

Robert Schick, *The Christian Communities of Palestine from Byzantine to Islamic Rule: A Historical and Archaeological Study* (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 2), Princeton, NJ: The Darwin Press, 1995. xviii + 583 pp. + 9 maps + 29 plates; ISBN 0-87850-081-2.

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[1] This study is a revision and expansion of the author's 1987 University of Chicago Ph.D. dissertation, presented under the title: *The Fate of the Christians in Palestine during the Byzantine-Umayyad Transition, A.D. 600–750*. The author (b. 1957) participated in excavations in Jordan.

[2] Unlike its present and original titles lead one to expect, the book furnishes no integral and integrated (socio-economic, political, or theological) history of late antique and early medieval Palestine Christianity. Instead, it amasses and assesses the extant historical and archaeological evidence for such a history. The volume focuses, geographically, on Byzantine Palestine and Transjordan, and, chronologically, on the period between Phocas' overthrow of the Byzantine Emperor in 602 C.E. and the termination of the civil war in 198/813, that followed the death of the 'Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid in 193/809.

[3] The study is divided into two parts, the first presenting a chronological narrative of the period (Chs. I–V) with subsequent topical studies on churches, conversion to Islam, Muslim policies towards Christians, and iconoclasm (Chs. VI–IX) (pp. 1–224), and the second comprising a large, alphabetically arranged *Corpus of Sites* collecting literary and archaeological data and bibliographic information for Christian and Muslim presence at every known site in the area, whether a city, town, village, or isolated structure (pp. 225–484). At the end, we find a comprehensive Bibliography (pp. 485–548), a (defective) General Index (pp. 549–83), and, finally, nine rather sketchy maps, and 29 (color) plates. Unnecessarily, the lists of maps and of tables are printed twice. It would have been better for Schick to have integrated maps and plates into the text.

[4] The historical section opens with a sketch of the eve of the Sasanian invasion, which was relatively stable (Ch. I). The Sasanian occupation of 614–28 was the first major blow to the Christian population (Ch. II). The brief period of Byzantine restoration under Emperor Heraclius of 628 to the mid-630s was not long

enough to have a decisive beneficial impact. The ecclesiastical hierarchy was disrupted by Heraclius' doctrine of Monothelism (Ch. III). The effects of the Muslim conquest in the course of the 10s/630s (Ch. IV) seem to have been less detrimental than those of the Sasanian invasion. Throughout the Early Islamic period (20/640–198/813; Ch. V), Christians seem to have experienced security and prosperity. The ecclesiastical hierarchy remained largely intact and monasticism continued to flourish. Ecclesiastical relations with the Byzantine Empire were greatly weakened during these years, although a few Palestine Christians were able to participate in church councils and they even managed to establish some contact with the Carolingians. In this period, the number of churches in use (Ch. VI) declined by peaceful abandonment due to economic change or earthquakes; churches were rarely deliberately destroyed or turned into mosques. Conversion to Islam (Ch. VII) was rare, but would appear to have taken place more extensively under the 'Abbasids, who promoted the principle that all Muslims, including non-Arab converts, were social equals. Anti-Christian policies (Ch. VII) were implemented only slightly. Restrictions on building and repairing churches and a more pronounced subordination of Christians appear to belong to the latter part of the Umayyad period. In a compelling chapter on iconoclasm (Ch. IX), Schick, finally, relativizes generalizations as to deliberate destruction by Muslims. Focussing less on literary data, as previous studies had done, than on actual pictorial evidence (cf. the plates), he argues on account of the precision of removal and repair of church mosaics, that iconoclasm should not be attributed to Islamic opposition to images in art, but to Christians themselves. Perhaps due to the iconoclastic edict of Yazid II in 721, they acted to forestall others from doing it and to deflect criticism by Muslims and Jews. The author's central conclusion is that, contrary to the accounts in the Greek literary sources, the decline in the number of Christian communities after the Islamic conquest (which anyway scarcely affected key centers as Jerusalem and Umm er-Rasas or the monastic communities) was connected less with specific Muslim-Christian relations than with the broader changes resulting from the conquest: "It was the population as a whole that shifted, not only the Christian communities" (p. 223).

[5] The strength of the volume lies certainly not in its rather unexceptional and provisional conclusions, but in the thorough

collation and integrated analysis of the immense amount of historical and archaeological evidence from literary sources and field excavations. The substantial corpus of some 330 sites and the bibliography make the book a useful reference and research tool, if not outdated the list of Asher Ovadiah (*Corpus of the Byzantine Churches in the Holy Land*, Bonn, 1970).

- [6] Methodologically, this study is weakened by the fact that the author has only partially utilized Arabic sources (p. 5) and almost completely neglected Hebrew material ("due to my weak knowledge of Hebrew," as he overtly admits, p. 6). He is only slightly familiar with excavations in Israel, Syria, and Lebanon (which is why the selection of photographs is restricted to sites in Jordan) (p. 7). Moreover, he has been unwilling to incorporate unpublished excavation results, "on the principle that information does not exist until it is published" (p. 7, cf. 230). As a result, for a great many sites in the *Corpus* the conclusion *ad nauseam* is that the history of a Christian presence is unknown. Inconsistently, the author has availed himself of unpublished M.A. and Ph.D. theses (pp. 493f., 519, 521, 524, 528, 540, 542).

- [7] Earlier reviewers have pointed out some other problems. Thus, e.g., Paul M. Cobb justly observed the author's ambiguity in using the notion of "decline" in a quantitative as well as a qualitative sense (*IJMES* 30 [1998], 127f.). Robert Hoyland questioned the postulated flourishing of the Christian population as late as the beginning of the seventh century, referring to Averil Cameron's *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity A.D. 395–600*, London/New York, 1993, Chs. vii–viii. Besides, Hoyland differentiated the question of tax incentives to conversion to Islam (*BSOAS* 61 [1998], 329f.). Serious objections were raised from an archaeological perspective by C.J. Lenzen, concerning defective interpretation and referential selectivity (*BAJOR* 310 [1998], 90–3). Bibliographical omissions were mentioned also in *OCP* 64 [1998], 250–2.

- [8] To this I would add that sometimes Schick seems to overrate the historical reliability of certain literary sources. While aware of "a considerable degree of distortion, bias, and outright fabrication and fantasy in the literary materials" (p. 3), he is ready to incorporate information from pilgrimage accounts like that of Arculf (c. 670) and Bernard (870). Thus, e.g., in respect to Jericho, which was destroyed in an earthquake in 659, Schick concludes from Arculf,

who mentioned just after 659 that the city was uninhabited and that only the house of Rahab the Harlot (see Joshua 6:17,20–5) was left (Arculf: “Its walls are still standing, but it has no roof”): “The House of Rahab continued in use up to at least the early Umayyad period” (p. 323).

- [9] Notwithstanding these shortcomings, Schick has provided an instructive reference book and an indispensable resource for further research. The work is lucidly composed, larded with summaries, carefully defined, plainly and succinctly phrased, is usually prudent in its conclusions, and is easily accessible and manageable. Its typeface, sturdy paper, and solid binding make it extra user-friendly. Author and readership are to be congratulated, therefore.