



BESMELLĀH I. ORIGIN OF THE FORMULA

i. Origin of the Formula

The formula, which in its short form occurs only twice in the Qur'ān, has been attested since the first century of the Hejra, although a precise date for its introduction cannot be established. It is included on the reverse of Arab-Sasanian coins beginning in 652, soon after the death of Yazdegerd III (r. 632-51), and in the margins of coins struck with the image of Kōsrow II. The formula seems to have been rare on Islamic seals and intaglios (cf. Kalus, 1981), but the fact that these materials have not been well published precludes evaluation.

The formula may have been adapted to strict Muslim monotheism from Iranian, following the pattern of the Mazdean formula *pad nām ī yazdān* "in the name of the gods," which occurs in the inscription of Narseh at Paikuli (end of the third century) and at Meškīnšahr (fourth century). Such an adaptation can perhaps be recognized in bilingual inscriptions on objects in which, after the first century of the Hejra, the *besmellāh* was correctly translated into Pahlavi by the singular *pad nām ī yazd*, whereas the distinction between the singular and the plural *yazd/yazdān* was strictly observed throughout the Mazdean tradition.

The *besmellāh* does not introduce the prayer (*ṣalāt*), but it is pronounced



before nearly every activity in daily life, particularly meals and sexual relations. A formula used so extensively could not escape the esoteric speculations of the Isma'ilis, who have associated its seven letters with the seven imams and also with the seven planets and other cosmological and astronomical entities. Finally, the formula has played an important role as a decorative element in both manuscript illumination and monumental architecture, and even in the composition of approved talismans.

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