Conference Report

Navigating Language in the Early Islamic World
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Al-Balādhurī (d. 892) explains the Arabization of the Umayyad *dīwān* with an anecdote about a Greek scribe who urinated in the inkpot. In response, we are told, ʿAbd al-Malik dismissed Greek scribes from their posts and changed the language of the administration to Arabic. This is a concise, entertaining explanation for linguistic change in the Near East. Nevertheless, al-Balādhurī's explanation falls somewhat short of scholarly expectations. The process of Arabization was not merely the purview of the caliph and his scribes, but rather a broad social phenomenon, as merchants, scholars, soldiers, and administrators alike turned to Arabic as a lingua franca. Muslims used Arabic, the language of the Qurʾān, to compose religious texts, record bills of sale, write philosophical and scientific texts, and adorn buildings. Jews and Christians also composed and engaged texts in Arabic, signaling the appreciation of Arabic across religious boundaries. Yet despite the appeal and the undeniable significance of the Arabic language, it did not spread evenly or quickly throughout the entire Islamic world. From Central Asia to the Caucasus to the Iberian Peninsula, the populations of many provinces continued to write and converse in other languages such as Persian, Armenian, Coptic, and Syriac, to name a few.

The aim of the symposium, "Navigating Language in the Early Islamic World," was to situate the history of Arabic and Arabization within a broader setting of linguistic diversity in the Islamic world. The papers represented a number of different approaches to the study of the early Islamic Near East, bringing art history, linguistics, religion, and history to the same table. They also spanned the geographical reaches of the early Islamic world with an aim to frame the discussion across both the Mediterranean and the Iranian cultural sphere. The participants began with three goals: (1) to explore evidence of multilingualism in an ethnically and religiously pluralist

environment, including through engagement with studies of the pre-Islamic Near East; (2) to investigate the ways that communities produced, employed, and transformed Arabic in their own settings; and (3) to contribute to the ongoing discussion of textual and oral transmission of narratives and historical accounts between the various languages of the Islamic world.

Muriel Debié (École Pratique des Hautes Études) opened the symposium with a paper entitled "The Languages of Diplomacy and Religion in the Late Antique Near East: the Arab Tribes and Surrounding Official Languages." She investigated the diplomatic and religious languages of Arab tribes in the period immediately before the rise of Islam to conclude that the choice of language in each context was dependent on both region and setting. Debié identified numerous instances when Arabs participated in diplomatic exchanges, the accounts of which presuppose the presence of interpreters or multilingual conversations, e.g., Ghassānid complaints against the Lakhmids aired in Constantinople. Debié also pointed to the lasting use of Syriac in the Near East in matters of religion, speculating in particular about inter-Miaphysite diplomacy in Greek and Syriac, set against the competition between the Miaphysite churches and the Church of the East to expand among Arab communities in the Near East. She concluded that official languages predominated in matters both political and religious, demonstrating that multilingual Arabs participated in these discussions in both the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires. The use of Arabic, then, appeared in moments when Arabs were not participating in this broader Near Eastern dialogue, but instead largely in communication aimed at other Arabs.

Khodadad Rezakhani (Princeton University) presented on "Pidginization, Creolisation, and Hybridity: the Interaction of Languages in the Early Islamic East Iran and Transoxiana." He began with the acknowledgment that modern studies on Persian follow nationalist readings, i.e., that Persian survived Arabic. Rezakhani challenged this reading by pointing out that the very idea of a single Middle Persian is constructed; rather, he argued, we should understand the Zoroastrian texts in Middle Persian language and Pahlavi script to reflect a single dialect among many. He pointed to the localized hybridity of Middle Persian, e.g., the relationship between Middle Persian, Aramaic and Arabic in Mesopotamia. This set the stage for the languages of the East (in particular, Khwarazmian, Sogdian, and Bactrian) to serve as the missing links between the "official" languages (as canonized later) and localized forms. In this, the early Islamic period emerged as a particularly significant moment, when we find the pidginization of language, such as when Arabic and Persian in particular mix in *amṣār* like Basra and Kufa. Here again, the East offers an interesting case study of a sort of linguistic melting pot, particularly the legal documents in Bactrian and mercantile in Sogdian. In this, Rezakhani brought the linguistic diversity of the East to bear on the modern interpretations that streamline the development from a single Middle Persian to New Persian.

Petra Sijpesteijn (Leiden University) concluded the first panel with her paper, "A Policy of Multilingualism in the early Muslim Empire." She started with a review of the ways in which the Arabization of the

dīwān appears in our ʿAbbāsid-era sources as the result of the initiatives of al-Ḥajjāj in Iraq, ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿAbd al-Malik in Egypt, and Walīd ibn ʿAbd al-Malik in Syria. These examples form the rationale for modern scholars' understanding of Arabization as a deliberate policy, implemented by the Umayyad élite to make Arabic the language of both religion and state. Yet these accounts would have us believe that Arabization was both sudden and top-down. While the Umayyads instigated similar empire-wide initiatives (e.g., the reform of coinage), Sijpesteijn argued that this reading of Umayyad Arabization cannot make sense of the extant documentary evidence. Multilingual papyri in Arabic, Greek, Sogdian, and Coptic culled from both Egypt and Khurāsān demonstrate that the shift from local administrative languages to Arabic cannot have been absolute or immediate. With examples from the 640s (a Greek-Arabic receipt for sheep) to the 830s (land measurements in Arabic, reusing a Greek papyrus), Sijpesteijn argued that the early caliphs opted for and promoted a multilingual administration, even investing in an infrastructure to maintain it.

Phillip Stokes (University of Tennessee, Knoxville) kicked off the second panel of the symposium with a paper entitled "New Perspectives on the Linguistic Landscape of Arabic in the early Islamic Period." He argued that the study of Arabic has focused on Classical Arabic and now needs to incorporate pre-Islamic and non-Islamic evidence. Pre-Islamic Arabic was tremendously diverse, both philologically and by script. To illustrate this, Stokes offered several examples of linguistic diversity as evidenced through inscriptions and early Qurʾān manuscripts. He argued that differences between readings and orthography of certain Qurʾānic phrases cannot indicate that the scribes did not know Classical Arabic. Rather, we should understand these variations as cues to the spoken norms of Arabic in the Ḥijāz. As such, Stokes suggested that we consider the orthography seriously rather than dismiss variations, as a way to uncover the norms of pre- and early Islamic Arabic. He also suggested, then, that we might uncover the variations of early Islamic Arabic by revisiting the traditional corpora, focusing specifically on Christian Palestinian Arabic and Judeo-Arabic. By looking at the spelling of certain words, e.g., the use of *nun sofit* or *alef* in Judeo-Arabic texts to render the accusative marker, we can hypothesize about the use of cases in Arabic. Qurʾānic *muṣḥaf*s, Christian Arabic inscriptions, and Judeo-Arabic texts all point in the same direction, namely that there existed several varieties of Arabic in the early Islamic period, signaled in these examples by the differences in case endings. Classical Arabic, Stokes concluded, was the result of the successful ʿAbbasid project that married the systemization of Arabic grammar (e.g., Sībawayh) to a wider discourse on Arab identity.

Fred Astren (San Francisco State University) offered a paper on "ʿAbbāsid Book Culture and Ninth-Century Jewish Sectarianism," in which he tracked the involvement of Jews in the "writerly culture" of ʿAbbasid cities. While primarily interested in Baghdad, he pointed to the broader processes of urbanization across the Islamicate world. Relying on toponymy, he demonstrated Jewish involvement in the growth of the urban middle class. Jews were merchants and bankers; Astren

tied their participation in the urban social structure to the rise in literacy and, as a result, to the production of texts, including those outlining religious differentiation. The combination of urban intellectualism and the availability of paper allowed for people to search widely for their modes of expression, as Astren demonstrated with an anecdote about a certain Muqammiṣ, a Jewish Muʿtazilī scholar who converted to Christianity, whose story paints very porous borders between religious and intellectual communities. To clarify the ramifications of Jewish participation in the changing urban conversations, Astren turned to studies of seventeenth-century England, which demonstrate certain parallels such as increased urbanization, shifts in land use and tenure, and rises in literacy. Astren thereby explained the form of Jewish sectarianism based on participation in intellectual communities of the ʿAbbasid metropole.

Judith Lerner (Institute for the Study of the Ancient World) brought an art historical perspective to the discussion with a paper entitled "From Bactrian to Arabic: Seals and Sealing Practices Observed in the Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Documents from Bactria." Starting with the late Sasanian period, she analyzed the seals on documents from the Iranian East, examining evidence from Sogdiana, Balkh, Gorgon, and Marw. Despite the introduction of Arabic in the Umayyad period, she indicates a few markers of continuity, such as references to the same family name or toponyms in the pre-Islamic and early Islamic documents or the use of the same Sasanian-era seal even on a document dated to 721/2. Lerner also elaborated on several examples of how the documents and their seals can demonstrate changes in the cultural norms of the East as, for example, in the use of single documents as opposed to the double documents used in Sasanian practice. In one example, she addressed the relationship between Sasanian coins and the stars on early Islamic seals, arguing for changes in the style that might indicate different artistic models. Instead of relying solely on east Iranian models to explain the form of these seals, Lerner suggested that we recognize the varieties of cultural practices in Umayyad-era Iran, born of both cultural interactions in Central Asia and lasting inheritances from the region's Hellenistic past.

Alison Vacca (University of Tennessee, Knoxville) concluded the first day of the symposium with a paper on "Language, Power, and Storytelling: Arabic in Caliphal Armenia." She opened with a challenge facing the study of Arabic in Umayyad and ʿAbbasid-era Armenia, namely the lack of direct evidence for multilingualism in written sources. All of the material extant today—e.g., inscriptions, jewelry, glasswork—dates to a later period or can be traced to Arabs in Armenia. We therefore have no proof that Armenians employed Arabic, though common sense suggests that they did. In response to this challenge, Vacca offered the eighth-century history of Łewond as a demonstration that Armenian authors were familiar with stories circulating in Arabic in the early ʿAbbasid period. First, Łewond's account of the Islamic conquest of Duin in the 640s relies on topoi commonly found in Arabic *futūḥ* collections. Second, the inconsistencies in Łewond's account of the Battle of Bagrewand in 775 can only be explained through recourse to Ibn Aʿtham's explanation of the battle. Vacca

argued that these examples demonstrate Armenian familiarity with Arabic, whether attributed to Łewond or to his underlying sources. These examples do not suggest that Armenians were reading Arabic, but rather that they were part of the same narrative circles in which stories about the conquests circulated in the eighth century.

The second day of the symposium opened with informal conversations led by three graduate student participants. The participants each brought with them a brief description of their project and/or a research problem that they were working on. They opened their discussions in small groups by introducing their projects before fielding questions or open conversations. After a half hour discussion, the graduate student participants then changed tables, allowing them each three separate conversations in small groups. Kader Smail (University of Maryland) introduced the *Epistle* of the caliph al-Mahdī to the people of Mecca, a document that chronicles the history of the city, the claims of the Quraysh, and the requests and recommendations of the caliph regarding, for example, how people should act in relation to the Kaʿba. This document, particularly when read in light of inscriptions, suggests that Mecca enjoyed rising prominence in the early ʿAbbasid period, perhaps related to the construction of orthodoxy in light of the nearby ʿAlid revolts. Pamela Klasová (Georgetown University) presented a snippet of her dissertation on the Umayyad governor al-Ḥajjāj, focusing on the relationship between language and power. Noting the significance of oratory as a key tool of empire and a vehicle of ideology, she analyzed the speeches of al-Ḥajjāj to argue that these were transmitted orally in a far more stable format than the surrounding narrative. Even in cases where certain words were changed, the rhythm is maintained. Klasová's work integrates studies on orality and literacy, Arabic poetry, and Qurʾānic Studies to place oratory at the heart of the Umayyad state apparatus. Abby Kulisz (Indiana University) opened a discussion on the problem of translating the Arabic word *dīn* as "religion." She indicated that the association of religion as a personal belief is a very modern concept, which might not translate correctly in a medieval setting. *Dīn* may alternatively suggest a way of life or a social concept, rather than a personal ideology. This segued into a broader discussion about the meaning of *dīn* and the lack of the plural form *adyān* in the Qurʾān.

Aaron Butts (Catholic University of America) started off the final panel of the symposium with a presentation, "Intersections between Arabic and Aramaic: The Case of Syriac Christians." He redressed the prevailing accounts about the shift from Aramaic to Arabic, focusing on the continued knowledge and use of both languages to argue for diglossic communities in the early Islamic period. Despite the fact that some of the more famous works, such as those of Abū Qurrā, exist today only in Arabic, we know that many also circulated in Syriac, as well, whether in translation, abridgements, or adaptations. Butts also indicated that the imagined transfer from Aramaic to Arabic needs to be complicated to allow for multiple registers and dialects of both languages. Syriac-speaking communities continued to speak in Syriac after the conquests, though their language became increasingly distant from written Syriac.

Similarly, Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq may have written in Arabic, but this was a literary language quite removed from the Arabic that he spoke. As such, the relationship between Aramaic and Arabic emerges as a complicated conversation, rather than a unidirectional progression of language change.

Marie Legendre (University of Edinburgh) continued with a discussion entitled "State Representation vs. Practical Use: The Administrative Languages of the Umayyads." She argued that the traditional narratives of language change cannot make sense of documentary evidence from Egypt. So, for example, she pointed to the dramatic drop in Greek documents in the period between 700 and 750. This fits neatly with the traditional models ascribing Arabization to the Marwānids. However, she also demonstrated that the documentary evidence in Arabic increased at a lower rate than we might expect: while Greek documents before 700 numbered to 11,989 and dropped to 4,298 in the period between 700 and 750, Arabic documents from the same periods increased only from 47 to 315. Far more remarkably, the number of Coptic documents remained steady, with 4,196 Coptic documents before 700, compared to 4,386 between 700 and 750. Legendre reiterated that Greek, the administrative language of Byzantine Egypt, was continuously used in the Umayyad period and thus confirms that administration was deliberately multilingual. The use of Coptic, however, changed in the early Islamic period, as the fiscal documents were never in Coptic in the Byzantine period; this was a Marwānid innovation, certainly explained by the role of monks in the payment of taxes. Legendre argued that by *naql al-dīwān*, the transfer of the registries, we should understand the reassessment of the fisc and a change of personnel. As such, the Marwānid reform was not linguistic so much as administrative reorganizing.

In the final presentation, "Towards an Arabic Cosmopolis: Culture and Power in Early Islam," Antoine Borrut (University of Maryland) presented the two main narratives that have dominated the discussions of language change in the early Islamic world, Arabization and the translation movement. He argued that we should keep multilingualism as the sounding board for these discussions. He offered the study of cosmopolitanism as a way to complicate the traditional narrative, focusing on the "politics of difference" (cf: Lavan, Payne, and Weisweiler) and the relationship between language, culture, and power (cf: Pollock). Stemming from this, he asked whether we might compare Arabic to Latin, a local vernacular that spread with the state, or perhaps more aptly, to Sanskrit as a transregional vernacular. The models developed to discuss South Asian cosmopolitanism and language offer a number of potential avenues of study for the state of Arabic and, particularly, the translation movement. Here, Borrut turned to the work of Ronit Ricci to suggest that literary networks promulgated the memory of a communal past. The translation of texts went hand-in-hand with conversion and cultural integration. Taking the documentary evidence from Qubbat al-Khazna in the Great Mosque of Damascus, and particularly the number and nature of Greek texts, Borrut argued for a process of subordination in early Islamic Syria, where social difference was not elided, but rather organized. At the

same time, he stressed that such models cannot be cast as immutable or universal, pointing to other models, particularly one of assimilation in al-Andalus. Cosmopolitan policies generated cultural, social, and political tensions that can shed a fresh light on the rise of an Arabic cosmopolis and on the fragmentation of the Caliphate that paved the way to an "Islamic commonwealth."

The ten presentations and three graduate student conversations brought together a number of different themes about the social history of language in the early Islamic world. The papers spanned a remarkably large geographical area to include both the Iranian oikoumene and the Mediterranean. They also brought a number of different disciplinary approaches—notably, history, art history, linguistics, and religious studies—into conversation. This disciplinary diversity fostered the discussion of a wide array of sources across many genres, providing a glimpse at the remarkable varieties of spoken languages (in their many incarnations) in the Near East. The symposium gravitated towards a number of different themes, among which would be the role of the "official" language under the Umayyads or in the pre-Islamic period under the Byzantines or Sasanians. Many of the talks sought to escape the shadow of ʿAbd al-Malik's reforms in order to envision language change as a more organic, complicated process. On the one hand, the participants discussed the role of empire and the relationship between prestige languages and power; on the other, they also signaled a larger conversation about administrative flexibility and the use of languages outside of the political setting. The theme of intersections within a polyglot culture recurred as the participants repeatedly argued for multilingual engagements across religious lines. Further, the relationship between different languages of the Near East must be complicated by the varieties of any given language. We cannot understand Classical Arabic, Syriac, or Middle Persian to be static, but rather we should recognize that the multiplicity of languages of the Near East must embrace localized variations and differing registers within any given language.

The papers will be published through Brepols as part of the Marco Symposium Series. A number of other scholars have joined the team, including Arianna D'Ottone (Università degli Studi La Sapienza di Roma) on Latin and Arabic; Rob Haug (University of Cincinnati) on the trilingual coins minted in Khurāsān; and Marijn van Putten (Leiden University) on Berber and Arabic.