists of the first half of the 10th century CE was Abu 'Ubayd al-Qassim Ibn Sallam (770-846 CE). The son of a Greek freedman, he was born in Herat (now in western Afghanistan), but moved to Baghdad to study and became a distinguished scholar and taught there and elsewhere for many years. He also held the position of judge of the important frontier city of Tarsus for eighteen years. He was a prominent scholar of the Qur'an and of jurisprudence, grammar, philology and literature, producing no less than twenty important books. Some of his colleagues described him as a 'mountain of scholarship'. Two of his works, *Gharib al-Hadith* (on the unusual vocabulary and transmission of the Prophet's traditions) and *Kitab al-Amwal* (on fiscal law) are particular masterpieces of their respective genres.

The latter is still a significant source for both the history of practical Islamic financial law and socio-economic history. He is often compared to al-Shafi'i and Ibn Hanbal, founders of two of the four major Sunni Schools of Islamic Jurisprudence.

A LEADING GREEK ARABIC GRAMMARIAN

Abu'l Fat'h 'Uthman Ibn Jinni (10th century CE) was a distinguished Arabic grammarian, philologist and literary critic. The son of a Greek freedman, he grew up in Mosul and lived mostly in Baghdad, while also spending time in Aleppo, where he was among the literary stars in Sayf ad-Dawla's court. Here he befriended the celebrated poet al-Mutanabbi, whose poems he collected and edited in about one thousand folios in his own attractive calligraphy. His own notes on some of the poems provide us with pertinent historical context, including observations on the circumstances of Sayf ad-Dawla's Byzantine campaigns. As an Arabic grammarian and linguist, Ibn Jinni most systematic and is perhaps the best since Sibawayh (the real founder of Arabic Grammar in the late 8th century CE).

Like the poet Ibn al-Rumi before him, Ibn Jinni was proud of his Greek ancestry. In one of his poems, he recites:

If I don't have an Arab pedigree / My scholarship speaks up for me/
But I do relate to noble ancestors / They are the Caesars/
When they speak, old Time stands still /
The Prophet did pray for them / That is enough honour indeed!

The reference here is perhaps to an early Islamic tradition. It is said that when the Prophet Muhammad wrote to the emperor Heraclius inviting him to accept Islam or alliance, Heraclius received the envoy kindly, kissed the letter and kept it carefully (unlike the behaviour of the Persian emperor who apparently tore the letter sent to him and insulted the Prophet's envoy). As a result Muhammad said of the Byzantine emperor, 'may God preserve his kingdom!'

THE GREEK MUSLIM ENCYCLOPAEDIST

A particularly important figure in Arabic classical letters and scholarship is the meticulous Greek Muslim encyclopaedist, Yaqut al-Hamawi al-Rumi (12th century

CE). He was bought as a young slave into the household of a merchant from Hama who then moved to Baghdad. Yaqut, whose name means Sapphire or Ruby, usually introduces himself in his books as 'Ubaydullah Yaqut. He started his literary career while helping his master with his business mainly between Oman and Baghdad. During this he obtained a good education, mostly through his own efforts. He excelled as a scribe and eventually developed into a noted calligrapher. This gave him the opportunity to satisfy his thirst for knowledge. He tells us that while copying manuscripts for a living, he read every book he laid his hands on. He travelled all over the Islamic East from Egypt and Syria to Central Asia and the Caspian region, eventually fleeing back westward from the advancing Mongol hordes and finally settling in Aleppo where he died.

Yaqut's works reflect an extensive and encyclopaedic knowledge. He was an honoured colleague and friend of such prominent notables and scholars as the historian and judge Ibn al-'Adim of Aleppo and the physician and man of letters Ibn al-Qifti of Cairo. Ibn Khallikan was later to remark that when he visited Aleppo some months after Yaqut's death, he found people still talking about his scholarship and good character. His systematic scholarship is most impressive, particularly his two major encyclopaedic works: A lively and well documented geographical dictionary of all known places (*Mu'jam al-Buldan*); and an even livelier dictionary of literary figures (*Mu'jam al-Udaba'*), both are real encyclopaedias with a truly wide scope and a humanist outlook. As calligrapher, he paid due attention to past masters of the art, and besides its general value, his literary encyclopaedia (*Mu'jam al-Udaba'*) provides insights into the history of Arabic calligraphy.

While his writings are concerned with literary history and geography, Yaqut strikes the reader as a well rounded scholar with extensive knowledge of the Qur'an, *Hadith*, jurisprudence, poetry and general history. In his introduction to one of his books, Yaqut expresses concern that some jealous readers might criticize his work simply by saying, 'This is only the work of a *Rumi* freedman, and what could someone like him possibly produce, as his race has done nothing like this, or ever produced any one of significance!'³¹ But he did not see the need to make claims for his distinguished ancestry or connections with the Caesars, as Ibn al-Rumi and Ibn Jinni did for example.

It is thus evident that many individuals of Greek background have left their mark on the political, cultural and intellectual life of Arabic civilization during the first six centuries or so of the Islamic era. It is equally obvious that their entry into the Arab-

Islamic societies of that period was hardly auspicious. Usually it was through the vicissitudes of captivity and at least short term enslavement. This was a terrible fact of life in the context of the times. Their fates varied as did the extent of their integration. Those who trained and succeeded as religious scholars seem to have been most integrated and remembered in Islamic sources, some achieving real prominence, such as Qalun in Qur'an studies, Ibn Jurayj and Bushra in *Hadith* Traditions, and Abu 'Ubayd Ibn Sallam in jurisprudence. No less celebrated were those who excelled in poetry, grammar, philology, literature or general knowledge such as the poet Ibn al-Rumi, the grammarian Abu'l Fat'h Ibn Jinni and the encyclopaedist Yaqut, despite clear hints of them being subject to occasional slight due to racism.

In the biographies of these three men of letters, professional jealousy and a touch of certain chauvinism can be detected, which in the case of the poet and the grammarian is met with mutual chauvinism and pride in their *Rumi* background expressed as royal ancestry. We find parallel to this in the work of some poets of Persian background, such as the 9th-century Mihyar. This has to be understood in the context of the ethnic and racial mix of Islamic society, particularly Baghdad and other cities.

The influx of war captives on both sides (and the slave trade between Byzantium and Islamic domains) seem to have led to many individuals finding themselves as slaves, at least for a while until they were exchanged, ransomed or freed. It was among the latter category, that is as freed women and men of Byzantine background that we find the wide range of human beings whose lives and activities became enmeshed and to a varying degree integrated in Arab-Islamic life during those centuries.

Modern 'traditional' historians may continue to highlight the disturbing episodes and negative chapters of war and conflict in Arab-Byzantine relations, especially as told by traditional chroniclers and other sources in Arabic and Byzantine Greek. But this should not lead us to ignore the positive human contacts and joint ventures, and indeed many examples of the *Digenis*, on both sides of the borders. Indeed, careful study of the societies of the Arab-Byzantine frontiers in the 9th and 10th centuries would show that there was considerable human cultural interchange with a degree of what I would call permeability and even fusion at the level of families and communities. In such a view, the notion of a 'clash of civilizations' must appear not only misleading but a distortion of the historical reality of human relations, even in those pre-modern centuries.

ENDNOTES

- 1 To save space, I cite Arabic sources in abbreviated form. Since this article tackles a hitherto unexplored question, I don't cite any specific modern studies, including my own previous publications. I can only indicate the range of modern scholarly contributions to the broader field of pre-modern Arab-Greek, more specifically Arab-Byzantine, relations by mentioning a number of modern authors; I trust that interested readers should find no practical difficulty in tracing the titles of their publications.
- 2 Studies by Richard Walzer, Franz Rosenthal, Francis E. Peters, Dimitri Gutas, George Saliba, among others.
- 3 Both early Roman-Arab and pre-Islamic Byzantine-Arab relations have received considerable scholarly attention, notably in the magisterial volumes of Irfan Shahid (Dumbarton Oaks publications), and in incisive contributions by Glenn Bowersock and Francis E. Peters, among others. For the period after the rise of Islam, A. A. Vasiliev and Marius Canard on broader Byzantine-Arab relations; on military aspects in the 7th century, Walter E. Kaegi's studies; on aspects of Arab perceptions of Byzantine civilization, contributions by Ahmad Shboul and Nadia El-Sheikh; and on Byzantine perceptions of Arabs and Islam from different perspectives: works by V. Christides, A. Th. Khoury, John Meyendorff, and Elizabeth Jeffreys, among others.
- 4 As an example, Romilly Jenkins (1948) and L. Ryden (in *Graeco-Arabico*, 1984), among others, have given us glimpses of Samonas, an Arab fugitive in Byzantium as reflected in Byzantine Greek literature.
- 5 Ibn Habib, *al-Muhabbar*, Hyderabad, 1928, 103.
- 6 Ibn Sa'd, *Tabaqat*, ed. E. Sachau, Leiden, 1905-40, 3: 230, 303, 344; al-Dhahabi, *Tarikh al-Islam*, ed. O. Tadmuri, Beirut, 1990-92, 3: 282, 598-400.
- 7 Al-Tabari, *Tarikh*, ed. M. A. Ibrahim, Cairo, 1971, 4: 431, 467.
- 8 Al-Dhahabi, 2: 221-22.
- 9 Al-Khazraji, *Khulasat Tadhbih al-Tabdhbih*, Aleppo, 1971, 442; al-Dhahabi, 2: 501.
- 10 Al-Dhahabi, 3: 210-12.
- 11 Al-Dhahabi, 3: 553-4.
- 12 Ibn al-Nadim, *Fihrist*, ed. G. Fluegel, Leipzig, 1871-2, 28; Yaqt al-Rumi, *Mu'jam al-Udaba'*, ed. D. S. Margoliouth, Cairo, 6: 103-4.
- 13 Al-Qadi al-Nu'man, *al-Majalis*, ed. H. Faqi and others, Tunis, 1978.
- 14 Al-Mas'udi, *Tanbih*, ed. M. De Goeje, Leiden, 1897, 362, 364, 365, 369, 376, 398; and *Muruj*, ed. C. Pellat, Beirut, 1968-71, v, para 2978 ff.
- 15 Al-Tabari, 8: 564-5.
- 16 Al-Tabari, 9: 313-14.
- 17 Al-Dhahabi, *Tarikh* (volume covering the years 241-250 of the Muslim era), 526.
- 18 Al-Mas'udi, 2, passim, and 5: 3436.
- 19 Ibn Khallikan, 2: 292; Dhahabi, Volume for years 341-50 AH: 447-9.
- 20 Al-Mutanabbi, *Diwan*, ed. M. Saqqa and others, Cairo, 1972, 2: 268-78, poem no. 143.
- 21 Ibn Khallikan, *Wafayat*, ed. Ihsan 'Abbas, Beirut, 197-72, 1: 375-80.
- 22 Al-Khatib, *Tarikh Baghdad*, Cairo, 1935, 5: 135-6; al-Dhahabi, *Tarikh* (volume covering the years 421-440 AH), 339-40.

- 23 Al-Khatib, and al-Dhahabi, as in the previous note; and al-Dhahabi (volume for the years 481-490 AH), 216-22.
- 24 Ibn Butlan, *Risala fi Shira al-Raqiq*, ed. A. M. Harun, Cairo, 1954.
- 25 Ibn Butlan, *Risala*, 352-77.
- 26 Ibn Khallikan, 3: 163-4.
- 27 The actual Greek *Digenis Akritis* epic, so alive in Modern Greek consciousness, has continued to attract the interest of Byzantinists. Elizabeth Jeffreys has recently (1998) produced an excellent English prose translation (with two versions of the Greek text in parallel to her English version) and a succinct scholarly introduction.
- 28 Abu Firas, *Dirwan*, ed. S. Dahhan, 3 volumes, Beirut, 1944. (About a decade ago the present writer composed a long poem in Arabic inspired by Abu Firas's life – *An-Nahar*, Sydney, 1999)
- 29 Yaqut, 5: 166; Ibn Khallikan, 3: 307-8.
- 30 Ibn Khallikan, 3: 307-8.
- 31 Yaqut, 1: 12-13.