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# Roads, Travel, and Time 'Across Jordan' in Byzantine and Early Islamic Times

## Not All Roads are Necessarily Roman

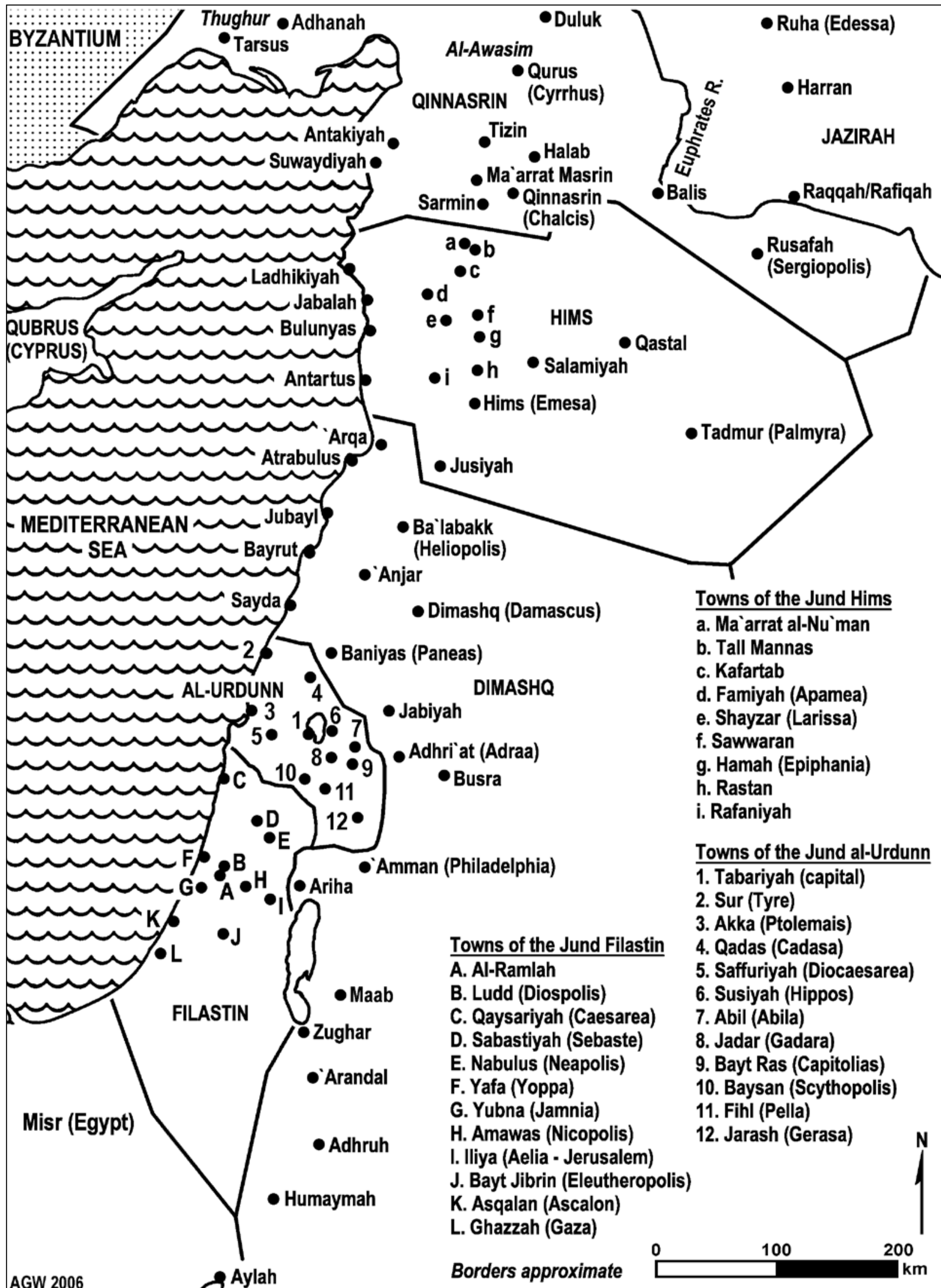
Crossing the land surface of Jordan today can be done with great speed and with little regard to topography. It was, of course, not always so, and even just a few decades ago getting from one place to another took time and, most importantly, no little knowledge of road networks and how the transport system worked. At what time of the year to travel, and by what means, were crucial issues with major economic and safety ramifications. Hence, an understanding of roads, ways of travel and travel times needed to journey from one place to another in antiquity are essential components in assessing the political, cultural and economic history of any age. This paper reviews and evaluates documentary and archaeological material detailing the major routes that crossed Jordan, the manner in which they were transversed, and the time required to travel over them in late antiquity and early Islamic times. In that post-Roman world, roadways took on new meaning as the needs of a Mediterranean empire gave way to wider, and more self-defining, social and economic requirements.

There are many ways of evaluating pre-modern transport networks, but my intentions are reasonably straightforward: to map out known, and some surmised, routes through Jordan in late antiquity and early Islamic times, and then to suggest the ways these routes were crossed and how long such journeys could take. To do this, both written and archaeological data will be used.

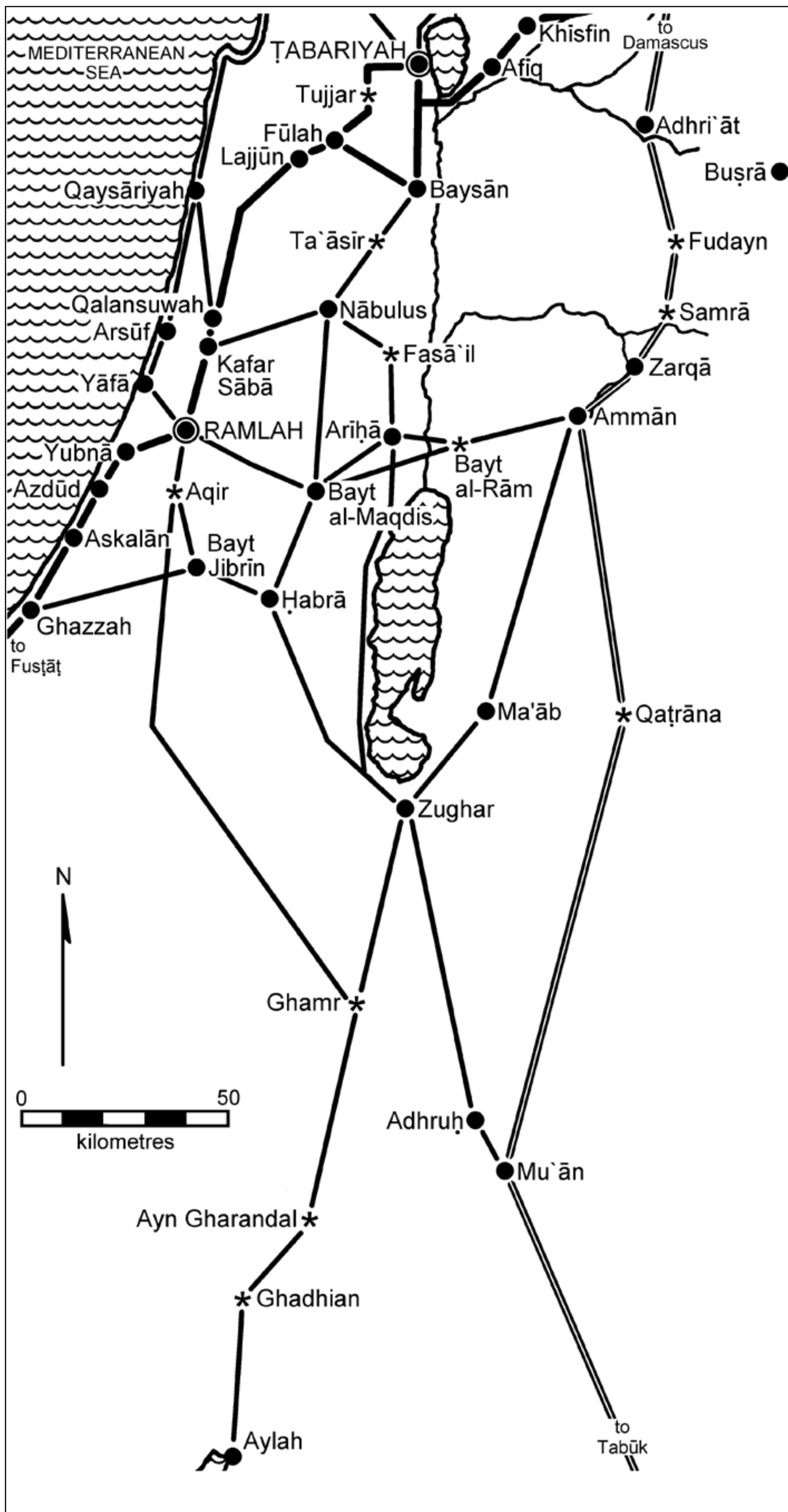
After the emperors Justinian (527-565) and Justin II (565-578), and hence beginning with the last quarter of the sixth century AD, Jordan and the whole of Bilād ash-Shām experienced significant cultural and settlement reorientations, reaching final expression in the provincial structure of early Islamic times (FIG. 1). In very general terms, inland areas experienced expansion while coastal regions lagged behind. In some cases urban centres faltered (although this should not be overstated), while many rural areas throve (Di Segni 1999). Accordingly, the bādiyah with it many villages, such as Umm al-Raṣāṣ or Riḥāb, blossomed while settlement profiles in many towns, such as Pella/Faḥl and Jarash, underwent significant changes (Walmsley 2007b). In the last quarter of the sixth century, we can see the unquestioned manifestation of the post-classical transformation of Jordan, but not in the manner of Hugh Kennedy's "*polis* to *madīnah*" hypothesis (H. Kennedy 1985), but rather a cultural levelling and a search for new, post-Roman, identities with a concomitant impact on the physical manifestation of towns.

What, then, of roads? In a time of shifting cultural boundaries, did the road network remain the same, or adapt to the changes, and what means of transportation were used to cross the landscape after the last quarter of the sixth century? We know remarkably little, but the changes of late antiquity suggest simply transposing the roman system onto this later time is just not satisfactory.

Ninth and tenth century AD written sources offer a useful outline of the important roads in Jordan during the first Islamic centuries (FIG. 2). Crucial, without doubt, was the road and pilgrimage route between Damascus and the Ḥijāz, which crossed Jordan from north to south (Muqaddasī (al-Maqdisī) 375/985 [1906]: 192.11-13, 249.13-250.7). The route, beginning in Damascus, passed through Adhri'āt (Dar'ā) to reach Zarqā', noted for its later Ayyubid fortlet (Qaṣr Shabīb) on a spur near the river (Petersen 1991), and thence to 'Ammān, a sub-governorate of the Jund Dimashq (Northedge 1992). Here pilgrims from Bayt al-Maqdis/al-Quds joined the pilgrimage.




1. The military provinces (*ajnād*) of early Islamic Bilād ash-Shām, the territorial extent of which was an outcome of cultural and settlement changes originating in late antiquity (Walmsley).




2. The main roads of Jordan and Palestine in the ninth and tenth centuries AD as recounted in the written sources (Walmsley).

South of ‘Ammān, the route would have passed by the Qur'anic site of Kahf ar-Raqīm, with two mosques (FIG. 3), and thereafter continued south to Ma‘ān via Qaṭrānah and onwards to the Ḥijāz. The Umayyads paid especial attention to this road as both an obligatory and prestigious act. Specifically, al-Walīd I built reservoirs and infirmaries on the Damascus–Makkah road (Ibn Faqīh (ed.) De Goeje, 290H/903AD [1885]: 106.17-20; al-Rashid 1980: 8), while later Hishām improved the water facilities on this route (al-Rashid 1980: 9, 11). In the fading years of the Umayyad caliphate, the hapless al-Walīd II commenced a grandiose palace to receive the pilgrimage, which was his habit: “At a staging-post called Zīzā' [Jiza] he [al-Walīd] would ... feed for a period of three days people returning from the pilgrimage” (Ṭabari trans. Hillenbrand 1989: 103-4). Tragically, however, the project – Mushatta, with its south-facing façade depicting an earthly paradise (FIG. 4) – was abruptly terminated by his assassination (Walmsley 2007a: 100-4).

Travel times are harder to calculate. In al-Maqdisī, the distance from the Yarmūk to Ma‘ān was covered in five stages (*marḥalah*), but for C.M Doughty the nineteenth-century trip was longer: two days to ‘Ammān, two to Qaṭrānah, one long 12-hour day to Ḥasā, and two further days to Ma‘ān – in all, seven gruelling days (Doughty 1883 [1921]: 4-18). It seems that al-Maqdisī's stages did not represent actual travelling times, but spaced route destinations. Hence, Doughty's trip would better represent actual travel times: that is, the minimum of a week from the Yarmūk to Ma‘ān, without a rest day.

Confirmation can be sought in the journey of Gertrude Bell from Mādabā to Wādī Mūsā in 1900, which involved two days on the mountain road to Karak and another two following the Roman road to Wādī Mūsā. Going back via Tuwwānah, the journey was spread over three days, in part due to the excessive heat (Bell 1927: 72-76).

The ninth-century AD geographical works, specifically Ibn Khurdadhbih and Qudāmah, preserve only a bare outline of the itinerary between Damascus and Makkah. The lack of absolute distances and some uncertainty over the itinerary in these works suggests that a centralized knowledge of the pilgrimage route did not match that kept for the post-roads; thus to travel on the pilgrimage road in Bilād ash-Shām, local knowledge was essential. Perhaps this situation arose after the overthrow of the Umayyads, for only with al-Maqdisī is more information provided, as he appears to have had access to sources familiar with the Umayyad system.

Al-Maqdisī stresses the pivotal role played by ‘Ammān on the route during the Umayyad Period, when this town was linked to Makkah via the oasis of Taymā' by three postal routes (Muqaddasī (al-Maqdisī) 375/985 [1906]: 249.13–250.7). In addition to the western pilgrimage route via Ma‘ān already described, a second (middle) route passed through al-‘Auniyid, modern al-‘Uwaynid with a

3. The two mosques of Kahf ar-Raqīm, the upper (foreground) of probable Umayyad date (Walmsley).

4. Failed grandeur: the unfinished depiction of an earthly paradise on the Mushatta façade (Walmsley).

ruined fort and wadi tower, reaching Taymā’ after a long 13½ stages (D.L. Kennedy 1982: 113-28, with references; Musil 1927: 517-18). The third, easternmost, route passed by way of Wubayr, modern Bāyir, once with remains of a castle and wells, reaching Taymā’ after 12 stages (Stein, in D.L. Kennedy 1982: 255-58; King, Lenzen and Rollefson 1983: 398-99; Musil 1927: 324, 517-18). ‘Ammān’s central role in facilitating communications between Damascus and the Ḥijāz, along with other important functions, accounts for the construction of an impressive Islamic citadel complex above the classical town (FIG. 5). However, the rise of the Abbasid dynasty resulted in a greater importance for the Darb Zubaydah from Kūfah (al-Rashid 1980), and the Damascus-Ḥijāz route reverted to regional, rather than imperial, importance only, with emphasis on the Ma‘ān route. Nevertheless, under the first Abbasid caliph, Abū al-‘Abbās as-Saffāḥ (132-136H/749-75AD), the route was repaired as revealed in an important milestone dated to 135H/752AD found near al-Mafraq, the intermediary stop between Adhri‘āt, the point of measurement inscribed on the milestone, and al-Zarqā’. It is most unlikely this is the only milestone on the route through Jordan.

Tenth century AD sources pinpoint a network of roads that passed through the trading town of Zughar at the southeast corner of the Dead Sea in the Wādī ‘Arabah (FIG. 2). A route south of Zughar led to Aylah probably via Ghamr (with a road to al-Ramlah), ‘Ayn Gharandal and Ghadhian in the

5. An obligatory, prestigious and pragmatic act: embellishment of the pilgrimage road from Damascus to the Holy Cities of the Ḥijāz with the citadel palace of ʻAmmān (Walmsley).

Wādī ʻArabah, a journey that extended over four stages (=days?) (Muqaddasī (al-Maqdisī) 375/985 [1906]: 249.12). Roads also led from Zughar to Ḥabrā and Arīḥā, and thence to points beyond such as Jerusalem and Nābulus. Another road from Zughar passed through Moab to ʻAmmān, through which town Damascus was joined to the trading markets of Zughar and Aylah. In addition to the Ḥajj (above), this connection further explains the ongoing importance of ʻAmmān, Adhriʻāt and al-Zarqā' in the third-fourth/ninth-tenth centuries. In total, the trip from Aylah to the Yarmūk extended over eight stages (ʻAqabah – Zughar: 4 stages; Zughar – Maāb, 1 stage; Maāb – ʻAmmān, 1 stage; ʻAmmān – Adhriʻāt, 2 stages). This trip would have taken at least eight days, the ascent from Zughar to Maāb being the most rigorous. Additionally, Ibn Ḥawqal mentions a road from Zughar to the mountains of ash-Sharāh, presumably reaching Udhruḥ and, ultimately, Maʻān (Ibn Ḥawqal (Abū al-Qāsim b. ʻAlī al-Nasībī) ed. Kramers 1938 [378H/988AD]: 186.6-7, 186.21-22). Al-Maqdisī overlooks this route, perhaps a little bit surprising considering the close ties between these two centres and Zughar. However, it was Jarrāḥid territory and difficult to cross. Al-Maqdisī also presents a blank map for north Jordan – located in this period in a separate *jund* (that of al-Urdunn; FIG. 1) – but the gap may

be knowledge-based, lying outside of al-Maqdisī's experience perhaps due to political factors and especially the impact of the "turbulent" 'Awf tribe that dominated that area in Fatimid times (Sourdel 1960). Therefore, we can expect a road northwards from 'Ammān to Jarash and from there to Pella and Baysān/Ṭabariyyah or to Irbid/Bayt Rās and both Abil and Jadar (Umm Qays); certainly these routes operated in Umayyad times and probably later, but the roads are not mentioned by the sources.

Not to be ignored for a number of reasons is the 'Ammān – Jerusalem road. According to al-Maqdisī there were two routes that connected these important centres: one in three sections through Arīḥā and Bayt al-Rām, perhaps via Ḥisbān; and the other more a direct approach covered in two stages, probably by way of the Wādī Nā'ūr or Salṭ and with one stop at the Jordan River. The Jericho – Jerusalem leg has produced important milestones from the time of 'Abd al-Malik with distances measured from Damascus, and which confirm the early Islamic mile of 2.285kms (Elad 1999; Sharon 1997: 104-8). Early in the twentieth century, Gertrude Bell travelled the road between Jerusalem and Salṭ in two short days (Bell 1907: 4-18). Leaving Jerusalem at nine in the morning, Bell lunched at the khān associated with the parable of the Good Samaritan before camping for the night at the Jordan crossing. Next morning, after paying a toll at the Jordan River bridge, Bell had a choice of three destinations: Salṭ, Ḥisbān or Mādabā. Taking the Salṭ road, she arrived there at four in the afternoon. On another occasion, in 1900, Bell travelled to Mādabā via Jericho, Livias/Bayt al-Rām and Wādī Ḥisbān in three days, but two of those were just over half days (Bell 1927: vol. 1, 67-70).

How were roads travelled in the seventh – tenth centuries AD? The information is equally as sparse. The first point to be considered is the condition of roads. We know that the Darb Zubaydah between 'Iraq and the Ḥijāz was essentially a cleared track, suitable for foot traffic, as with many Roman-period routes in Bilād ash-Shām. Two written sources offer a glimpse of road traffic in early Islamic times. In about 685AD, the administrator of Nessana/Nastan within the district (*kūrah*) of Ghazzah, which formed part of the *Jund Filastīn*, received a demand from a superior (probably based in Ghazzah) to provide two camels and two drovers, with pack saddles and straps, to serve upon the Caesarea – Scythopolis (Qaysāriyah – Baysān) road (Kraemer 1958: 209-11, document 74). Secondly, in the late seventh century, as recounted by Arculf the pilgrim, pinewood for fuel was carried to Jerusalem by camels, for wagons and carts were rarely seen (Wilkinson 1977: 106). Clearly, pack animals (camels and mules) were the main means of transport (FIG. 6), while wagons must have been an exception, a system almost certainly inherited from late antiquity.

While patchy, the late antique and early Islamic material on travel across Jordan is generally consistent: it took at least a week (more from 'Aqabah) to transverse Jordan from north to south and a couple of days to cross the Jordan rift valley. Not surprisingly, then, in this period the material culture of the south stemmed from a clearly different tradition than that in the north, but with demonstrably east – west connections as well. As described elsewhere (Walmsley 2000), most economic networks as observed in the material culture operated effectively within a radius of 100km, or three days travel time. That allowed a journey to be completed within a maximum six-day period, which would ensure the traveller could return home in time for the holy day of the week. This arrangement reveals the practical compatibility between religion and commerce that characterised the late antique and early Islamic periods in Bilād ash-Shām.

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6. Camels as beasts of burden: a working camel on the vault of the reception hall of Quṣayr 'Amra (Walmsley).

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