

Conversion in Late Antiquity: Christianity, Islam, and Beyond
Workshop on 'Converting Practice'
University of Oxford, Ashmolean Museum
3 July 2010

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"Conversion to Islam during the Lifetime of Muḥammad"

Abstract

This paper will address the issue of conversion to Islam during the lifetime of Muḥammad. As such, it is a discussion of the varied conversions of the group known as the Saḥāba, the Companions of Muhammad. Their status in the early community was often affected by the timing of their acceptance of the new faith—whether early or late, relative to the career of the Prophet. A hierarchy among the Companions of Muḥammad, developed by sectarian biographers and historians long after the lifetimes of the characters in question, commented upon and narrated their conversion stories in thematic and often dramatic ways. These first followers of Muḥammad—including 'Alī, Muḥammad's cousin and son-in-law, and Abu Bakr, his longtime friend and father-in-law--were figures upon whom later authors staked their hagiographical, theological, and political claims. The Companions comprised a unique and nearly sanctified category of people in the developing self-consciousness of the early Muslim community. As such, an analysis of how they came to join the burgeoning new religious movement is a crucial aspect of understanding their place in the history, and the historicization, of early Islam.