

The Role of the Nabateans in the Islamic Conquests

This paper is concerned with the role the Nabateans played in a period when they are almost forgotten. Many historians tend to ignore the period after their defeat at the hands of the Emperor Trajan at the beginning of the second century AD.

Many studies have been carried out on Nabatean inscriptions and every aspect of their civilization up to the time when Christianity spread, from the third to the fourth century AD. During that time, Petra became the seat of the archbishop, and participated in many Councils of the church¹. The Nabateans had three main centres: Ḥajr in the south, Petra in the middle, and Buṣrā in the north². Buṣrā remained prosperous even after the fall of Petra; and during the Roman rule, it was the capital of the Province of Arabia. Arabic was the spoken language in all three centres in Bilād ash-Shām; Greek was the official language while Aramaic was the language of liturgy and inscriptions.

Many of their inscriptions were to be found in Sinai, Egypt³, Horan, Um al-Jumal⁴, Petra, Mada'in Ṣāliḥ, and north of Ḥijāz⁵. As far as I know, these inscriptions go back to the fourth century AD. It is also well known that they were the origin, or one of the origins, of the Arabic script.

Our knowledge of the Nabateans during the periods which preceded the coming of the Moslem Arabs, the Islamic conquest of the Prophet and the Caliph 'Umar is scarce. Nevertheless, we can say that in the fourth century AD, they intermingled with the Arab tribes emigrating to Bilād ash-Shām. These tribes were called Arabised Christians to distinguish them from the Arab tribes of Ḥijāz. The reason for giving them that name was that although they converted to Christianity, they accepted the new religion only superficially⁶. Of these tribes were Juḏhām, 'Udhrah, Bahrā', and part of Kalb. In the south, there were the tribes of Sulaym, Muzayna, Juhayna and Bali which stayed pagan until the coming of Islam.

Juḏhām, including their cousins (Lakham), was one of the strongest and largest tribes. Juḏhām was able to stand up to the strongest tribes in Bilād ash-Shām such as Ḡhassan, Kalb and Kindah. Their territory stretched from Ḥajr in the south to Syria in the north where they bordered the tribe of Kalb. They were also found in Wādī al-Qurā, Tabūk and Ilah. They

built and expanded such cities as 'Ammān, Ma'an, Idhrah, Mudayn and Ghaza. In addition, they engaged in trade with Egypt, the Arabian Peninsula and Syria⁷. From this we can see that Juḏhām inhabited the same area that had been inhabited by the Nabateans, although the latter moved further to the north while the former further to the south. What I want to emphasize about Juḏhām is that the Nabateans, after the disintegration of their state, could have mingled with Juḏhām whose geographical expansion was similar to that of the Nabateans. It is also possible that both had become allies, fought together after the coming of Islam, then converted along with almost all the Arab tribes of Bilād ash-Shām to the new religion.

In spite of that, we have some sources that specify the role the Nabateans had played especially during the early Islamic conquests. In the book *Al-Maḡhāzī*, which is one of the earliest books that dealt with the conquests, Al-Wāqidī wrote about the raid on Tabūk. According to him, before Islam, the Ṣāqita, that is the Nabateans, went to Madīna as traders⁸. After Islam, the only source of news from Bilād ash-Shām also came from them⁹.

Al-Wāqidī added that the Nabateans spread the news that the Byzantines were amassing a great army under the leadership of Hercules whose headquarters was in Homs¹⁰. We can deduce from this that the Nabateans continued trading with Yathrib (Madīna) even after the coming of Islam. There is no doubt, then, that the Arab Nabateans resented the fact that the Romans and later the Byzantines were the ones who destroyed their state and influence. So, they allied themselves with the rising power of Islam and the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula whom they considered as their liberators. As a result of their relation with Yathrib and the Arabs of Ḥijāz, Al-Wāqidī said that in many places they were mistreated and persecuted as in Dumat al-Jandal¹¹. As a further evidence, Ibn 'Asākir confirmed the above mentioned facts in his book¹².

So, we find that the Nabateans wanted to continue trading with Madīna even after the coming of Islam, but this obviously did not please the Byzantines who asked the ruler of Dumat al-Jandal to persecute them. This hypothesis is confirmed to be true in the book *At-Tanbīh wa-l-Isḥrāf* by Al-Mas'ūdī,

who mentioned that the ruler of al-Jandal who was a Christian and subjugated to Hercules the Byzantine emperor, used to mistreat the Madīna traders of whom many were Nabateans¹³. This incident is also mentioned in Ibn Sa'd's book *At-Ṭabaqāt Al-Kabīr*. He wrote that Hāshim Ibn 'Abdu-l-Manāf, the Prophet's grandfather, used to trade in the Nabateans' sūq (market) which was held in Yathrib¹⁴; so too in Professor Muḥammad Kurd 'Alī's book *Khiṭaṭ Ash-Shām*¹⁵.

However, of the greatest importance, was the role they played in the great Islamic conquests. Ibn 'Atham al-Kūfī wrote in his book *Al-Futūḥ* that during the war between the Moslems and the Byzantines in Palestine, 'Amr Ibn Al-'Āṣ, sent a letter to Abū 'Ubayyda saying that the people of Baalbeck had gathered an army of twenty thousand in support of Hercules. This piece of news was sent to the Moslems by their Nabatean agents, residents of Bilād ash-Shām. He also added that when Abū 'Ubayyda had decided to fight, he sent a Christian Nabatean as messenger to the Caliph 'Umar. When 'Umar met the messenger, he admired his intelligence and asked him to convert to Islam. The messenger agreed, was well-treated and was sent back to Abū 'Ubayyda with a letter from the Caliph¹⁶.

A further proof of the above mentioned incident is found in Al-Balādūrī's book *Futūḥ Al-Buldān*. During the Islamic conquest of northern Syria and the Peninsula, the army leader 'Ayyād Ibn Ghanam asked the Arab inhabitants to work as spies for the Moslem Arabs against the Byzantine enemy, a task they accepted¹⁷.

During the reign of the Caliph 'Umar and before the conquest of Jerusalem, 'Abdu-l-Mun'im Al-Ḥimyarī, one of the late historians, wrote in his geo-historic lexicon *Ar-Rawḍ Al-Mi'tār* the following anecdote. He said that the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Abū 'Ubayyda, the leader of the Islamic armies, agreed that the keys of the Holy City would be given to the Caliph 'Umar in person when he came to Jerusalem. The peace treaty which would later be known as 'uhdah-l-'Umaryyah and which has been kept ever since at the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Jerusalem, was handed to the Jerusalem Patriarch Sofronius with some later additions. Later, the Caliph wrote to the Patriarch giving sanctuary to the Christians, their children, women and churches, on condition that they would not allow the Jews to live in the city. Afterwards, when 'Umar came to Jerusalem, he ordered the Nabateans of Palestine to sweep the place of the Rock, which had become a rubbish dump¹⁸.

From the above text, we can recognize firstly that the Arab Nabateans probably made up a large percentage of the inhabitants of Palestine. Secondly, the people of Jerusalem under the leadership of the Patriarch asked the Moslem Arabs not to let the Jews live in the city. Thus, the Jews were not living in Jerusalem at the time, and its inhabitants did not want them to come back after they were expelled by the Romans at the hands of Titus in 70 AD. This is a very important matter but irrelevant as far as this paper is concerned.

It seems that the Nabateans, who were farmers too, resided in Palestine and southern Bilād ash-Shām. Ibn 'Asākir wrote that the Caliph 'Umar asked the Nabateans of Bilād ash-Shām to let the Moslems eat their produce but not to take anything with them¹⁹. Al-Iṣfahānī, the author of *Al-Aghānī*, wrote that the Nabateans of Yathrib played an important role in the civil war that led to the assassination of the third Caliph 'Uthmān²⁰. The same idea was also mentioned by Al-Balādūrī²¹. From all this, we can say that the Nabateans had been in Madīna before and after the coming of Islam. That they also had their own market there is very clearly verified.

There is no doubt, however, that when we discuss the Nabateans, there is the danger of getting confused with the following terms: Nabṭ and Nabateans. Nabṭ is given to villagers and hired workers, while Nabateans to the inhabitants of the city of Petra. It seems to be that later in history either of the two terms referred to both meanings since the Nabateans, who were originally merchants, also became farmers. It is interesting to know that the Aramaeans who lived to the south of Ḥajr were farmers and also used to be called Nabateans²². It is true that the word Nabṭ was first given to the Syriacs and the Chaldeans, the inhabitants of Mesopotamia. Those two peoples were Semites despite their obscure origins²³. However, the mistake lies in the fact that Nabṭ was synonymous with farming. Ibn Al-Qaryā defined the word Nabṭ as the people whose livelihood came from cultivated lands²⁴, while Ibn Al-Kalbī defined it as anyone who was not a shepherd or a soldier for the Arabs and who lived on cultivated land²⁵. Ibn Ḥabīb of *Al-Muḥabbir* wrote that the mother of Maslama Ibn Hishām Ibn al-'Āṣ from the tribe of Makhzuṃ was a Nabatean from Dūmat al-Jandal; the mother of the sons of 'Utba Ibn Nawfal Az-Zahrī was a Jewish Nabatean²⁶. Thus, it is very difficult to distinguish between Nabṭ and Nabateans in Bilād ash-Shām, but the reader is able to do so from the context.

We have mentioned that the Nabateans intermingled with the tribe of Judhām in Bilād ash-Shām and became farmers in addition to being town and city dwellers. Moreover, we find that during the reign of the Umayyad Caliph 'Abdu-l-Malik, they also co-existed with the Jarajima from the people of Lukām in northern Syria. Ibn Al-Athīr wrote that 'Amr Ibn Sa'īd refused to give allegiance to 'Abdu-l-Malik. Consequently, the leader of the environs of the mountain of Lukām attacked with followers from the Jarajima, the Nabateans and slaves, but 'Amr was defeated at the hands of 'Abdu-l-Malik. Later, one of the army leaders of 'Abdu-l-Malik whose name was Shuḥaym Ibn Al-Muhājir fought them and many Jarajima and Nabateans were killed. The rest were given safe conduct and they withdrew to their villages²⁷.

At the beginning of his reign, 'Abdu-l-Malik Ibn Marwān was busy fighting the rival to the Caliphate, 'Abdu-llah Ibn Al-Zubayr, in Ḥijāz and his brother Mus'ab in Iraq. The Byzantine emperor took advantage of this critical situation and tried to acquire the lands of the Moslems. Apparently, with the help of the Jarajima and some Nabateans, he was

able to fight the Moslems. When 'Abdu-l-Malik defeated the Byzantines, he gave the Nabateans and the Jarajima safe conduct. So, the latter went back to the villages around Homs and Damascus and to their city in Lukām, the former to their villages while the slaves went back to their masters²⁸.

At a later period during the reign of the Umayyad Caliph Yazīd Ibn 'Abdu-l-Malik, Al-Kūfī described in his book *Al-Futūḥ* how Yazīd Ibn Muḥlab revolted against the Caliph who sent Maslama Ibn 'Abdu-l-Malik to fight him. Al-Kūfī continued to describe how the Umayyad soldiers were arrogant and fearless of the enemy which included the Nabateans in their ranks²⁹. We should, however, disregard Al-Kūfī's hostile bias against the Umayyads because of his Shi'ite's tendencies. On the other hand, we can tell from his story that the Nabateans were soldiers in the army of Bilād ash-Shām ready to fight for their land and lives, in addition to being farmers and landowners.

At the beginning of the Umayyad Caliphate, the Moslem Arabs, mainly the members of the Umayyad dynasty and senior government officials, started to buy lands. To stop this, the Caliph 'Umar Ibn 'Abdu-l-'Azīz forbade such transactions; whenever a Nabatean sold his land to a Moslem, he used to return it to its former owner, and deposit the money paid for it in the state treasury³⁰.

Between 140–141 Hijrī, the Caliph Abū Ja'far Al-Manṣūr looked into the matter of the tithe lands. He examined the situation and reduced the tithe which was called 'Ta'dīl'.

To summarize, we can say that before Islam the Nabateans established an authentic Arab civilization. During the lifetime of the Prophet and the pre-Umayyad period, they continued their trading with Madīna, and provided information to the Moslems about the enemy manoeuvres. During the period of the great conquests, they were agents for the Moslem armies. In addition, and after the battle of Yarmūk, the Nabateans along with Judhām and the Arabs of Bilād ash-Shām joined the Moslem armies and fought with their Arab brethren. In the Umayyad period, some of them became farmers and villagers, and in due course intermingled with the people of Bilād ash-Shām, and consequently shared with them the same fate.

In the centuries following, we know that they built a castle outside Petra during the Crusader Wars. In the 16th century AD, they gave their name to a complete neighbourhood of Damascus which was exclusively inhabited by them³². Finally, Professor Hitti has written that nowadays the tribes of Huwayṭāt³³, and probably 'Al-Budul', the people of Petra, are the Nabateans' descendants.

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