

# SIFTING THE CLUES TO THE CALIPHATES

What can papyrus patterns say about the lightning-fast growth of Islam in the seventh and eighth centuries?

By Jeff Bolichowski  
Photographs by Jonathan Small

The sudden emergence of Islam and dramatic growth of the Islamic polities known as caliphates in the seventh century CE and onward has been the source of enduring fascination. Between 634 and 644 alone, the campaigns of Caliph Umar brought Sassanid Persia and the Byzantine Empire’s territories in Egypt, the Levant and much of North Africa under Islamic rule. But the newly arrived Muslims faced an enormous challenge: How to govern vast and populous lands with well-developed Greek and Persian bureaucracies already in place?

The eventual success of the caliphates as multi-ethnic empires is vital to understanding the cultural melting pot of the medieval Middle East and the region’s subsequent development. It is a slice of history that has intrigued Eugenio Garosi since he was 18, when he travelled to Syria with family. “You could see the ruins of ancient cities, side by side with wonderful Muslim monuments, Crusader fortresses and others,” says Garosi, a historian of early Islam and former Azrieli International Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Haifa.

Beyond the grandeur of those ancient ruins and the sweeping narratives of empires rising and falling lies a deceptively simple layer of history: papyri from the early Islamic period. These are seemingly inconsequential documents written by people living within the caliphates, and the light they shed on their time fascinates Garosi.

Each papyrus may seem to say little — a sales document here, a letter between bureaucrats there. But as Garosi looks at them together, studying the way the writers write, the language they use, even the sentences they pick, he can spot patterns that reveal the details of their lives. They speak not just to the people who wrote them, but to the complex and evolving empire in which they lived.

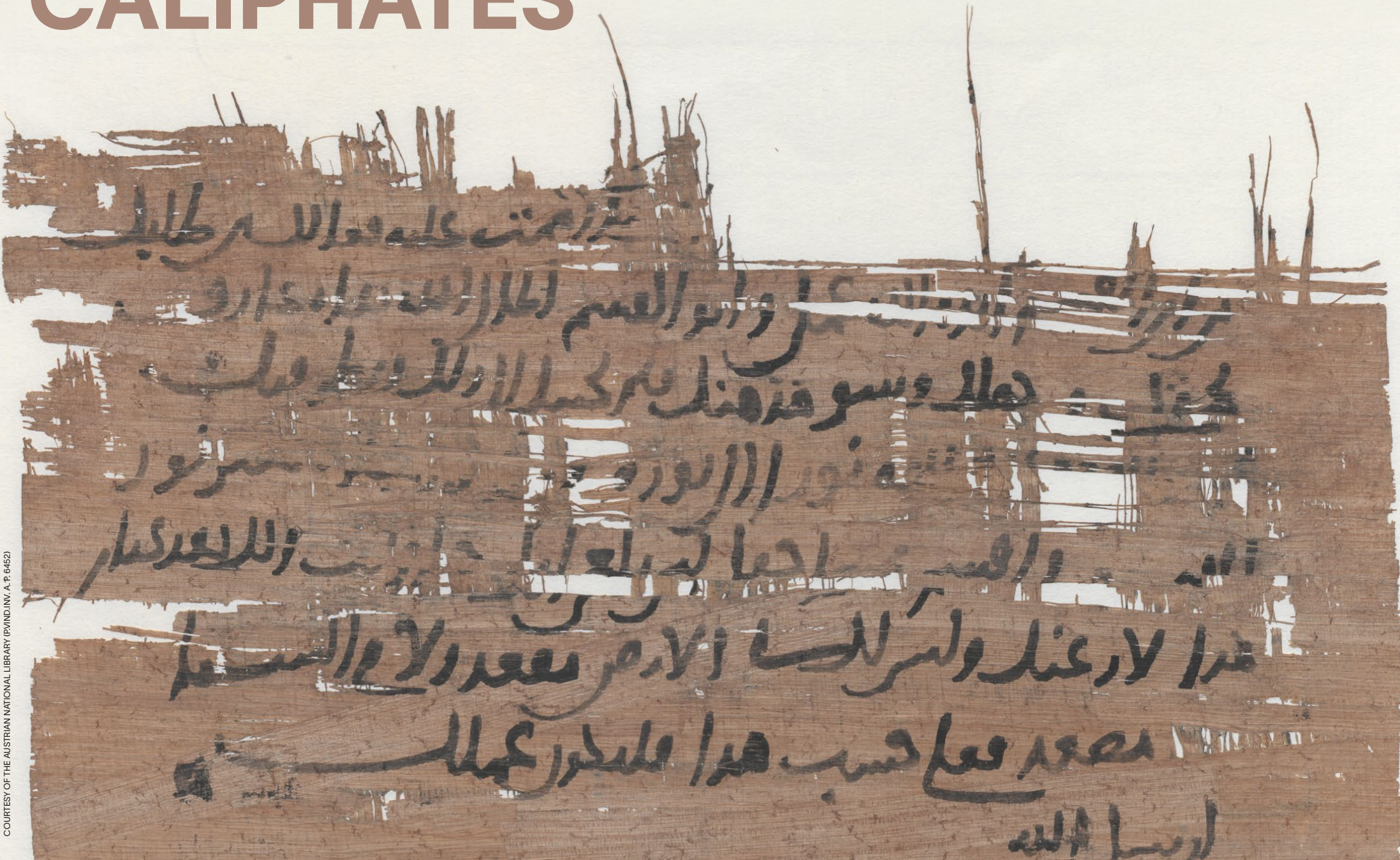
“From one contract of sale, you don’t gather much,” he says. “But once you try to put it within a series of parallels, you can actually get from the very small to a larger system, and you can do it from the bottom up.”

Garosi’s research focuses on scribal norms, the rules and conventions writers used while drafting letters in the early Islamic period, particularly in Egypt, where the climate allowed more papyri to survive. By piecing together volumes of these early-medieval documents and studying how scribal norms interact, his research paints a picture of cultural adaptation and change as a minority ruling class of Arabic-speaking Muslims sought to govern a new empire.

Garosi’s research approach had its roots in a conversation with a supervisor at an Ethiopian restaurant in Jerusalem, Israel. He came to realize that papyri — many of them available in online archives such as the Arabic Papyrology Database — provide a unique evidence base to move beyond biographical scholarship focused mainly on eminent scholars and leaders.

“These particular sources allow you to look at a more representative sample of society,” says Garosi. While not as broad as a modern sociological study, papyri

To an informed yet untrained observer, papyri from the early Islamic period may look like inconsequential sales documents and letters written by bureaucrats living within the caliphates. But to historians such as Eugenio Garosi, these weathered fragments offer clues to the rapid success of the multi-ethnic caliphate empires.



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can nevertheless be analyzed for patterns – and, in many cases, for changes in those patterns over time.

Many of the documents were found together and are clearly related. With so many documents belonging to one person or group, scholars can see changes in their writing over time and get a sense of how people interacted with their environment.

Garosi, for example, often focuses on a collection of hundreds of papyri belonging to one person or institution. “From the notion that these documents belong together, you can reconstruct not just the outward identity of the person but see in which context this person acted and lived. This gives you an additional second level to your investigation, as opposed to a biographical dictionary where you essentially have just the name.”

What emerges is a complex picture of how the early Islamic realm interacted with the people who lived in it, and how Arab, Greek and Coptic writers structured and translated documents to communicate with one another.



Greek and Arabic scribal conventions were first adapted in letters common to administration, creating a layer of Greek-Arabic bilingualism between Arabic high officials and the mostly Coptic populace. “This would be the space that was most receptive to the innovations brought in by the Arabs,” Garosi says.

Their formula would be more than a translation. The writers would adapt Arabic and Muslim writing conventions to “take the cultural edge off what were specifically Muslim formulae.” Greek writers using otherwise Arabic scribal conventions, for example, would omit text such as the Shahada (the declaration of faith in one God) that would make the text specifically Muslim. Their documents would have a more generically monotheistic voice.

These scribal norms, translated from Arabic, trickled down into levels of society below the bureaucracy, conveyed through a middle layer of bureaucrats largely writing in Greek. Scribal norms adapted in that early space of Greek and Arabic bilingualism would make their

way into communications written in Coptic. In this way, the Arabic language may have spread not just through Arabs themselves but through Greek intermediaries adopting the language and norms — some even adopting the language while maintaining their existing faith.

While papyri mostly originated in Egypt, Garosi says this scribal pattern can be seen in documents throughout the early Muslim world, such as those found in Sogdiana, an ancient Central Asian country located in modern Uzbekistan. This suggests, he says, that the translation of Arabic scribal forms through intermediaries and into the broader society from there was a “purposeful intervention.”

Scribal patterns show yet another part of a bigger picture: the spread of the Arabic language. Even as they were spreading scribal norms, Arabs were settling into the new empire, typically in garrison cities separate from the local population. In Egypt, Arabs were not allowed to own land. These garrisons created ready military forces for the caliphates, but also created almost fully Arab Muslim spaces within a non-Arab and non-Muslim context — helping to prevent a loss of culture.

“The Islamic empire was pretty much the fusion of two imperial entities, the Sassanian Empire and the eastern provinces of the Byzantine Empire,” says Garosi. “These were two empires with very different administrative languages.” The Arabic language may have had the power to bridge the bureaucratic gulf, helping it to become a new lingua franca for the empire.

Garosi, who grew up in Italy and studied in Germany (LMU Munich) and Switzerland (University of Basel), is making key contributions to what is known about the long-neglected transitional phase from the Byzantine to the Islamic era. This period has become the subject of heated discussion in recent years, especially among the younger generation of Arabists, papyrologists, Byzantinists and ancient historians, says Sabine Huebner, a professor of ancient history at the University of Basel, who was one of the supervisors of Garosi’s PhD dissertation. “Early Arabic papyrology, in particular, has made a quantum leap in recent years, thanks in part to new research projects and newly developed digital tools.”

Huebner lauds Garosi’s interdisciplinary background in early Islamic and Arabic studies, numismatics, economics, papyrology and digital humanities. She says his work “strikes a chord and is extremely relevant.”

To Garosi, exploring the history of early Islam through scribal norms found in papyri helps historians view this period as the complex work in progress it was. The emergence of the caliphates was far from a switch-on or switch-off of empires. It was more a progressive process, one experienced differently by people at various levels of society.

He is looking forward to following wherever these papyrus patterns lead, fragment by humble fragment. ▲●■

By studying scribal norms of related papyri, Garosi, a historian of early Islam and former Azrieli International Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Haifa, can see how Arab, Greek and Coptic officials communicated with one another in the nascent Islamic administration.



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