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Continuity or Change? Rural Settlement in Provincia Arabia and Palaestina Tertia in the Seventh to Ninth Centuries

One of the issues to have attracted scholarly attention in recent years concerns the settlement morphology and socio-economic indicators of rural development in the transitional period between the Late Byzantine and Early Islamic eras. Particularly important are features evidenced in the territory of modern Jordan, in the areas of the former *Provincia Arabia* and *Palaestina Tertia*, during the seventh to ninth centuries.

The prosperity and outstanding growth of the countryside in the 6th century has been well evidenced by recent fieldwork. Data from written sources suggest that a large number of settlements were established within each city district, with long-term trends and fluctuations that are not yet fully investigated.

The roots of this remodelling can be traced back to the 4th century, as Imperial policy encouraged private ownership of land. Thus, land was granted to anyone who was prepared to invest in its development. These laws remained in force until at least the end of the Byzantine period and probably affected the distribution of earlier Islamic settlement. Demographic expansion, most likely resulting from increased security in marginal areas, and climatic amelioration were probably the main factors driving this intensification of the settlement process (Hirschfeld 2005: 535).

The gradual transformation of territorial occupation was twofold and probably began in the second half of the fifth century. Local tribes seem to have shifted from nomadic to sedentary lifestyles; in some cases they reoccupied abandoned Roman military structures, whereas in others they established new settlements in fertile areas close to a major *polis* (Hamarneh 2003: 217, 2006: 94-95).

Nomadic populations would have provided an agricultural workforce, as well as military protection of frontier areas through tribal confederations. Imperial policy encouraged an *intra limitem* settlement process in which the church, as an official institution, played a prominent role. This may be deduced from the pages of the *Historia Ecclesiastica* of Sozomenos (Sozomenos 1960: 299-300), in which the conversion of large groups of *foederati* is mentioned. The latter were represented by their own bishop, the Bishop of the Arabs, at the church Counsels of Seleucia (AD 359) and Antiochia (AD 363) (Devreesse 1945: 211; Piccirillo 2002: 195-198). Later in the fifth century this *ufficium* is no longer mentioned, and instead we come across a list of local bishops who represented the urban areas they held (Piccirillo 2005: 377-379).

Provincial administration was also reorganised in contextual terms. During the Roman period, cities represented the main centres of power, to which local aristocracy contributed through endowment (Branders and Haldon 2000: 143-144). During the period of the late Roman Empire, a gradual diminishing of the importance of the central government redirected power towards church institutions.

The formation of dioceses in the 4th and 5th centuries caused a decline of civic administration, which was promptly replaced by administration by church officials and local philarchs (See also discussion in Fiema 2002: 213, 229). Formal recognition of the bishop's authority in urban administration in the East was granted in a law of AD 505: the *defensor* was to be appointed by the bishop, as were the clergy, *honorati*, *possessores* and *curialis*. This was because the bishop was invested with the spiritual authority to protect the weak and to ensure the food supply of the city (Saradi 2006: 181-182). In the sixth century, numerous Justinianic laws recognised the bishops' authority in civic administration, along with their fiscal responsibilities in

the cities and countryside. Bishops assessed taxes from church land and promoted construction projects, not only of churches (in both urban and rural centres) but also of civic buildings. In

Provincia Arabia this involvement is attested to by a lintel inscription discovered in Gerasa / Jarash that mentions a prison established by Bishop Paul of the same city in AD 539 / 540 (Gatier 1985: 297-308), as well as a mosaic inscription that attests to the construction of a cistern by Bishop Sergius in Madaba in AD 575 / 576 (The inscription mentiones "a cistern in a cistern". See Piccirillo 1989: 30).

From an archaeological point of view, excavations have demonstrated that particular attention was directed towards large agricultural settlements, mainly represented in *Provincia Arabia* and *Palaestina Tertia* by villages that grew up around *castrum* enclosures. Most of these settlements display evidence for vast building projects that may reflect the key position of the church. The settlements of Umm al-Quṭṭayn, Umm al-Jimāl, Khirbat as-Samrā, Riḥāb, Zīzyā, Dhibān, Nitl and Umm ar-Raṣāṣ / Mefa'a, al-Murayghāt, Khirbat al-Murayghāt, Kastron Zadakathon / Sadaqa, Kastron Ammatha / al-Ḥammām, Khirbat an-Naḥās, Arindela / Gharandal and al-Huana / al-Ḥumayma (For bibliography and discussion see Hamarneh 2003: 55-62) all show expansion outside the enclosure, as well as the merging of *castrum* and village which suggests that no military actions were undertaken. The considerable number of ecclesiastical foundations in each locality (up to 15 in some cases), mostly dated by inscriptions, is evidence for the patronage of bishops of nearby dioceses in conjunction with investment by local land-owners. This indicates the importance of these villages as foci for a wealthy, land-owning class of euergets. The long-term vitality and development of these towns in the 6th to 8th centuries enabled them to rival the cities in regional economies, although they never attained the functions of established urban centres (Small towns were upgraded to cities on construction of a wall, see Saradi 2006: 97-100).

The policy of agricultural privatisation resulted in a long period of prosperity and led to increased interaction between city and village, e.g. villagers leasing land from urban residents who owned land in the village (See Bagnall 2005: 556). Villagers supplied the cities with agricultural products through local markets and obtained short-term financing. For example, papyri discovered in Egypt describe how a farmer and *presbyteros* were to supply flax to a worker resident in Nilopolis (Bagnall 2005: 556), or that a vineyard worker was to receive a loan to be repaid in wine from a deacon of Arsinoiton *polis* (Bagnall 2005: 556). Hagiographic texts also mention that wheat was largely produced in *Arabia* and was then transported to monasteries in *Palaestina*. Cyril of Schytopolis, in the "Life of St Saba", describes an incident that befell a camel rider transporting wheat from *Machaberos* / Mekawer to the monastery at Wadi an-Nar in the Judean desert (*Cyrilli Vita Sabae*: 186). In the "Life of St George of Choziba", an agent of the monastery came from *Arabia* to ask the Abbot for an amount of money, 60 *solidi*, to buy wheat (Di Segni 1991: 99).

Papyri discovered in Petra demonstrate that much of the income of some of its leading families came from vineyards and arable land located in neighbouring villages, normally leased out on a contractual basis (Fiema 2002: 226).

Several local notables acted as benefactors and were therefore immortalised in mosaic inscriptions. Three *scholastikos* flank the bishop in major construction projects mentioned in a mosaic of AD 530 at the *diaconicon* / baptistery of the monastic complex of Mount Nebo (Piccirillo 1989: 157, 1998: 221-225). Local notables Stefanos and Elia, sons of Comitissa, were involved in the construction of the Church of St George at Khirbat al-Mukhayyaṭ, built in AD 535 / 536 (Piccirillo 1989: 180). The same family members were mentioned a few years later, along with Bishop John of Mādabā (AD 542 - 557), in connection with the construction of the Church of Saints Lot and Procopius in the same village (Piccirillo 1989: 187). In AD 541 Bishop John of Boṣra built the Church of al-Ḥuṣn (Bishopric of Boṣra) with Elia, a soldier or official (Al-Muheisen and Terrier 1997: 493). In one case in *Provincia Arabia* it seems clear that local philarchs promoted construction activities: the mosaic inscriptions of the Church of St Sergius of Nitl lists the eminent Taa'laba, son of al-Audelos the Philarch, and Areta, son of al-Areta, among its euergets (Piccirillo 2001: 267-284; Hamarneh 2004: 203-204. The church at Tall al-'Umayrī may be a second example).

According to the Petra papyri, ecclesiastical institutions also received income from land, with some cases of leasing in perpetuity. It is worth mentioning that expressions as *haram* or *aram* may be generic words for an area of fields, prob-

ably referring to sacred land similar to the Greek *hiera ge*, i.e. former temple land later owned by *res private* or by the church itself[1]. Monasteries also performed an important role in the administration of church property. They received endowments in land, as Egyptian papyri occasionally mention property ownership and real estate in connection with monasteries (Brenk 2004: 454). Income from these properties probably helped to maintain charitable institutions, such as hospitals, *xenodochia* and facilities for pilgrims.

As well as being donated, land was also acquired through direct contracts between members of the clergy and private owners. In Petra papyrus n. 25, a presbyter of the Church or Monastery of Saint and Martyr Theodore of Ammatha acquired an *epoikion*, or piece of well-irrigated, cultivable land (γεωρία) in the village of Augustopolis, for the church from a *diaconos* and then registered the transaction in the archive of the *hypodektai* of Petra in AD 558 / 559 (Arjava, Buchholz and Gagos 2007: 79-80). Particular attention should be paid to the definition of part of that property as *patrimonium*, or financially subject – in this specific case – to the Imperial treasury instead of that of Petra.

The historical record shows how social and economic importance gradually shifted towards the villages in Late Byzantine administrative structures, confirming the vitality of local rural economies and potentially indicating that consumption broadly matched population size (See also Haldon 1990: 138; Fiema 2002: 227). In fact, the village and the land it exploited was the basic fiscal unit of the region in the 6th to 8th centuries and, more generally, of the Byzantine Empire as a whole[2]. In historical terms, it seems that exploitation of local resources gradually replaced reliance on imports, reflecting – as Fiema has pointed out – a decline in the attention paid to the area by central government (Fiema 1992: 329-330).

Surveys and excavations have demonstrated that villages were provided with presses sufficient for intensive wine and olive oil production, either adjacent to villages or in the courtyards of pre-existing compounds. Many of these presses date to the sixth century, reflecting a peak at that time in the development of rural settlements in the two provinces under consideration here, which is in turn suggestive of a broad-based, balanced economy (See also Frankel 1997: 73-84, 1999).

At Umm ar-Ar-Raṣāṣ, for example, the presence of wine presses hints at intensive land use outside the *castrum*. In addition, the south and east gates of the *castrum* were blocked, one by a row of rooms (perhaps shops?), the other by a latrine and mill (See Bujard 2008, Bujard forthcoming). In the courtyard of the Church of Saint Paul, a wine press was situated just outside the entrance, along with a mill and *horrea* (Pappalardo 2002: 392-399). Large wine press compounds that included areas for treading, refining and storage were built in Khirbat al-Bādiyya (Hatamleh and el-Qadi 2001: 12; Al-Muhaisen 2006: 83-98; see also El-Khouri 2008: 83-84), Khirbat Ṣa'ad (Sari 2004: 9-20; Sari and Melhem 1997: 196-211), al-Yaṣīla (Al-Muhaisen 1991: 341-346; Melhem 1992: 129-36), Ya'mūn (Najjar, Rose and Turshan 2000: 8-11), Khirbat Duḥālah (Sari 1990: 9), Khirbat al-Masarrāt, al-'Ālūk (Ghrayyib 2004: 28), Gil'ād (Hadidi and Melhim 1998: 15-18), Zuqrīṭ (Smadi and Melhim 1997: 5-12), al-Ḥaufa (Abu Dalu 1994: 5-19), Khirbat Yājūz (Khalil and al-Nammari 2000: 41-57), Ṣuwayfiyya, Khirbat ar-Rashādiyya[3], Umm al-Kundum (Piccirillo 1983d: 108-110; Hamarneh 2003: 182) and an-Nakhīl, amongst others. Some of these were constructed in rock-cut caves or on *wadi* ridges, making good use of natural landscape features. In addition, a few of these villages also had olive press installations.

At the same time, intensive production seems to have been undertaken by monasteries, whether large *cenobium* structures or smaller monastic communities established close to villages, as documented in at least 48 cases. Establishment of monastic structures followed the expansion of village settlement in the region, probably in order to administer land owned by the church. Economic activity supported by monastic compounds is evidenced by the documented presence of wine press installations in 28 such structures, as well as a few olive presses. Although these data do not necessarily imply significant demand or the existence of di-

[1] The term may refer either to former temple land or to a heap of grain, indicating land planted with cereal crops. See Kaimio and Koenen 1997: 461.

[2] At least two words for village are used in the written sources: *chorion* and *kome*. The former referred to peasants dependent on a land-owner, while the latter was used for free smallholders. For further analysis see Branders and Haldon 2000: 149-150.

[3] The excavations carried out in April - May 2010 yielded evidence for significant wine production.

rect connections to markets, they do suggest that communities were self-sufficient in many of the basic requirements of life.

Scholars have generally accepted that church building activity, well attested in *Provincia Arabia* and *Palaestina Tertia* in the sixth to eighth centuries, was an important indicator of socio-economic development (Di Segni 1999: 149-178; Walmsley 2005: 516). Besides official foundations sanctioned by a bishop, as evidenced from dedicatory inscriptions, churches were also built in villages by local clergy and community members. Examples include two churches in Yaṣīlah, dated AD 513 and 628 / 629 respectively. A dedicatory text, dated AD 572 / 573, discovered in the Church of St. Thomas at Khirbat Ṣa'ad mentions local notables and a Master of Weights at Boṣra (Sari 1995: 528; Hamarneh 2003: 232) who probably owned land in the *kome*. A similar inscription is known from the Church of St Theodore of Sūf, which was built in the second half of the sixth century by the local community, who "paid the workers and provided the artisans" (Gatier and Villeneuve 1993: 4; Hamarneh 2003: 233-234). The inscription at Khirbat aṭ-Ṭanṭūr (Dayr al-Musmār) describes how the mosaic of the Church of Kaloa was completed thanks to the efforts of Presbyter Giobb and the local community in AD 622 / 623 (Piccirillo 2007: 100). In *Palaestina Tertia* in AD 573 / 574 the mosaic pavement of the Church of the Theotokos at Khirbat ar-Rashādiyya was patronised by a wealthy woman, Megale, who brought in a mosaicist from Jerusalem for the purpose (Mahamid 2003: 7-16; Di Segni 2006: 587-589).

According to archaeological data, the area responded to a number of changes in the political and administrative climate of the Byzantine Empire during the reigns of Phocas (AD 602 - 610) and Heraclios (AD 610 - 641). These coincided with the Persian invasion of AD 614 and the subsequent Arab conquest. Dated inscriptions attest that few dioceses were as active in building as Boṣra, under its leading Archbishops Polieuctos (AD 594 - 623) and Theodoros (AD 634 - 637) who are mentioned in the texts of Riḥāb, Khirbat as-Samrā, Samā and Yaṣīla. Although rebuilding or restoration projects seems to have become more common after AD 635, Khilda near 'Ammān saw a church rebuilt in smaller form in AD 687 under Bishop George[4]. Similar remodelling is attested to at al-Quwaysima ('Ammān) and Khirbat Dārayya (Pella) (Hamarneh 2006: 103). Riḥāb also saw fervent activity: a church dedicated to the Martyr Philemon was rebuilt in AD 663, and was followed in AD 691 by the construction of the St. Sergius Basilica (Piccirillo 2007: 99-100).

A number of monasteries seem to have been built during the seventh century, including St. Sophia / Riḥāb (AD 605) (Piccirillo 1981: 68-70; Hamarneh 2003: 79-80), Khirbat ad-Duwayr (AD 608) (Melhim 1998: 25-30), Dayr aṭ-Ṭanṭūr / Khirbat al-Musmār (AD 622 / 623) (Piccirillo 2007: 100), Khirbat Listib, St. George at Samā (AD 624 / 625) (Piccirillo 1981: 51; King 1983: 126-133, 1988: 38-51; Gatier 1992: 150; Hamarneh 2003: 274), St. Nicefor Constantine / Riḥāb (AD 632) (Piccirillo 2007: 98) and probably Khirbat Daria, Dayr Ṣa'da, Khirbat al-Kursī and ad-Dayr of Mā'īn. The lower Church of al-Quwaysima was erected in AD 717, the Monastery of the Theotokos near 'Ayn al-Kanīsa was decorated in AD 762 and a mosaic-paved room was added to the south wing of the Monastery of Mār ILyās near 'Ajlūn in AD 775 / 776, the latter as a result of the generosity of the pulse-merchant John and his family (Piccirillo 1981: 17; Di Segni 2006: 579-580). In contrast, urban churches dated to this period are extremely rare; just one example has been documented to date, being the Church of the Theotokos which was erected in Mādabā in AD 767 (Piccirillo 1989: 45-49).

Some of the abovementioned dates coincide with the Persian invasion of Syria and Palestine (AD 613 - 629 / 630). At the current stage of research, the rush of monastery building in the seventh century cannot yet be attributed to the flight of communities from Palestine after the destruction caused by the Persians. In fact, the life of St George of Choziba describes how monks sought refuge in Arabia when the Holy City was besieged (Di Segni 1991: 102). Thus, the monks of St Saba stayed in Arabia for a while before returning to their cells in Palestine. This suggests that Arabia remained stable throughout these upheavals and was relatively unaffected in economical and political terms by the Persian invasion.

[4] Najjar and Sa'id 2004: 257-260. The dedicatory inscription of this smaller church mentions the same donor family as that of its larger predecessor. See Hamarneh 2003: 231-232 for further discussion.

In the eighth century, under the Umayyad, further rebuilding and restoration activity is attested to in the countryside, as in the case of the Church of St Stephen at Umm ar-Raṣāṣ, which was built in AD 718, with a new pavement added in the presbyteral area in AD 756. In Mā'īn / Belemounta a church was built in AD 719 / 720. These two churches have mosaic floors depicting towns flanked by donors, e.g. Libb / Limbon, Phisga / Mount Nebo and Deblaton; there is also a frame showing cities in the Nile delta, Arabia and *Palaestina* (Piccirillo 1993), probably to emphasise the Christian identity and prosperity under the new Umayyad rule.

Some of the larger towns were probably provided with baptisteries after AD 635, as at Umm ar-Raṣāṣ, Ḥayyān al-Mushayrif, Riḥāb, Khirbat al-Maqātī', Dhībān, Mā'īn, ad-Dayr and Khirbat Ḥujayjah, reflecting the religious autonomy of these villages. Additionally, there are several references to the *ufficium* of chore bishop and *periodeutes* in the Petra papyri and in several dated inscriptions found in *Palaestina Secunda*, *Provincia Arabia* and *Palaestina Tertia*. The inscription of Khirbat Daria (Gerasa / Pella), dated to the seventh century, mentions Kassiseus the Chore Bishop of the Monastery of Saint Gellon (Karasneh 1997: 23-30); that of Khirbat ad-Duwayr (Pella) dated to AD 593 / 602 refers to Bishop Paul and Chore Bishop Roman, while that of the Church of St. Lot at Zoara, which is dated to AD 691, records the name of Chore Bishop Chrestos. It is also worth mentioning the *periodeutes* in the church mosaic inscription of St. John the Baptist of Riḥāb, dated to AD 619 / 20.

Further elements of continuity can be traced back to iconoclastic interventions in mosaic floors, as images of living creatures were carefully removed and replaced either with neutral decoration, or simply by removing the offending *tessarae* and repositioning them in scrambled fashion. A *terminus ante quem* for this activity is provided by three pavements: the Lower Church of al-Quwaysima dated to AD 717 (Piccirillo 1998: 359-364), the Acropolis church at Mā'īn dated to AD 719 / 720 (Piccirillo 1989: 226-234) and the nave of the Church of St Stephen at Umm ar-Raṣāṣ dated to AD 718. The original design of these pavements included depictions of both humans and animals. In contrast, a second pavement added in AD 756 to the presbytery of the Church of St Stephen at Umm ar-Raṣāṣ (Piccirillo 1994: 244-246) covers a previous one and displays just geometric decoration. This suggests that the iconoclasm occurred around or just before this date. On the other hand, the Theotokos Church, built in Mādabā in 767 (Piccirillo 1989: 45-47), was decorated with geometric mosaic patterns, probably reflecting a growing preference for non-figurative representation. New evidence comes from the pavement of the Church of St Constantine at Riḥāb, dated to AD 623 (Piccirillo 2007: 97-98). This displays, in a patch of white *tesserae* in one of the repaired portions, the inscribed letters TM with a horizontal line above that normally characterizes an abbreviated *nomen sacrum* or numbers. A suggested interpretation, based on the date of the Creation (*ab origine mundi)*, corresponds to the year AD 832 (Di Segni 2006: 578-579) and, if proved correct, may contribute further to the debate on iconoclasm.

In the Umayyad and early Abbasid periods, land seems to have been intensively exploited, with administrative reorganisation in *Jund al-Urdun* and *Jund Dimashq* (Haldon 2003: 380-381). Restrictions placed on local administration resulted in alternative economic strategies being introduced by the new rulers. Islamic settlements refrained from encroaching on the boundaries of established villages, probably to avoid conflict with Christian land owners. Al-Baladhuri describes an analogous situation in the middle Euphrates before Mu'awiyah became Caliph in around AD 661 (Kennedy 2003: 293).

The newly established Umayyad compounds formed large agricultural estates, which typically included a residential area (*qaṣr*) – resembling a *quadriburgus* in architectural terms – set amidst cultivated land close to an important crossroads, usually with sophisticated arrangements for water catchment and management. Most of the land was cultivated by *mawali*, according to written sources that describe land in the al-Balqā' being in the hands of the new elite and report the interest of the rulers themselves in large scale agricultural investment[5]. As an example, Khalid Ibn Yazid Ibn Mu'awiyah received from Abd al-Malik Ibn Marwan the sum

[5] Written sources mention several estates in the Balqā', such as that of Abu Sufyan Sakhr Ibn Harb who owned the village of Biqinnis. Al-Tabari mentions that 'Umar al-Thaqafi, governor of Iraq and the east between AD 738 and 744 had a *mazra'a* in Balqā', while Yaqut indicates that a *hisn* was owned by Khalid Ibn Abbad in the village of Tanhaj in Balqā' (See Northedge 1992: 51).

of 40,000 dinars and four estates in Anwas (in *Jund Filastin*) and Faedei (al-Fedeyn in *Jund al-Urdun*). The latter was uninhabited and subsequently transformed by him into a prosperous *da'ya* (Humbert 1989: 124-125). Mā'īn, identified with *Kastron Ammatha* according to Ibn 'Asakir in *"Tarikh Madinat Dimashq"*, featured a *qaṣr* and garden owned by Farwa ben Amr al-Judhami (Genequand 2003: 25). Later this estate was expanded, as al-Istakhri and Ibn Hawqal mention a fortress inhabited by the Umayyad and their *mawali* (Genequand 2003: 25-26). Similar developments can also be traced at al-Humayma, where members of the Abbasid family bought the *qaria* and later transformed it into their own enclave, building a *qaṣr*, mosque and garden, as well as planting 500 olive trees (Oleson *et al.* 2003: 55-59; Schick 2007: 346-347).

Other examples, such as the five *quṣūr* discovered at Umm al-Walīd and Khān az-Zabīb, date either to the last decades of the seventh century or to AD 710-720 (Bujard 1997: 372-373). These estates probably formed the residential unit of a clan or family group having substantial land-holdings. The religious needs of the residents were met through the construction of small mosques nearby. Similar extensive estates were located around Qaṣr al-Ḥallabāt (Arce 2007: 342-344), al-Qaṣṭal, al-Mushāsh, Azraq al-Jiyāshī, Shuqayra al-Gharbiyya (Karak) (Al-Shdaifat, Al-Trawneh and Ben Badhan 2006: 206-210), al-Mutrāb / Khirbat as-Samrā and al-Ḥammām (Ma'ān) (Genequand 2001: 12-16). These seem to have developed on the fringes of Byzantine villages in *Provincia Arabia* and *Palaestina Tertia*, but have not yet been fully investigated. It will be important to establish whether or not these estates formed part of a larger property owned by members of the ruling dynasty. Their importance cannot be considered merely in economic terms. In order to avoid dissent resulting from taxation of the provinces, Umayyad government finances relied more on rental income and produce from their own estates. Revenue from agricultural land, whether in cash or kind, may also have been used in support of the administration and army. The latter consisted mainly of private troops, so as to circumvent the restrictions of the *diwan* system (Kennedy 2003: 363-365).

In cultural terms, this prosperity was marked by the use and spread of painted / glazed pottery vessels (produced to meet local demand, but otherwise uncommon in Byzantine contexts in the region), metalwork, ivory, sculpture and stucco. The latter was introduced primarily in the context of wall decoration, alongside the more common mosaic floors, all of which marked the establishment of a new class of euergets amongst the Umayyad elite.

Archaeological evidence resulting from the excavation of Byzantine villages and Umayyad compounds demonstrates remarkable continuity in settlement pattern throughout the seventh and eighth centuries. Ceramic evidence from sealed contexts dates the abandonment of the area to roughly the ninth century. Although the issue still requires clarification, it seems that Christian villages and Umayyad estates experienced a shared decline that resulted in the depopulation and abandonment of the most marginal agricultural lands. We hope that further research will shed additional light on the matter.

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