

Conversion in Late Antiquity: Christianity, Islam, and Beyond  
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### Abstract

"Hard-boiled" is how Daniel Beaumont characterised the majority of early (mid-8th to mid-9th century AD) Arabic narratives of conversion to Islam ("Hard-Boiled: Narrative Discourse in Early Muslim Traditions", *Studia Islamica* 83 (1996), pp.5-31). According to Beaumont, writing now nearly fifteen years ago, their literary format is such that they describe only the framework of events in which a conversion took place, not the convert's motives or feelings. In other words, "the more intimate aspects" of persona cannot be deduced from them.

Beaumont's "hard-boiled" narratives are "positive" conversion stories about the heroic first years of Islam, and in the continuing absence of any wider surveys or typologies of such narratives, I shall not attempt to quantify or generalise, but will instead go to the opposite end of the scale from Beaumont, and look at two well-known narratives of "negative" conversion from Islam that refer to the same period. One is a depiction of a false prophet, the other the story of an apostasy. The dates of redaction of these examples overlap with those of Beaumont's examples. Do they conform to the "hard-boiled" literary paradigm? If not, do they in fact offer insights into persona?

Another type of "negative" conversion is conversion, within Islam, to heresy. The literary response to this situation does not necessarily take the form of narrative or of an individual account, but may nevertheless approach it psychologically rather than theologically. I discuss an example from the late tenth century.

Finally, the phenomenon of non-conversion requires some discussion. The development of an Arabic-language literary culture in the first four centuries of Islam was the joint effort of converts, of Muslims of different, usually contending stamps, and of non-converts. It is the still only partially understood working together of this mix that has given us the literary accounts considered here. For much of the time, during this period, the possession of literary culture implied the sharing of ethical and intellectual values, gave access to the companionship of the like-minded, and afforded Muslims and non-converts similar opportunities of professional advantage, so that we have little idea, from the historical record, what, in ordinary circumstances, might trigger conversion or else stiffen resistance to it.

The bearers of elite literary culture were the only people in their society equipped to leave rounded accounts of their own personae. This they did not directly through confessional autobiographies, but obliquely, through the great

variety of topics, people and situations they chose to write about. For these writers, what was a human being, an individual, and what were the terms on which he or she could be understood and described? My point of reference here will be Hilary Kilpatrick's discussions of Christian and Muslim writers in tenth-century Iraq.

During the two-century period book-ended by Beaumont's early 'Abbasid writers, who portrayed the beginnings of Islam, and Kilpatrick's mid-'Abbasid writers, whose perspectives had shifted partly or wholly to the recent past, intellectual options multiplied, and so did the resources of literary expression. In contrast to other questions of human choice, conversion does not appear to have been a major preoccupation of writers of the period. Whether or not a systematic quantitative approach would bear out this impression, my conclusion for the time being is that, in any case, conversion, as experienced from within or described by the cultured elite, is something that can only be understood by us from the starting point of that elite's conceptions of the human person and personality, a topic hitherto avoided by modern scholarship (both literary and historical). The intense focus of the past decade on how modes of thinking developed in the 'Abbasid period has, however, yielded enough tools to enable us now to approach it non-subjectively.