

MINORITIES UNDER NON-SASANIAN RULERS

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A much better picture of this subject emerges when one reviews how Christians and other minorities fared under other rulers. As G.W. Bowersock, P. Brown and O. Grabar (editors) report in *Late Antiquity*, Harvard University Press, 1999, pp. 23-):

The transformation of the Roman Empire into a Christian state eventually led to restricted freedom for Jews and non-orthodox Christians. Although Judaism was a legal cult, Jewish proselytism and the building of new synagogues or the adornment of old ones were forbidden by law during the 5th century. This legal restriction on constructing religious buildings was also imposed by Islamic authorities on Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians when the Muslim Arabs came to rule the Middle East. Under their influence, Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian sacred sites slowly vanished during the Middle Ages, to be replaced by shining new mosques, which are now the landmarks of Islamic cities.

The competition for converts as well as for highly visible or conveniently located sacred spaces can be tracked in the conversion of buildings from one religion to another.

When the Romans recaptured the Holy Land from the Persians during the early 630's, "forced baptism of the Jews" was carried out until the Muslim Arabs occupied the Holy Land.

The increasing attention devoted to relics and the belief in their power to protect the faithful explain the shock felt by the Christian world when the holy city of Jerusalem and the relic of the Cross were captured by the Persians in 614. The conquest of the Persians of the eastern provinces of the Byzantine empire led not only to the destruction of numerous cities but also to a spiritual crisis among Byzantine Christians. Stories circulated relating the desecration of the churches of the Holy Land, the massacres of Christians, and the cruelty of the Jews. How could God let fire-worshippers defeat the Christians? Had he abandoned the Holy Land to Zoroastrian Persians and to their Jewish allies to punish the Christians for their sins? The Monophysites and the Chalcedonians believed that the

theological error of the opposite camp had attracted onto them the wrath of God.

Forced baptism of the Jews was short-lived, for in 634 Muslim Arabs invaded Syria. ... Churches were officially desacralized and used for profane purposes. Still others were considered highly charged holy places and were transformed from temples to churches to mosques, such as in Damascus.

The 8th century was a turning point in the relationship between the Muslims and the *dhimmis* (subject peoples). In Palestine, churches show traces of deliberate destruction of mosaics, particularly human and animal figures. We know that Umar II (d. 720) had ordered that representations of crosses be destroyed. Calip Yazid II (720-724) ordered the destruction of statues, according to an Arab source of the 10th century, and of Christian images representing living creatures, if we follow Byzantine sources. This period was marked by a tightening of the rules concerning the *dhimmis*. A ruling of 'Umar II (717-720) excluded non-Muslims from government administration unless they were willing to convert. The family of John of Damascus had been involved with tax collecting for many generations, under Persian, Byzantine, and now Muslim rulers. When he heard of the new ruling, John resigned and became a monk at St. Sabas in Palestine. This unfavorable evolution of the status of the *dhimmis*, protected yet second-class citizens, clearly appears in the writings of the "Abbasid jurists, where numerous prohibitions, including restrictions on religious freedom and other new vexations, are noted. (No new churches or synagogues were to be erected, no proselytizing or public ceremonies were allowed. Authorization was required for the restoration of damaged religious buildings.

Most likely the depopulation and impoverishment of the congregations explain why buildings were not repaired. The same desacralization of Christian buildings happened in regions where no earthquakes damaged the churches. In Egypt, the taxes that the *dhimmis* had to pay to the Muslim state eventually led to a real impoverishment of the Christian communities. Only after the Arabic invasion did

the declining Christian community adopt the sturdy temple as its regular church which probably indicates a lack of means or authorization to repair its other churches.

In the city (Pella) conquered by the Muslims in 635, the Christian community had lost its prosperity as well as its political power. At that time, Christian processions were forbidden and Christians were allowed to practice their cult only inside their churches, as discretely as possible. The loss of respect for the sacred building by a growing non-Christian population is attested by the fate of the other church entrances; during this time they were either sealed or reduced in size, probably to prevent animals from wandering into the atrium and the sanctuary. The fate of the once magnificent church of Pella was shared by many churches, synagogues and Zoroastrian temples located in Muslim lands. "Churches and monasteries certainly did suffer in periods of general lawlessness, like the disorders and rebellions which followed the death of the caliph Harun al-Rashid in 809."

The Umayyad mosque in Damascus, built by the caliph al-Walid (705-715), stands on the site of the cathedral of St. John, which in turn stood within the *temenos* of the ancient temple of Haddad/Jupiter, whose origins go back to remotest antiquity.