

2nd meeting of the research group on Kinship and Community in the Early and Medieval Islamic Mediterranean

**** St Cross College, Oxford - Ian Skipper room - January 9-10, 2020 ****

Participants: Arezou Azad (Univ. of Oxford) Karen Bauer (Inst. Ismaili studies), Janet Carsten (Univ. of Edinburgh), Anna Chrysostomides (Univ. of Oxford), Ana Echevarria (UNED), John Nawas (KU Leuven), Arietta Papaconstantinou (Univ. of Reading), Christian Sahner (Univ. of Oxford), Uriel Simonsohn (Univ. of Haifa), Oded Zinger (Hebrew Univ.)

Abstracts

Christian Sahner

Marrying Up: Bonds of Kinship between Muslim Men and Elite Non-Muslim Women in the Conquest Era

Early Islamic historical sources contain accounts of elite Muslims taking elite wives from the conquered populations of the Near East, North Africa, and al-Andalus. Sometimes these were political marriages, and sometimes they occurred in the context of slavery and concubinage. The children who issued from these unions were meant to fuse together bloodlines, embedding the conquest at the very highest echelons of the conquered society. My presentation will explore several examples of these unions as a way of examining how kinship networks became intertwined during the conquest era. It will also explore what both sides stood to gain by these unions, and explore what these stories signified for later audiences.

Oded Zinger

The bonds of kinship: Jewish women in the legal of medieval Egypt

In our last workshop I explored how Jewish women requested assistance in letters of requests from the Cairo Geniza. Following advice from the group to expand my study to men's letters, I will begin my talk by showing that men expressed obligation based on kinship like women did, but they also expressed obligation based on social ties. What I call 'kinship obligation' is expressed through reference to blood, milk and upbringing, while what I call 'social obligation' is expressed through reference to bread, salt and wine consumed together, neighborliness and, most strikingly, love ('bi-ḥaqq al-ahava'). In the second half of my talk I will explore the expression of love in men's letters and what it tells us about the bonds of men, masculinity, and the meaning of love and its uses among the Jews of medieval Egypt.

Arietta Papaconstantinou

The role of debt and obligation in discourses of community and kinship in eighth-century Egypt

It is almost a truism that conceptions of debt and obligation create relationships, and are therefore central in 'creating' community. Documentary papyri and literary texts from eighth-century Egypt are replete with references to debt and obligation, in a large number of contexts, but most often within communal bounds. The terminology and language of kinship is often found in such documents, and is used variously to construct some forms of patronage, to maintain communal cohesion and belonging, and to assert authority. I shall present a choice of texts that will allow us to explore those aspects in some depth.

John Nawas

The Patronate of the third AH/ninth century AD

Ibn Abi Tahir Tayfur wrote his Book of Baghdad at a moment of transition when society was changing from an oral to a writerly culture, a process that took place in 3rd/9th century Iraq. In this presentation I will study every occurrence of the word "mawla" in this text to see what it meant in this foundational century of Islamic history.

Uriel Simonsohn

Hannah, Sarah, or Shmuni? Medieval Retellings of the Martyrdom of the Mother and Seven Sons

The story of the mother and her seven sons appears for the first time in the Book of Maccabees. It takes place shortly before the Maccabean revolt against the Seleucid empire in the 2nd century BCE. A mother and her seven sons were arrested by the Seleucid authorities and brought before the monarch – Antiochus Epiphanes who attempted to forcefully feed them with pork. The boys are brought before the king, each one in his turn, each one refusing to surrender to the king's demand, subsequently severely tortured and put to death before their mother, who is finally martyred as well. This incredibly rich narrative offers a set of ideals, most notably a profound commitment to God, specifically God's law, by making the worst of sacrifices - a mother's sacrifice of her children. It is perhaps owing to the terrible impression the story makes that it has been continuously retold throughout history in the context of different confessional traditions. However, the story's retelling has come out in different versions, at times retaining in others leaving out some of its original details. These editorial choices will be at the center of my presentation in an attempt to identify their underlying moral concerns with regard to the maternal image of the story's female protagonist.

Karen Bauer

The womb-ties, blood kinship, and communities of Qur'anic interpretation

In the presentation for the first Kinship and Community workshop, I explored the concept of kinship and community in the Qur'an, particularly focusing on the notion of brotherhood, because the term 'brother' is used in the Qur'an to denote a spiritual kinship of believers. In that presentation, we came across the term '*rahm*' (wombs) in the text, which is generally translated simply as 'kinship', and we discussed the notion that this might refer to uterine kinship (kinship through the female line). In the intervening months I have explored this more thoroughly, and I now believe that the references to the '*rahm*' in the Qur'an refer to blood kinship, which is not necessarily through the maternal line; this is opposed to the notion of 'brother' in the Qur'an, which is primarily spiritual (when Moses refers to his actual blood brother he does so by referring to the uterine tie, by calling him 'son of my mother', rather than 'my brother').

In this session I will present some works of medieval Qur'anic interpretation and show how they deal with the interpretation of Q. 4:1, which mentions the 'womb'. The interpreters invariably emphasise the importance of maintaining links with blood kin, in two cases even referring to the womb that is suspended from God's throne, which becomes cheerful and speaks to the person who has maintained his 'womb-ties' (which is to say ties of blood kinship) and hides itself from the person who has severed those ties. These mainstream Sunni and Shī'ī interpretations thus connect the maintenance of blood kinship ties with piety and with closeness to God. Al-Mu'ayyad fī'l-Dīn al-Shīrāzī, a Fāṭimid Ismā'īlī interpreter, however, says that although the ties of blood kinship are important to maintain, the ties of spiritual kinship are even stronger than blood kinships. For him, this was a way of arguing for the spiritual kinship of the Ismā'īlī mission. Thus the relative emphasis on blood kin or spiritual kin, both of which are important in the Qur'anic discourse, varies depending on the situation of the Muslim community of interpretation. In all cases, however, it should be noted that interpreters emphasise the need to maintain blood kinships as a part of living a pious life. They do not in any way adopt the image for their own community that is the prominent image of the early Muslim community, which is that their very existence as a community was predicated on the severance of blood kin networks.

Anna Chrysostomides

Initiation Rituals and Religious Affiliation in the 7th-9th-century Near East: *fiṭra*, *ṣibgha*, and *ma'mūdiyya*

This paper will track the development of opinions regarding the ritual of baptism within 7th-9th-century Islam and what this might indicate about daily life and lived Christian or Islamic experience in the Levant and former Sassanian territories. Baptism does not appear as a concern in Muslim texts until the lifetimes of al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) and al-Māturīdī (d.c. 944), while the Syrian Orthodox Jacob of Edessa (d. 708) allows for Muslims to be the beneficiaries of any priestly care given to Christians from the very earliest days of Muslim-Christian interaction. The East Syrian metropolitan Ṭṣō'bōkt (r.c. 773-779) later stipulates that inter-religious marriages to Muslims are acceptable if the couple agrees to baptise any resulting children.

Ḥadīth and *tafsīr* compilations suggest some confusion regarding whether or not Muslim children could rely on an inborn instinct to be Muslim, *fiṭra*, or whether they needed a type of initiation ritual - either circumcision or a type of ritual washing to fight illness and impurity. This ritual washing was known to Arabic speaking Muslims as *ṣibgha* and Arabic speaking Christians as *ma'mūdiyya*. The Muslim religious elite attempted to differentiate between Muslim and Christian initiation rituals only in the 10th century by emphasising the inherent state of *fiṭra* in Muslim children and the ritual of circumcision as a Muslim initiation ritual. This was done in an attempt to dissuade parents, mainly concerned with their children's health and wellbeing, on a practical rather than an ideological level, from having their children baptised. The *tafsīr* can provide some insight into whether or not early Muslims practiced baptism due to the timing of their debates over the word *ṣibgha*. The earliest *tafsīr* commentators (early 700s through to the late 800s) do not discuss baptism in their exegesis of Qur'ān 2:137-138, the verses which mention *ṣibgha*, if they even discuss 2:137-138 at all. Al-Ṭabarī states clearly in his commentary on Qur'ān 2:137-138 that only Christian children require *ṣibgha* while Muslim children are born Muslim because of *fiṭra*. Al-Māturīdī argues that there is no relation between *ṣibgha* in the Qur'ān and baptism, and firmly equates *ṣibgha* with the Muslim concepts of *fiṭra* and *milla*.

Ana Echevarria

The Berbers in the Iberian Peninsula: A Marker of Religious Difference of a Tribal Category?

One of the main concerns of researchers about the early conquest of the Iberian Peninsula is the ethnic characterization of the groups that entered in 711. The definition of Berbers in this period is elusive. While Nicola Clarke considers this term as a marker of religious difference, French scholars like Pierre Guichard (*Structures sociales 'orientales' et 'occidentales' dans l'Espagne musulmane*, Paris: Mouton, 1977) or Helena de Felipe (*Onomástica e identidad de los bereberes de al-Andalus*. Madrid: CSIC, 1997) have attempted to explain the distribution of tribal populations in Iberian lands, using the same term to explain how kinship was understood at the time of the conquest. The latter, while deeply grounded in French colonial ideas, has been widely accepted by Spanish scholars –especially archaeologists- until very recently and is still discussed in most conferences.

Given that the “conversion” of Ifriqiya was less than thirty years old in 711, we may assume Islamic kinship traditions and common genealogies were far from established among the conquerors of al-Andalus. Berbers, Late Roman (Byzantine) and Vandal recent converts would have had different perceptions of kinship bonds when moving into the Peninsula, and their assimilation by the Visigoth population would result then in different combinations. The arrival of “proper” Arabs to appease the “Berber revolts” only made things more difficult.

Looking into recent scholarship on the topic, I would like to discuss possible sources for assessing different tribal and kinship groups in the context of early Islamic al-Andalus and to consider how the interpretation of early genealogies served an instrument for the assimilation of new converts (Berbers and locals), given that the extant sources for al-Andalus start so late.