In an age when the relationship between the World of Islam and the West is seen by an alarming number of people in both regions as being one which involves either Crusade or Jihad, it is good to be reminded that the earliest contacts between Christians and Muslims involved Eastern, rather than Western, Christians, both inside and outside the Islamic empire, and that the very sharp contrasts between Christians and Muslims, which were drawn later by Western Christians did not always apply. Military confrontations certainly did occur, but there were also significant contacts and exchanges through diplomacy, trade and culture: Byzantine craftsmen, after all, helped with the decoration of not only the Great Mosque in Damascus but also the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina in the first decade of the eighth century CE, and the earliest mosque in Constantinople, for the use of Muslim traders, was established just a couple of decades later. The multi-dimensional nature of the relationship between Arab Muslims and Byzantine Christians between approximately the years 600 and 1100 CE is made abundantly clear in this edited volume.

The volume is part of the invaluable series published by Ashgate under the title “The Formation of the Classical Islamic World,” whose philosophy is to collect together and make available, in English translation if necessary, some of the leading articles which have been published over the last century or so on different aspects of classical Islam. Forty-eight volumes are planned altogether, under the general editorship of Lawrence Conrad, and this volume, which is number 8 of the series, succeeds admirably in bringing together a considerable amount of material from widely disparate sources in order to illustrate the complexity of Arab–Byzantine Relations. The volume contains fifteen articles, grouped under five main themes. As the editor comments in his Introduction, it begins and ends with war, but there is much else in between. The first theme, War and Diplomacy, includes four articles: the Persian background (Clive Foss, 1975), Julius Wellhausen’s classic article on Arab wars with the Byzantines (1901), H. A. R. Gibb’s also famous article on Arab–Byzantine Relations under the Umayyads (1958), and an article by Hugh Kennedy on Byzantine–Arab Diplomacy (1992). The second theme, Frontiers and Military Organization, contains two articles, one on the seventh century by John Haldon (1995), and another, by Haldon and Kennedy together, on the eighth and ninth centuries (1980); the latter, originally published in Belgrade, is particularly useful to have more widely available. The third theme, Polemics and Images of “the Other,” contains an article by Suliman Bashear on apocalyptic in early Arab sources (1991), an article by John Meyendorff on Byzantine views of Islam (1964), and an article by Ahmad Shboul, on views of the Byzantines in early Arabic literature (1981). Part IV, entitled Exchange,
Influence and Confluence, focuses on the extent to which there were contacts between the two cultures in this period. An article by Oleg Grabar looks at Art (1964), Gustave von Grunebaum investigates Philosophy, Literature and Piety (1964), Lawrence Conrad looks at historical writing (1990), and finally Patricia Crone revisits the question of whether there was any exchange between the two cultures concerning artistic representation, particularly with reference to the suggestion that the Iconoclast Movement in Byzantium might have been influenced by Islamic ideas.

The final part of the book, on Martyrdom, Jihad, Holy War, then links an article by the editor on the early development of the idea of Jihad on the Arab–Byzantine frontier (1992) with a more recent one by David Woods on the 60 Martyrs of Gaza and the possible Martyrdom of Bishop Sophronius of Jerusalem (2003).

Overall the book makes clear that a whole range of factors were involved in the relationship between Arabs and Byzantines in this period, with Muslim writers using a wide range of terms to describe the other, sometimes political (subjects of the Byzantine emperor), sometimes linguistic (Greek speakers), sometimes geographical (Anatolians), and sometimes religious (Christians). Stereotypes, for example the image of Byzantine women as prostitutes, were not unknown. What is clear, however, is that the balance of power between the two states had a crucial influence on their mutual perceptions, with the failure of the Umayyad attack on Constantinople in 717–18 and the Byzantine revival in the tenth century, paralleled by the decline of the ‘Abbasid Empire at the same time, having a significant effect on how the two communities perceived each other. The extent to which the older Persian fear of Rome lived on in ‘Abbasid attitudes towards Byzantium is also interesting: “it behooves the Muslims to be most wary and on their guard against the Rum” (Qudama b. Ja’far in the early tenth century CE). Yet at almost the same time, the Orthodox Patriarch Nicholas Mysticus could write to the caliph in Baghdad: “two empires, that of the Saracens and that of the Romans, together hold the entirety of power on earth, have preeminence and shine like two great torches in the celestial firmament. For this reason alone, it is necessary that we have relations of community and confraternity, and that we absolutely avoid—under the pretext that we differ in our way of life, our customs and our religion—maintaining hostile dispositions toward one another.” Christian–Muslim Relations, it seems, were just as diverse and complicated then as they are now!

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