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“The Year According to the Reckoning of the Believers”: Papyrus Louvre inv. J. David-Weill 20 and the Origins of the *hijrī* Era

<https://doi.org/10.1515/islam-2018-0025>

Abstract: The present paper addresses itself to the enigmatic phrase *snh qaḏā' al-mu'minīn* that appears in a papyrus sheet from early Muslim Egypt. It takes issue with the earlier interpretations of the phrase, arguing that it is indeed a dating formula that is probably to be read as *sanat qaḏā' al-mu'minīn*, and understood as “the year according to the reckoning of the believers”. Based on the testimony of this phrase, it is further argued that the epoch of the Muslim calendar was, in all likelihood, originally meant to count the years from Muḥammad’s foundation of a new community and polity at Medina, a momentous event that the early Muslims conceived of as the dawn of a new age.

Keywords: Arabic papyri; Muslim calendar; jurisdiction of the believers; reckoning of the believers; *hijra*; chronology

On 24 October, 1793, the Convention Nationale of the fledging First French Republic voted to adopt a new calendar. Thenceforth, the Convention decreed, all official documents and correspondence had to be dated from the establishment of the republic on 22 September, 1792, using the formula “l’an de la république française”, thereby consigning, as it seemed at the time, the Gregorian calendar to the dustbin of history. An earlier reckoning system that counted the years from the revolution of 1789 employed the formula “l’an de la liberté”. For the French revolutionaries, the revolution marked a watershed moment in the annals of the human race and was incontestably the most remarkable episode of French history since the Treaty of Verdun established *Francia occidentalis* as an independent

Article note: This paper has benefited much from the insightful comments and criticisms of Arletta Papaconstantinou (University of Reading), Gladys Frantz-Murphy (Regis University), Hossein Sheikh (Georg-August-Universität Göttingen), Sean Anthony (Ohio State University), and Robert Hoyland (Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, New York University), to whom I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude. The responsibility for all errors and (mis)interpretations remains with me alone.

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realm in the wake of the Carolingian Civil War nearly a millennium earlier; it had overthrown tyranny and arbitrary despotism to inaugurate the era of “le règne de la loi”, “liberté”, and “égalité” – ideals ever so extravagantly proclaimed on the coinage of the revolution and other official media. It was, then, only fitting for so conspicuous an achievement to be commemorated by the introduction of a new era that calculated the date from it.¹

The early Muslims were, likewise, no less convinced of the epochal import of their role in world history: they had succeeded in establishing a strictly monotheistic community of believers which defeated the greatest empires of the time and conquered their territories. Never before, as the caliph ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb allegedly declared upon his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, so lowly a people had managed to attain such greatness – a telling sign that God was on their side.² And just like the French revolutionaries, the Muslims, too, set about avowing their most cherished beliefs, the oneness of God and the prophethood of Muḥammad, on such official media as coins and monumental inscriptions.³ They also deemed it appropriate to devise a new calendar that had as its starting point a formative event in the short past of their nascent community. This they did sometime during the reign of the caliph ‘Umar; and for the epoch of their calendar they opted for their prophet’s emigration from Mecca to Medina, or so we are told.

Unlike the French case, however, Arabic documents produced by the early Islamic state never refer to the era used by any specific name, but simply confine themselves to indicating the date by the phrase “the year such-and-such” (*sanat kadhā wa-kadhā*). This is most unfortunate, as the name used for an era could tell us much about what the people who devised it thought both of its significance and of their own historical role and mission. But a recent papyrus find in which each reference to the date is followed by the phrase *snh qaḏā’ al-mu’minīn* may prove to be the odd exception to this rule. In what follows, I shall attempt to proffer a new interpretation for this phrase and discuss its importance for our understanding of the early Muslims’ conception of their era. By way of conclusion, I will then contrast this conception with some eighth-century Christian writers’ perception of the Muslim chronological system, which, I argue, likely lies at the root of their reference to what may be construed as Muḥammad’s leadership of the Muslim conquests.

¹ On the French revolutionary and republican calendars, see SHAW 2011.

² See e. g. al-Ḥākīm al-Nayshābūrī, *Mustadrak* (2002), I: 130.

³ For coinage as a medium of ideological expression in early Islam, consult HEIDEMANN 2010; and now TREADWELL 2017.

Papyrus Louvre inv. J. David-Weill 20



Fig. 1: P. Louvre inv. J. David-Weill 20. © 2007 Musée du Louvre, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Claire Tabbagh / Collections Numériques.

A decade ago, Yūsuf RĀĠĪB published a fragmentary seventh-century CE papyrus from Egypt, P. Louvre inv. J. David-Weill 20, containing a series of debt acknowledgements (Ar. sing., *dhikr ḥaqq*⁴). All of the debt acknowledgements in the legible part of this document bear the perplexing phrase *snh qaḏā' al-mu'minīn*, which occurs invariably after the dating formula.⁵ RĀĠĪB read the phrase as *sanat qaḏā' al-mu'minīn* and understood it to be a designation for the new *hijrī* era introduced into Egypt by its Muslim conquerors, translating it as “l’année de la juridiction des croyants”.⁶ More recently, however, Jelle BRUNING has cast doubt

⁴ I must, however, emphasise that a *dhikr ḥaqq* could generally be an acknowledgement of any kind of legal right or claim.

⁵ *ilā mil' al-ghayl ilā mil' ithnān* [sic] *wa-arba'in* [...] *al-mu'minīn* (lines 2–3); *ilā mil' al-ghayl min sanat ithnayn wa-arba'un* [sic] *sanat qaḏā' (al-mu'minīn)* (lines 5–6); *ilā mil' ithnān* [sic] *wa-arba'un* [sic] (*qaḏā' al-mu'minīn* (line 8); *ilā mil' ithnān* [sic] *wa-arba'un* [sic] *sanat (qaḏā' al-mu'minīn* (lines 10–11); [...] *min sanat ithnān* [sic] *wa-arba'in sanat qaḏā' al-mu'minīn* (line 13).

⁶ RĀĠĪB 2007. He is followed in this interpretation by HOYLAND 1997, 690, who translates it “the year of the dispensation of the believers”; DONNER 2011 (HOYLAND and DONNER had advance

on this interpretation, arguing that the phrase is, in fact, a hitherto unknown “validity clause” that should be read as *sunnat qaḍā’ al-mu’minīn*.⁷

To begin with, BRUNING’s interpretation of the phrase appears to be untenable for a number of reasons. First, documents with a validity clause are usually very elaborate and highly sophisticated in terms of their formal structure, and the clause actually appears in only the most formally elaborate of them,⁸ whereas each receipt note in our papyrus hardly comprises three lines of writing. Second, the validity clause is, almost universally, a peculiarity of contracts, not of debt acknowledgements.⁹ Third, if BRUNING’s proposal is correct, this would be the oldest known Arabic document of any kind bearing such a clause.¹⁰

True, these objections might not *a priori* rule out the possibility of the phrase being an idiosyncratic validity clause, and BRUNING certainly tries to make a case for such a possibility by making recourse to “the fluidity of legal formularies in the period under consideration”.¹¹ Nevertheless, a more disconcerting problem with this reading is that a *sunna* is, semantically speaking, a precedent set by an individual, or individuals, not a particular way of, or procedure for, doing something *per se*. It is, in other words, a *modus operandi*, and thus a construct like *sunnat qaḍā’* would hardly constitute idiomatic usage. As Max BRAVMANN noted in his thoroughgoing study of the term, “the primary meaning of *sunnah*... is: ‘procedure – or: practice – decreed and instituted by a definite person (or, possibly, by a group of persons)’”. This original sense, he explained, later acquired the ancillary meaning of “procedure practiced by a certain community”, but this later sense was still thought to be based on, “the practice established by certain

access to the papyrus); MORELLI 2010, 143, footnote 12, who opts for “anno della giudicatura o giurisdizione dei credenti”; SIJPESTEIJN 2013, 68; and WEBB 2016, 150. DONNER 2002–2003, 48, renders it, rather liberally, the year of “the rule of the believers”, which is followed by TILLIER 2017, 142–143, footnote 486. In a later work, DONNER passingly entertains the idea that the phrase is probably to be understood as the “era of the believers” (DONNER 2010, 177), which is the main contention of the present paper. HOYLAND 2017, 125, footnote 54, on the basis of parallels from late-ancient Christian texts, is inclined towards “administration of the believers”.

⁷ BRUNING 2015.

⁸ See Geoffrey KHAN’s exhaustive analysis of the structure of Muslim legal documents in KHAN 1994.

⁹ I owe both observations to Hossein SHEIKH. The only possible exception to this latter rule that I am aware of is a tenth-century CE *dhikr haqq* from the Sammlung Erzherzog Rainer in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, PER A Ch 3577r, which contains the phrase *daynan thābitan lāziman lahu*. For this papyrus, see THUNG 1996, 12.

¹⁰ KHAN 2008, 888, dates the emergence of such formal features as the validity clause to the ninth century CE, a fact conceded by BRUNING 2015, 371, footnote 83.

¹¹ BRUNING 2015, 358.

individuals”.¹² In either case, the term could only be possessed by an animate substantive: “the act which *someone* performs and introduces into practice... constitutes *sunnatu man maḍā*, ‘the procedure (or ordinance) of the one who has gone’” – a forebear.¹³ In the Qur’ān, the term *sunna* and its plural *sunan* are attested sixteen times, out of which fourteen are in a genitive construction, all with an animate substantive.¹⁴

BRUNING, who seems to be well aware of this difficulty, produces a verse in which an unnamed panegyrist praises al-Nu‘mān ibn Bashīr al-Anṣārī’s justice by stating that *qaḍā’uhu sunnatun wa-qawluhu mathalun*, “his ruling is a precedent and his saying a dictum”.¹⁵ Intriguing as this juxtaposition of the two terms *sunna* and *qaḍā’* may be, it hardly constitutes evidence for the actual use of *sunna* in a genitive construction with an inanimate substantive. In the panegyrist’s estimation, al-Nu‘mān’s legal rulings *set* normative precedents; put differently, his *qaḍā’* is itself a *sunna*. There is no talk of *sunnat qaḍā’ al-nu‘mān ibn bashīr*, only of *qaḍā’ al-nu‘mān*, which is the same as *sunnat al-nu‘mān (qaḍā’uhu = sunna)* – the relation between the two terms is one of equation. To paraphrase, a person’s deeds and actions may set a *sunna*, but, *pace* BRUNING, those actions cannot *have* a *sunna* of their own – i. e. the *sunna* belongs to the person, not to the action. Hence, a form like *sunnat fi’l fulān* would be meaningless, whilst the *fi’l* itself could become a *sunna*.

The same holds true for the other example he adduces,¹⁶ which comes from an epistle ascribed to the second caliph, ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, and addressed to his governor of Basra, Abū Mūsā al-Ash‘arī, wherein the activity of pronouncing judgement (*qaḍā’*) is said to be, “a binding obligation and an established precedent” (*fa-inna l-qaḍā’ fariḍatun muḥkamatum wa-sunnatun muttaba‘atun*).¹⁷ Again, the relationship between the two terms *qaḍā’* and *sunna* is one of equivalence, not possession; neither of the two terms modifies the other. BRUNING is certainly correct in asserting that *qaḍā’* can constitute a normative precedent, but “constituting” a normative precedent is not quite the same thing as “having”

12 BRAVMANN 2009, 164.

13 Ibid., 160 (emphasis mine).

14 KASSIS 1983, s. v. “Sunnah”. I mostly rely on Qur’anic examples herein, for the Quran is the only Arabic book which could, with a fair degree of certitude, be said to date from about the same time-period as this papyrus. For the *status quaestionis* on the date of the Quran’s codification, consult SINAI 2014.

15 al-Bakrī, *Simṭ* (n.d.), I, 397; cited in BRUNING 2015, 372.

16 BRUNING 2015, 371.

17 ḤAMĪD ALLĀH 1987, 428. The letter is very well-attested; for its attestations, consult *ibid.*, 425–436.

one, as he appears to envisage it.¹⁸ And, in the case of our phrase, his proposed reading would require *qaḍā'* to possess a precedent of its own, whilst the syntactic relationship between the two terms simply cannot be possessive – although for purely semantic reasons. It is also telling that his proposed translation for the phrase *snh qaḍā' al-mu'minīn*, “in accordance with the normative (legal) procedure of the believers”, brushes aside this semantic problem by transforming a sequence of two genitive constructions into a single construction modified by an adjective.

Yet another difficulty with this interpretation is that the phrase is, in one instance, shortened to *qaḍā' al-mu'minīn: 'alayhi [...] ilā mil' ithnān [sic] wa-arba'ūn [sic] qaḍā' al-mu'minīn* (lines 7–8). To read the term *qaḍā'*, a verbal substantive (*maṣdar*), in the accusative, as BRUNING proposes, means that it is to be considered an adverb, but an adverbial verbal substantive always modifies a verb (of usually the same root, but occasionally also of a different one), whereas this sentence is nominal.¹⁹ We seem, therefore, to be left with no option but to read the phrase as *sanat qaḍā' al-mu'minīn*, which ought to be construed as a cognomen for the newly devised *hijrī* era, opposed to the dating formula, in which case *ilā mil' ithnān wa-arba'ūn qaḍā' al-mu'minīn* would exhibit no syntactic problems and would read “until the flooding of [the year] 42 of the *qaḍā'* of the believers”.

Be that as it may, RĀĠIB's understanding of the phrase is not without problems of its own, either. For one thing, as BRUNING and Mathieu TILLIER observe, the tri-literal radical *q-ḍ-y* and its derivatives did not denote judicial activity in the earliest period.²⁰ As a matter of fact, in the Qur'ān, “the verb *qaḍā*, from which the term *kāḍī* was to be derived, refers... not to the judgment of a judge but to a sovereign ordinance, either of Allah or of the Prophet”, as Joseph SCHACHT explicates.²¹ For another thing, it would be odd at best for a people to designate their era by reference to its use for judicial purposes, let alone for “la fonction de

18 “The characterization of *qaḍā'* as *having or constituting* a normative precedent... finds confirmation in historical sources”; BRUNING 2015, 371 (emphasis mine). He also refers the reader to CRONE and HINDS 1986, but I failed to find any examples of derivatives of the root *q-ḍ-y* juxtaposed with *sunna* there.

19 FISCHER 2002, 196.

20 BRUNING 2015, 366–367; TILLIER 2017, 142–143, footnote 486; cf. also DONNER 2011, 86; TILLIER 2009, 79–83; and *pace* DONNER 2012, xxix, who, backtracking on his earlier position, finds in this phraseology evidence that “the establishment of an overarching system of justice was in fact a key goal of the new Believers' regime”.

21 SCHACHT 1982, 10.

cadi”, as RĀĠĪB contends.²² One would rather expect the new era to be branded by terminology that would tie it in with either its starting point, as in the formula *sanat kadhā wa-kadhā li-l-hijra*, “the year such-and-such of the *hijra*”, used in, *inter alia*, the entries of chronicles from later centuries, or – especially in a multicultural environment as post-conquest Egypt – the people who primarily used it. Examples of this latter type, in which non-Muslims, and occasionally Muslims themselves, refer to the Muslim era by names that, one way or the other, evoke the newcomers, are known in the multitudes and have been collected by Yiannis MEIMARIS, Klaas WORP, Roger BAGNALL, Robert HOYLAND, and Sebastian BROCK, as well as RĀĠĪB himself. One of the earliest specimens of this usage occurs in the account of the synod of 676 CE, convened by George I, catholicos of the Church of the East, where the date is mentioned as “the year 57 of the domination of the *ṭayyāyē*”²³ (*šnt ḥmšyn wšb’ lšwltn’ dtyy’*).²⁴

More importantly, a number of bilingual Greek-Arabic papyri – which are all *entagia* from Nessana, in the south-western Negev, near the Egyptian border – use the *hijrī* era in both their Greek and Arabic parts, employing like characterisation. The earliest of such papyri, P. Nessana 60, is dated to the year 54 AH. The Arabic part of this *entagion* simply closes by declaring that the document has been, “written by Abū Sa’id in Dhū al-Qa’da of the year 54” (*kataba abū sa’id fī dhī al-qa’da min sanat arba’ wa-khamsīn*), whereas the dating formula in the Greek part is recorded as “written in the month of November of the third indiction, year 54 according to the Arabs (*kat’ Arabas etous ND*), by the hand of Alexander, son of Ammonius”.²⁵ There are overall six documents of this kind from the years 54–57 AH in the Nessana corpus.²⁶

²² RĀĠĪB 2007, 192.

²³ This term is applied by Syrophone writers to the nomadic peoples who inhabited the northern fringes of the Arabian desert. It is usually translated as “Arabs” by modern writers, but the wisdom of rendering an ancient exonym by a gentilic with endonymic connotations to the contemporary ear has lately been ably questioned by WEBB 2016. I have, accordingly, left the term untranslated.

²⁴ CHABOT 1902, 216 (text), 482 (translation); cf. also *šnt ḥmšyn wtš’ lšwltn’ dtyy’* in *ibid.*, 227 (text), 490 (translation). On George and this synod, see HOYLAND 1997, 192–194. HOYLAND adduces more examples in *ibid.*, 193, footnote 69.

²⁵ KRAEMER 1958, 180–181.

²⁶ For which see *ibid.*, 180–195; and also MEIMARIS 1984. More examples of the use of the *hijrī* era in non-Arabic and/or non-Muslim documents are to be found in WORP 1985; BAGNALL and WORP 2004, 300, footnote 1; and BROCK 2005. For the earliest dated *Arabic* documents, see RAGHEB (RĀĠĪB) 2013. A new, intriguing example, referring to the *hijrī* era as *al-hijra al-ḥanifiyya*, has been brought to light by LEVY-RUBIN 2003, 202.

But the earliest known use of the Muslim *hijrī* era in non-Arabic documents is a monumental Greek inscription of the Umayyad caliph Mu‘āwīya ibn Abī Sufyān, commemorating the renovation of the Roman thermal complex of Hammat Gader in modern Syria, remarkably also from the year 42 AH. The undertaking is dated using three different chronological systems, the Byzantine indiction, the era of the colony of Gadara (which has as its epoch the Roman colonisation of the region in 64 BCE²⁷), and the *hijrī* era: “in the sixth year of the indiction, in the year 726 of the colony, the year 42 according to the Arabs” (*indiktiōnos S etous tēs kolōnias SKPs kata Arabas etous MB*).²⁸ As may be seen, the necessity of applying clear-cut nomenclature for the eras used becomes amply clear for this tri-epochal document, and its author employs terminology that relates the *hijrī* era to the people who used it – to wit, the “Arabs”.

Hammat Gader is situated at the triple point of the modern states of Israel, Jordan, and Syria, near the Golan heights, while the provenance of P. Louvre inv. J. David-Weill 20 is Egypt, and both the bath inscription and the papyrus date from the year 42 AH. This proximity in space and time of the two formulae, as well as their similarity in texture, could hardly have been entirely fortuitous. I should, therefore, like to submit that the phrase *sanat qaḏā’ al-mu’minīn* is an Arabic parallel to the Greek *kat’ Arabas etous* and similar expressions used for qualifying eras in various near-eastern languages at the time – though without intending to postulate any direct conversation between the singular *sanat qaḏā’ al-mu’minīn* and any particular phrase in another language.

The root *q-ḏ-y* in Arabic of the seventh century has a plurality of significations, but, according to LANE’s *Lexicon*, it primarily denotes the completion or conclusion of something.²⁹ The root in this sense is frequently encountered in the Qur’ān: “when you have completed your rites, remember God” (*fa-idhā qaḏaytum manāsikakum fa-dhkurū allāh*; Q 2:200); “when it [scil., the recitation] was finished, they returned to their people, warning” (*fa-lammā quḏiya wallaw ilā qawmihim mundhirīn*; Q 46:29); or, “when the prayer is concluded, scatter throughout the earth” (*fa-idhā quḏiyat al-ṣalāt fa-ntashirū fī al-arḏ*; Q 62:10). The root is also applied to denote the fulfilment/passage of a period of time, as in “when Moses fulfilled the term [agreed with his father-in-law]” (*fa-lammā qaḏā mūsā al-ajal*; Q 28:29); or, “so that a specified term would be completed” (*li-yuqḏā ajalun musamman*; Q 6:60).³⁰ A particularly interesting usage of the root occurs in

²⁷ MEIMARIS 1992, 79–80.

²⁸ HIRSCHFELD and SOLAR 1981, 203–204.

²⁹ LANE 1968, s. v. “q-ḏ-y”.

³⁰ BRUNING 2015, 367, mistakenly thinks that here a “financial context” is intended, but this could hardly be the case, as the Quran is speaking about sleeping and waking as a metaphor for

Q 69:27, where the *nomen agentis* form *qāḍī* is used, in the feminine, in the sense of “endpoint” (of a period of time): “only if it [scil., death] was the endpoint!” (*yā laytahā kānat al-qāḍiya*).³¹

Similar applications of the term could be found in some Arabic papyri of later periods.³² For instance, in a lease contract from the year 205 AH, the issuer declares that he has no right to send anybody to the addressee, “until your year expires, and its expiry is at the end of [the month of] Bashans” (*hattā tanqāḍī sanatuka wa-inqīḍā’uhā fī insilākh bashans*).³³ In a rental contract from the year 298 AH, the owner of a house rents it to the tenant for the duration of twelve consecutive months, beginning with the month of Tūt and “with whose conclusion at the end of [the month of] Misrā” (*wa-inqīḍā’uhunna salkh misrā*).³⁴

In the light of this usage, it is likely that, in mid-seventh-century Egypt, the root had acquired a secondary acceptation in the sense of “passage”, especially in association with time measurement. If this conjecture is tenable, the phrase *sanat qaḍā’ al-mu’minīn* would have been a reference to the system the “believers”³⁵ used for keeping track of the passage of time, which could then be conveniently translated as “the year according to the reckoning of the believers”. Fred DONNER, too, seems to have this possibility in mind where he suggests, albeit half-heartedly, that the phrase might mean the “era of the believers”.³⁶

death and resurrection. The verse continues by asserting, “then your return shall be unto Him” (*thumma ilayhi marja’ukum*).

31 See also the comprehensive survey of the root’s semantic field in TILLIER 2009, 79–83. TILLIER remarks that, “le *qaḍā’* est donc toujours un acte définitif, qui marque la fin d’un état, le passage d’une situation à une autre... Le *qāḍī* est l’agent de ce processus, le ‘passeur’ par qui la transition est achevée” (ibid., 81).

32 I have derived these examples by searching the Arabic Papyrology Database of the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München. Securely datable attestations of the root *q-ḍ-y* in the first Islamic century are very rare, partly due to the small number of edited documents from the first century, and most of those from the second century apply the root and its derivatives in the sense of “to judge”, and are thus of no relevance to this investigation.

33 RĀĠIB 1982, 298.

34 VANTHIEGHEM 2013, 191.

35 “Believer” is the primary appellative by which Muḥammad’s followers identified themselves in the first century of Islam. On the preponderance of this term in said period, see DONNER 2002–2003; and LINDSTEDT (in press).

36 DONNER 2010, 177.

Flies in the ointment

There are two other papyri that contain what seem to be variants of the phrase. The dating formula in papyrus Louvre inv. E 7106, a debt acknowledgement, edited by BRUNING, reads: *ilā mil' al-ghayl min sanat arba' wa-arba'in snh*. The term *snh* could not, of course, be read as *sana* here. BRUNING, therefore, suggests that it has to be read as *sunnatan*, which must be shorthand for the unabbreviated form *sunnat qaḏā' al-mu'minīn* – as he reads it.³⁷ This would have been a tempting interpretation had the reading *sunnat qaḏā' al-mu'minīn* itself not been a problematic one. Alternatively, one might argue that the term is indeed to be read as *sunnatan*, but is an independent validity formula in itself, rather than a shorthand form. But this, too, would be a farfetched argument, for the two formulae simply share too many elements to allow for one to be independent of the other. The only other viable explanation seems to be treating the sentence as incomplete: it might be that the scribe indeed wanted to write a full dating formula, similar to the one in papyrus P. Louvre inv. J. David-Weill 20, but, towards the end of the papyrus sheet, realised that writing the whole formula would leave the witness with a very small space to sign his name, and therefore left off the rest of it; the first three lines of the papyrus fragment are indeed written in a more spacious hand, with a relative condensation observable in the last two lines.³⁸

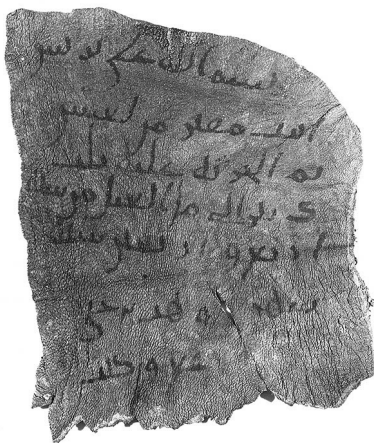


Fig. 2: P. Louvre inv. E 7106. © Musée du Louvre / Documentation du Département des Arts de l'Islam.

³⁷ BRUNING 2015, 365.

³⁸ Yet, there has been an attempt, at least to my eyes, to fill the whole of line 5 with the words *arba' wa-arba'in snh*. Perhaps it was at this point that the scribe decided to dispense with the rest of the dating formula, but I do not wish to press this argument too much.

RĀĠĪB’s second fragment, P. Vindob. A 1119, is more tricky, however. It reads thus in lines 6–7: *danānīr qaḏā’ al-mu’minīn ilā mil’ sab’ wa-[khamsīn]*, which could in no way be read as part of a dating formula.³⁹ RĀĠĪB translates the first part of the phrase as “dinars de la juridiction des croyants”, without offering a comment, and thereby appears to construe it as a reference to some form of currency denomination.⁴⁰ BRUNING, for his own part, states that this is just another way of abbreviating the phrase *snh qaḏā’ al-mu’minīn* (which he reads as *sunnat qaḏā’ al-mu’minīn*), inasmuch as the word *snh* is left out of the phrase in line 2 of P. Louvre inv. J. David-Weill 20 as well.⁴¹ There is no doubt that this must be the case, but, because of a lacuna in the first part of the sentence, it is impossible to proffer either a syntactical or a semantic-pragmatic analysis of the phrase, as was done for the other two sheets, and, consequently, it is impossible to decide whether in this instance it should be read as *sana* or *sunna*. It must, however, be conceded that, insofar as the text is legible, BRUNING’s reading of it is syntactically unproblematic, even if semantically and formally perplexing.

As it seems, the variegated mutations of the phrase are too unwieldy to allow any one interpretation to account for them all at once. One could only hope that the emergence of further attestations of the formula in unedited fragments in the future will help to shed more light on this conundrum.⁴²

Afterword: The origins of Islamic chronology

Recently, Robert KERR has argued that the fact that none of the earliest documents that employ the Muslim era, whether produced by Muslims themselves or otherwise, refers to it as the era of the *hijra* cannot be fortuitous and is in need of some explanation. Basing himself on the evidence of P. Louvre inv. J. David-Weill 20, amongst other things, KERR contends that the epoch of the Muslim calendar was not originally the *hijra*, and that Muḥammad – if he did exist at all – did not emigrate from Mecca to Medina; it was, presumably, in the process of the

³⁹ The phrase is likely attested twice in the fragment. Line 4 begins with [...] *minīn ilā mil’ sab’ wa-khamsīn*. The initial four letters are evidently the final part of the word *mu’minīn*, as suggested by BRUNING 2015, 369, footnote 81, and *pace* RĀĠĪB 2007, 202, who takes the letters to be *mtyn*, and then translates them as “deux cent”!

⁴⁰ RĀĠĪB 2007, 202–204.

⁴¹ BRUNING 2015, 369–370.

⁴² Shortly before submitting the final draft of this paper for production, Mathieu TILLIER informed me that he and Naïm VANTHIEGHEM have discovered new attestations of the phrase *snh qaḏā’ al-mu’minīn* in two papyrus fragments, which they are currently preparing for publication.

Muslims' generation of a foundation myth, in the course of the following centuries, that the epoch of the Muslim calendar came to be identified as the *hijra* of the Islamic prophet from Mecca to Medina.⁴³

It is, however, possible to argue that the non-Muslim documents that refer to the Muslim era as the “era of the Arabs/*ṭayyāyē*/etc” do so simply because their authors were only concerned with the fact that the era was employed by the Muslim conquerors, rather than its origin and epoch. Yet, if the interpretation of the phrase *snh qaḏā' al-mu'minīn* proposed above is correct, the same obviously cannot be said of our papyrus sheet: its use of the Islamic *basmala* at the beginning of each *dhikr ḥaqq* means that it has been produced by (or, at least, for) Muslims.⁴⁴ This observation might be taken to substantiate KERR's conclusion; but is this the only possible interpretation of the evidence? To conclude from an absence of any reference to a *hijrī* era in the first century of Islam that no *hijra* ever occurred no doubt stretches the evidence, and indeed KERR engages in some sleight of hand to justify this contention.⁴⁵ More fanciful – indeed phantasmagorical – is his further contention, made without producing the slightest shred of evidence, that the original epoch of the Muslim calendar was the “holy war” that Heraclius initiated against the Sasanians in allegedly 622 CE.⁴⁶

So, if it was neither Muḥammad's *hijra* nor had it anything to do with Heraclius, what was the original epoch of the Muslim calendar? A brief, anonymous Syriac list of the Muslim rulers, probably composed at the start of the reign of the Umayyad caliph al-Walīd I (86 AH/705 CE) and hence known as the *Chronicon ad annum 705*, begins thusly:

next, a tract reporting the kingdom of the *ṭayyāyē*, how many kings there were among them, and how much land after his predecessor each held before his death.

In the year 932 of Alexander, the son of Philip the Macedonian, Muḥammad entered the land. He reigned seven years. After him, Abū Bakr reigned two years. After him, 'Umar reigned twelve years. After him, 'Uthmān reigned twelve years.⁴⁷

⁴³ KERR 2014a and 2014b.

⁴⁴ Or, if KERR insists, non-Trinitarian Christians who later came to call themselves “Muslim”. Documents produced by non-Muslims from later centuries occasionally employ the *basmala*, but the earliest of them that I know of (check ALMBLADH 2010, 48, 56) is from the ninth century CE, and it is unlikely that at such an early date non-Muslims made use of Islamic formulae and phraseology.

⁴⁵ KERR 2014a. For instance, he claims that the root *h-g-r* is not attested in the sense of “to emigrate” in any Semitic language (ibid., 47), while this is, of course, not the case (cf. AL-JALLAD 2016, 97, for its attestation).

⁴⁶ KERR 2014a, 50–51. Why this particular year has been singled out as the start date of Heraclius's campaign is a mystery whose answer eludes me.

⁴⁷ Translation adapted from PENN 2015, 159.

Some seventy years later, at the start of the reign of the Abbasid caliph al-Mahdī (158 AH/775 CE) another anonymous Syriac chronicler echoed a similar understanding of the Medinan phase of Muḥammad’s career, writing:

in 930 of Alexander, Heraclius and the Romans entered Constantinople, and Muḥammad and the *ṭayyāyē* went forth from the south and entered the land and subdued it.

Then the years of the Muslims (*mhaggrāyē*) and the time when they entered Syria and took power, from the year 933 of Alexander, each of them by name, are as follows: Muḥammad, 10 years; Abū Bakr, one year; ‘Umar, 12 years; ‘Uthmān, 12 years.⁴⁸

Both lists continue enumerating the Muslim caliphs and the length of each one’s reign up to the time of writing. Previous scholars have expressed bewilderment at the dates given by these two chronicles for the appearance of Muḥammad,⁴⁹ since the traditional date given for his *hijra* falls in AG 933. But the reason behind this is probably more innocuous and mundane than hitherto imagined: the authors of both chronicles seem to have been unaware of the fact that a year in the lunar Muslim calendar is approximately eleven days shorter than a year in the solar Alexandrian calendar, and simply subtracted the time (in lunar years) elapsed since Muḥammad’s *hijra* from the Alexandrian date to arrive at the Alexandrian equivalent for the date of the *hijra*. The author of the second chronicle (known as the *Chronicon ad annum 775*), for instance, was writing at the time of the accession of al-Mahdī in 158 AH/AG 1087 – that is, 157 years after Muḥammad’s *hijra* in 1 AH. By subtracting 157 from 1087 we arrive at 930, which is the Alexandrian date given by the author for Muḥammad’s *hijra*. Both authors, then, are speaking of the beginning of Muḥammad’s Medinan career – although the *Chronicon ad annum 775* hastens to produce a second report which gives the correct date for the event.⁵⁰

Not only our two anonymous chroniclers, as with many other non-Muslim authors, consider the Islamic era to start with the “coming of the Muslims”, and thereby telescoping the events, they also treat Muḥammad as just one temporal ruler in the infinite succession of kings and potentates that had ruled them since time immemorial. Likewise, the starting point of the Muslim era indicates the beginning of Muḥammad’s career as a “king” – when he “entered the land” and “subdued it” – to them, precisely in the same manner in which the start of a new reign would literally bring about the end of an era and usher in a new one under

⁴⁸ Translation adapted from HOYLAND 1997, 397. The reference to the *ṭayyāyē* has been omitted, apparently mistakenly, in PALMER 1993, 51; see the original Syriac text in BROOKS 1905, 348.

⁴⁹ E. g., HOYLAND 1997, 398–399; SHOEMAKER 2012, 53.

⁵⁰ HOYLAND 1997, 398, plausibly considers the paragraph dating Muḥammad’s appearance to AG 930 to be the work of the final redactor himself.

the Byzantines and Sasanians. In other words, they understood the Muslim era as a regnal era that had stuck after the death of the monarch the years of whose reign it counted, not unlike the era of Seleucus or that of Diocletian.⁵¹ This conception of Muslim chronology is not peculiar to these two texts and could be observed in such non-Muslim compositions as the *Mozarabic Chronicle of 754*, which refers to the starting point of the Muslim era as the date of their “rebellion” and conquest of the Near East,⁵² and the *Chronicle of Zuqnīn*, which speaks of the “subjugation of the Romans by the *ṭayyāyē*” (*šlt... ty’ lyhwn*) and their conquest of Byzantine territories in AG 932.⁵³ It is in fact this conception of the epoch of the *hijrī* calendar as the starting point of both Muḥammad’s “kingship” and the Islamic empire that lies behind what has been construed as their reference to Muḥammad as the leader of the conquests, which Stephen SHOEMAKER has taken to be evidence for Muḥammad’s actual leadership of the Muslims during their conquest of the Near East.⁵⁴

Contemporary non-Muslim observers cannot be faulted for having, as it seems, mistaken the Muslim era for a regnal reckoning system, as reckoning by regnal years was a time-honoured tradition in the late-ancient Near East.⁵⁵ But this apparent mistake could be of some heuristic value for us: if ancient near-eastern practice was so strong-rooted that non-Muslims could only think in terms of it, perhaps it was also strong enough to influence the early Muslims in their selection of an epoch for their chronology. In the light of the near-eastern tradition, it is more than conceivable that, when devising a new era for their calendar, the early Muslims’ intention was to somehow follow established practice and imitate imperial dynasties. The Muslims had, of course, no kings,⁵⁶ and therefore they could not adopt regnal years as a means for reckoning. What they instead had

51 For these eras and their associated calendars and epochs, see BAGNALL and WORP 2004 and MEIMARIS 1992.

52 WOLF 2011, 94. Cf. the relevant entry in the *Continuatio Byzantia-Arabica ad annum 741* (HOYLAND 1997, 615).

53 CHABOT 1933, 149 (text); HARRAK 1999, 141 (translation).

54 SHOEMAKER 2012. For non-Muslim writers, the Muslim era counted the years from the establishment of Muslim rule, an event which, in hindsight, could easily be taken to have been coterminous with the Muslim conquests, while Muḥammad, of course, was the first Muslim “king”. It is easy to see how all these preconceptions could have given rise to the belief that Muḥammad personally initiated the conquests. Some of SHOEMAKER’s evidence, however, is of an entirely different nature and should not be dismissed as arising from misconception.

55 MEIMARIS 1992, 357.

56 It is true that panegyrists sometimes used such designations as “king” (*mulūk*) for the caliphs, but it must be remembered that these never appear in “official” contexts; cf. MARSHAM 2018.

was a puritanical “community of believers”, which had been founded by Muḥammad upon his arrival in Medina in 1 AH; indeed, one of Muḥammad’s very first acts in Medina was to conclude a treaty with the town’s various tribal groups, in which he proudly declared his still rather small band of followers, the “believers” and the “Muslims”, to be “a community (*umma*) to the exclusion of all others”.⁵⁷

The Muslim tradition is itself very much alive to the influence of ancient near-eastern, in general, and Sasanian and Byzantine, in particular, customs on the decision to adopt Muḥammad’s foundation of a new community at Medina as the starting point of their era. In his monumental *al-Āthār al-bāqīya ‘an al-qurūn al-khālīya*, the Muslim polymath Abū al-Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī records several anecdotes concerning how the second caliph, ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, went about doing this, mentioning both a Sasanian-style regnal reckoning and the Alexandrian-Seleucid era as proposed chronological systems that were rejected.⁵⁸ Al-Bīrūnī states that the dates of Muḥammad’s birth, his call to prophecy (*mab‘ath*), and death were also considered for the epoch of the Muslim era, but were rejected on the grounds that the exact date of the first two events was debated (*li-anna fī al-mawlid wa-l-mab‘ath min al-khilāf*), and that “it would be inauspicious to reckon the date from the death of a prophet or king” (*fa-laysa yustaḥsanu l-ta’rikh bi-mawt nabiyyin aw halāk malikin*). The *hijra* was instead adopted, “as it marks the consolidation of the rule of Islam... and that there afterwards followed the conquests of Islam” (*‘alā anna ba‘da l-hijra istaqāma amr al-islām... wa-tawālat lahu ba‘dahā al-futūḥ*).⁵⁹

It is unlikely that the early Muslims had actually considered the dates of Muḥammad’s birth, call, and death as possible candidates for the epoch of their chronology (or, for that matter, had given thought to using the Sasanian and Seleucid calendrical systems), but al-Bīrūnī’s statement illustrates later Muslims’ knowledge that, following ancient custom, their forefathers put the epochal point of their era at the foundation of their new community and state, which just happened to fall on the same time as Muḥammad’s *hijra*. What the early Muslims had in mind was apparently the beginning of their polity, which in their view was the dawn of a new age that witnessed the establishment of God’s rule (*amr allāh*) on earth,⁶⁰ hence the reference to it in our papyrus as “the year per the reckoning

⁵⁷ LECKER 2004, 7, 19.

⁵⁸ Also reported by al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rikh* (1879–1890), I, 1251.

⁵⁹ al-Bīrūnī, *Āthār* (1878), 30.

⁶⁰ For the notion that the early Muslim polity conceived of itself as the instrument of God’s rule on earth, cf. the reference to the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik as “caretaker of God’s government” (*walī amr allāh*) in the panegyric of al-Rā’ī al-Numayrī (d. ca. 90 AH), *Dīwān* (1980), 228 (verse 41), 229 (verse 47); cited by CRONE and HINDS 1986, 8. Another notable and early attestation comes from

of the believers”. Written barely a quarter of a century after the introduction of the new epoch, P. Louvre inv. J. David-Weill 20 shows that what probably mattered the most for the Muslims at the time was having a distinctive chronological system of their own, in keeping with their newly-acquired imperial grandeur and ideological pretensions, rather than emphasising the role Muḥammad had played in the foundation of that empire.⁶¹

This understanding of the original referent of the epoch of the Islamic era neatly dovetails with Patricia CRONE’s observation that Muḥammad’s *hijra* was originally thought of as just one in a series of *hijras* that continued well into the Umayyad period, and it was only in later times that his *hijra* became the *Hijra*, – with a capitalised initial – a specific and formative event in the history of the early Muslim community.⁶² It was a few generations later, probably beginning in the Marwānid period, that Muḥammad’s *hijra* came to be viewed as the starting point of the Muslim calendar. The first reference, albeit very tangential, to the *hijra* as the starting point of Muslim chronology also comes from a brief Syriac chronicle composed upon the death of the Umayyad caliph Yazīd II ibn ‘Abd al-Malik (105 AH/724 CE). This chronicle, which evidently draws on a Muslim source, introduces itself as

a notice of the life of Muḥammad, the messenger (*r[asūl]ā*) of God, after he had entered his city and before he entered it three months, from his first year; and how long each king who subsequently arose over the Muslims (*mhaggrāyē*) lived once they had come to power.⁶³

This chronicle equally treats Muḥammad as a “king”, but appears to associate the beginning of his reign with his emigration to “his city” – Medina, known in Arabic as *madīnat al-nabī*, or the “Prophet’s City”. The three months before he entered Medina is presumably a reference to the fact that he made his *hijra* in the

the treaty of alliance concluded between ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ and Mu‘āwiya ibn Abī Sufyān during the First Civil War (35–41 AH), in which they speak of their plans for, and responsibilities with regard to, “God’s government” (*amr allāh*), discussed in MARSHAM 2012. MARSHAM takes the phrase *amr allāh* to mean “God’s will”, but the context makes “God’s rule/government” a more appealing interpretation. The phrase is also occasionally used with like connotations in the Quran; see COOK 2002, 272; and SHOEMAKER 2012, 222.

61 I must, however, draw attention to a unique, experimental coin issue, presumably belonging to the Umayyad caliph Yazīd ibn Mu‘āwiya (r. 60–64 AH), which is dated using a Sasanian-style regnal era, beginning with the caliph’s reign. It reads *šnt ’ywkw yzytyw*, “year one of Yazīd” (MOCIRI 1982). It seems that the Muslims did eventually briefly experiment with regnal reckoning, but set it aside very quickly (my thanks to Robert HOYLAND for reminding me of this issue).

62 CRONE 1994.

63 PALMER 1993, 49.

third month of the year 1 AH, or three months after the start of Islamic chronology.⁶⁴

The identification of the *hijra* as the epoch of the Islamic era might have occurred as part of what Fred DONNER has termed the Marwānids’ “quranisation” of their politico-administrative vocabulary,⁶⁵ but perhaps it was, at least partly, an unwitting process too: in the mind of the latter-day Muslim, Muḥammad’s *hijra* was a far more significant moment in the narratives of Islamic salvation history than his laying the foundations of a (rudimentary) state. In fact, al-Bīrūnī is the only source to provide us with more-or-less objective speculation on this issue, and most chroniclers couch their accounts of the early Muslims’ adoption of their epoch in highly charged terms that are meant to remind their readers of the significance of this turning point of Islamic history; one such report, for instance, asserts that the *hijra* was chosen because, “it differentiated between right and wrong” (*fa-inna muhājarihi farraqa bayn al-ḥaqq wa-l-bāṭil*).⁶⁶

Before closing, I must dedicate a few words to RĀĠĪB’s ill-founded claim about the continued use of the pre-Islamic lunisolar calendar by the Arabian conquerors up until at least the year 57 AH in his edition of P. Louvre inv. J. David-Weill 20.⁶⁷ This claim, as BRUNING has shown, is based on a skewed understanding of a phrase in the fragment. RĀĠĪB translates the phrase in question (*ilā mil’ al-ghayl ilā mil’ ithnān* [sic] *wa-arba’in*; in line 2) as “jusqu’au plein des bassins *et* la fin de (l’année) quarante-deux”,⁶⁸ thus taking the term *mil’* to have different meanings in each of its two occurrences in the same passage, whilst it has one and the same signification in both instances: the whole passage is a full apposition, whereby the expression *ilā mil’ ithnān wa-arba’in* serves to further qualify *ilā mil’ al-ghayl*.⁶⁹ Philological problems aside, a simple comparison of any two bilingual Arabic-Greek papyri – which are dated using both the Greek indiction and the Muslim calendar – from two different years would reveal the Muslim calendar to have been lunar. For instance, P. Nessana 60 is dated to Dhū al-Qa’da, 54 AH, and November, indiction 3, while P. Nessana 66 is dated to Rabi’ I, 57 AH, and February, indiction 5.⁷⁰ It may be seen that P. Nessana 66 has been written 28 Muslim months after P. Nessana 60. Now, had the Muslim calendar still been a lunisolar one at this stage, P. Nessana 66 would have been composed two solar

⁶⁴ HOYLAND 1997, 396.

⁶⁵ DONNER 2011.

⁶⁶ Khalifa, *Ta’riḫ* (1985), 51; al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’riḫ* (1879–1890), I, 1251.

⁶⁷ RĀĠĪB 2007, 193–194.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 198 (emphasis mine).

⁶⁹ BRUNING 2015, 368–369.

⁷⁰ KRAEMER 1958, 180–181, 194–195.

years and four months after November, indiction 3 – that is, in March, indiction 5.⁷¹ But this is not the case: P. Nessana 66 is dated to February, indiction 5, exactly 28 lunar months (~ two solar years and three months) after November, indiction 3.⁷²

As Robert HOYLAND once remarked, “the scarcity of sources for this period precludes any too profligate an approach for its historians”,⁷³ but we must be careful not to slip to the other extreme by reading too much into our sometimes abstruse and terse sources and taking them as evidence for what they do not really speak to.

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71 Note that in the system used the indiction year probably begins with May, and hence November is the seventh and February the tenth month of the year; BAGNALL and WÖRZ 2004, 28; but cf. MEIMARIS 1992, 32–34 (but in any case March came after November in the year).

72 The movement of the Muslim months against the Christian months in the 50s AH is very clear from the specimens produced in WÖRZ 1985, 109. In a forthcoming article, François DE BLOIS shows how the Muslim calendar was well in place already by 22 AH at the latest; DE BLOIS (in press).

73 HOYLAND 1995, 98.

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