

THE ISLAMIC CONQUEST OF SOUTHERN JORDAN A NEW RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE

by
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Current Perspectives

One of the most significant events in the world of Late Antiquity, the Islamic conquest of the eastern Byzantine provinces during the first half of the seventh century A.D., has received much attention in scholarly literature. The phenomena of the conquest — its rapidity and astonishing success — have generated an endless discussion over the cause of the conquest and factors which seemingly contributed to the Islamic strength (Donner 1981: 3-11 for a summary). Similarly, discussion continues on discerning the causes of the Byzantine failure to contain the Muslim attacks. Typically, scholars search for symptoms of Byzantine weakness, as derived from narrative historical record. This approach led to the recognition of several anciently documented factors which seemingly facilitated the conquest.

The proponents of the military factor point to the military weakness and the manpower shortage of the Byzantines, following the exhausting Persian wars (Constantelos 1972: 345; Kaegi 1986: 82-83; Stratos 1968: 235; Vasiliev 1973: 199). The political factors include the dissolution of the Ghassanid phylarchy which was seemingly a major blunder on behalf of the Byzantines, creating a vacuum state between them and the Persians, as well as depriving them of much needed auxiliary troops (Barker 1977: 242; Becker 1913: 331; Gabrieli 1968: 109). Conflicts between the Monophysites and the Chalcedonians, which seemingly resulted in a weakened allegiance of eastern populations to the government in Constantinople, is a main point of the much exploited religious factor (Becker 1913: 345; De Goeje 1900: 104; Hitti 1960: 143; Vasiliev 1973: 196, 208). Finally, social factors include the general indifference of eastern populations to the Byzantine rule, caused by the interval of Persian occupation and an oppressive fiscal system reintroduced by the Byzantines after A.D. 629 (De Goeje 1900: 104; Donner 1981:

99; Gabrieli 1968: 108-109; Stratos 1968: 25, 100, 260).

In discussing the social and economic changes which affected Syria-Palestine during the century preceding the Islamic conquest, H. Kennedy noted a set of similarly defined factors allegedly responsible for the fall of the Byzantine East during the Muslim invasions. He observed that “these explanations are undoubtedly correct within their limits but they will hardly account for the more far reaching changes in society and culture which accompanied the conquest” (1985: 142). It is suggested here that these factors merely reflect the large-scale symptoms characteristic for a process of cultural change, associated with the decline of political authority, disintegration of administrative and military elements, and apparent changes in the economic viability of specific areas, all of which actually occurred prior to the conquest.

Therefore, while these factors may be regarded as descriptive devices addressing the historical question of how the conquest was facilitated, they fail to sufficiently address the general question of why the Byzantine provinces fell an easy prey to the conquerors. Further, these particularistic symptoms of Byzantine weaknesses are commonly extended spatially to explain historical events in areas with diverse sociopolitical and economic characteristics, such as northern Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine and Egypt. Peripheral areas, such as southern Jordan, are rarely given more than limited recognition in such generalizations. It is suggested that regional variations in both nature and reasons for the success of the conquest are often sacrificed for the sake of making general statements in scholarly works.

The region of southern Jordan or, in administrative terms, the “eastern *Palaestina Tertia*”, extended between Wadi al-Hasa and the Gulf of ‘Aqaba, and was centred on Petra. It was the first Byzantine territory to

fall under the Muslim attacks. In particular, extant historical sources indicate the prior to the conquest absence of Byzantine administrative and military structures, reflected in an astonishing capitulation of major population centers of the area such as Aila ('Aqaba) and Adroa /Adruh (Udhruh), to the forces of Muhammad, in A.D. 630 (Mayerson 1964). A widespread abandonment of fortifications in the region during the century preceding the Muslim conquest is also well-attested through archaeological data (Parker 1986: 153-154).

A re-examination of the issues related to the conquest of this specific area indicates an inadequate explanatory value of the aforementioned factors, when considering the existence of the regional variations in the situation of the Byzantine East before the conquest. As mentioned above, the historically documented religious disunity of eastern populations figures prominently in previous explanations of the rapid Muslim conquest. What, however, was the degree of that dissent, and how significantly could it have affected the political allegiance of the populations? Similarly, how significant was the regional military weakness of the Byzantines during the conquest if an early Muslim military expedition could be annihilated at Mu'ta in a remote corner of Moab in A.D. 629, while only a year later Aila, a major city of southern Jordan, would capitulate to the forces of Muhammad, seemingly without reference or recourse to the Byzantine government? Why Petra, a famous commercial emporium of the Nabataean-Roman period, still highly praised by Eusebius (1966: 36.13-14) and Libanius (*Ep.* 321, 1963: 301) in the fourth century, did become "a hard and distant place of exile" (John of Ephesus 1923: 188) in the following century, and obviously ceased to be an urban center by the end of the sixth century? Why was it that literary evidence concerning southern Jordan became increasingly scarce after the fourth century, with most of the area completely disappearing from the historical record by the end of the sixth century? Why did neither Byzantine nor Arab historians describing the events of the conquest pay any attention to the situation in southern Jordan? Finally, why is it that none of the proposed explanatory factors mentioned above provide a satisfac-

tory understanding of these puzzling issues?

Research Hypothesis

In the present analysis, an alternative processual perspective focussing upon the regional scale of economic decline in southern Jordan and the effects of this process on political, social and demographic realms is presented. Initially, the selection of economic processes as significant in understanding social change seems particularly justified in the study area. It is generally acknowledged that the rapid sociopolitical development of southern Jordan, culminating in the establishment and maintenance of the Nabataean state, was related to the economics of long-distance trade in highly valued Oriental goods passing through the area (Russell 1981), and that the subsequent decline of southern Jordan, exemplified by the decline of Petra as a political and commercial center, may have been associated with a loss of trade revenues. Thus, a significant aspect of our current understanding of the cultural history of southern Jordan is the implication that the economics of international trade must have played a more significant role in the sociopolitical processes of development and decline than the alternative economics of agriculture and pastoralism.

The present paper, being a short summary of an extensive research (Fiema 1991), addresses this economic argument by presenting an hypothesis which suggests a direct relationship between the dominant economic strategy and the forms of sociopolitical organization. Economics are widely accepted as playing a prominent role in the rise and decline of complex social organizations, underlying conditions of social inequality while representing one of the primary benefits which complex organizations may provide a population. The postulated relationship between a specific economic strategy and the most appropriate level of sociopolitical complexity implies that societies are expected to be politically and economically organized at the level required by their economy. Among the alternative economic strategies pursued by the inhabitants of ancient southern Jordan were agriculture, pastoralism and trade. The selection of pas-

toralism or agriculture is primarily related to ecological factors, while the pursuit of trade is most likely to have been subjected to further cultural factors such as political and economic concerns. Each strategy would have been associated with different costs and benefits which fluctuated through time.

The cost of trade is primarily related to the maintenance of the infrastructure necessary for its efficient management and defense, while its benefits are derived from the accumulation of wealth resulting from a participation in trade. It is postulated that the costs and benefits for an involvement in long distance international trade (as opposed to local or interregional trade) may be heavily influenced by international economics and politics.

Further, the benefits should be proportional to the volume of trade which passed through the area. While a greater volume would generate greater potential benefits, a drop in the volume of trade would be associated with diminishing benefits. It is suggested that the volume and nature of trade passing through southern Jordan were largely a function of economic conditions and political decisions in surrounding regions, and as such, lay beyond the direct control of its indigenous populations. Only the costs of trade were, to varying degrees, under their control. As long as external economic conditions allowed for a high market demand for imported goods, and so long as external political decisions allowed local populations to control the infrastructural costs of trade by determining their own trading partners, trade routes and means of transport, a favorable costs to benefits ratio for participation in long distance international trade could be sustained.

Conversely, a decline in external economics, involving a drop in market demand for imported items, or the development of an internal production of such items, or the inability of local populations to control the infrastructural costs of trade due to external political interference, would result in an unfavorable costs to benefits ratio in which a continued participation in long-distance international trade could not be economically sustained. Under these circumstances, it is expected that changes in the volume of trade

passing through the area would be followed by changes in the local administrative and military structures of the area, and changes in the spatial distribution of populations, reflecting the pursuit of alternative economic strategies.

Focussing on the economics of southern Jordan as related to long-distance exchange, a testible and non-ambiguous model of cause-effect relationships between trade and political-military affairs in southern Jordan may be generated. In particular, it is expected that the political and military viability of southern Jordan in the Late Roman and Byzantine periods would have varied in accordance with economic fluctuations. Changes in regional economics, following the fluctuations in long distance trade, would have engendered subsequent political and military changes in the area. In historical terms, if state-level, international trade did substantially decrease in the area, then a subsequent decline in its administrative and military forces (reflecting a decrease in the importance of the area in Constantinople's considerations) should have occurred (Fiema 1991: 51-54).

Archaeological Indicators

With the assumption that the political and military affairs of southern Jordan varied in accordance with the economic importance of that area, the expected relationships which would have resulted can be tested using extant data. In operational terms, previously documented political and military changes can be temporally and spatially compared with variations in trade as documented through archaeologically recovered material culture and demographic data derived from regional site surveys.

Spatial and temporal variations in trade economics should be mirrored in human demographic shifts as reflected in the size, density and distribution of archaeological sites, i.e. settlement patterns. Data concerning community size, the distribution of populations, means of communication and defensive measures should furthermore reflect the patterns of political and administrative organization in the area. The importance of settlement patterns as material isomorphs

of the mode of production and sociopolitical organization has been widely recognized, in addition to extant historical and other written records (Adams 1981: 51; Claessen and van der Velde 1985: 249; Price 1978: 165).

Periods favorable for long-distance international trade should be marked by a hierarchy of site locations and defensive works reflecting general regional control, but with a focus along major international lines of communication. Site clusters would be expected at major nodal points along trade routes, or at locations where resources vital to that trade were geographically circumscribed. Spatial organization may reflect a model in which the hierarchy of commercial centers shows descending levels with increasing distance from the highest level-center. Centralization of the political elite is expected to be achieved in a single highest-level center, which is also the most important economic center easily accessible through a well-developed intra- and inter-regional road system. Evidence of high-cost administrative facilities, such as roads and forts, may reflect the direct economic and political influence of the state-level organization.

Periods unfavorable to long-distance international trade, but with continued regional viability, should be marked by a decline in the patterns defined above and their general replacement by a hierarchy of site locations and defensive works dispersed across the landscape, reflecting shifts towards alternative and geographically dispersed agricultural and pastoral economic options. Given known environmental conditions in southern Jordan, clusters of sites and defensive works would be expected in areas where agricultural and pastoral development were possible, but where critical resources (fertile land, water, seasonal pasturage) were geographically circumscribed (Chisholm 1970: 102-103). Some of the former trading emporia or large market places may concurrently decline to a level consistent with the regional pattern of settlement, although still retaining their role as regional administrative centers. The disappearance of international route connections will be also characteristic for this pattern.

The increasing isolation of clusters of

sites, and the smaller average size and a less accentuated hierarchy among outlying settlements, would therefore reflect only a minimal level of economic integration and the administrative structures that are the concomitants of centralized power. Under extreme economic conditions, the site hierarchy would be expected to virtually disappear along with associated defensive works, reflecting the political and military collapse or abandonment of the area.

Historical Interpretation

A detailed analysis of spatial and temporal distribution of archaeological remains in southern Jordan during the Nabataean through the Late Byzantine periods, conducted under the guide-lines of the hypothesis above, has been presented elsewhere (Fiema 1991). A short processual interpretation of this research follows.

The political and economic situation of the Mediterranean of the first centuries B.C./A.D., involving a growing demand for Oriental goods, favored the Nabataean involvement in trade and resulted in the founding of a state level society among the Nabataeans by the late second or early first century B.C. The subsequent development of maritime trade routes to Egypt would not have led to a collapse of the Nabataean trading network, since both a high market demand and international politics favored the existence of independent and competing commercial networks. In fact, extant archaeological data suggest the intensification of Nabataean involvement in long distance trade as a response to the more cost and time efficient, sea-borne transport to Egypt (Fiema 1992).

The apparent settlement pattern and communication networks attest to an economic efflorescence in southern Jordan from the first century B.C. through the early third century A.D., which was accompanied by a highly developed administrative, commercial and military infrastructure. This infrastructure is archaeologically attested in a well-developed hierarchy of sites, an extensive road network, and the flourishing of Petra which functioned as the major political and economic center of the area.

The political extinction of the Nabataean

state in A.D. 106 and the organization of the region as a Roman province did not substantially alter the extant supply and demand situation. Roman administrative and military arrangements actually followed prior Nabataean arrangements, in pursuit of the same economic goals. However, the direct assimilation of southern Jordan into the political sphere of the Roman empire would have resulted in an increased dependency of local political arrangements upon the broader considerations of the government in Rome.

The postulated economic decline of the Roman empire in the third century A.D., associated with changes in the pattern of commercial routes, and with a decline in the demand for exotic goods, would have directly affected the economics of southern Jordan. In particular, external political and economic factors would have altered the relative costs and benefits associated with trade networks, with a drop in the external market demand for Oriental goods dramatically altering the return rates for international long distance trade relative to alternative economic options. In this situation, the volume of trade passing through southern Jordan would have dramatically decreased, and a shift to lower order economics involving interregional trade, agriculture and pastoralism would have occurred. This shift, archaeologically documented through altered patterns of human demography, settlement hierarchy and communication networks, apparently began in the late third century A.D., and culminated during the Byzantine period.

It was the political and economic recovery of the empire under the Tetrarchic system and throughout the fourth century which brought about new administrative and military arrangements in response to the altered economic situation in southern Jordan. These arrangements specifically reflect the increasing significance of alternative economic options (agriculture, pastoralism, interregional trade and the copper exploitation). The Byzantine period in Jordan is marked by an unparalleled expansion into marginal lands and extensive agricultural production. This recovery, however, as based upon the economic viability of certain regions of southern Jordan, was increasingly localized, and there-

fore favored differential administrative and military arrangements among the regions of southern Jordan. Archaeological data related to the Byzantine period (the fourth through the sixth centuries A.D.) exhibit a growing regionalization of settlement locations and military structures, apparently reflecting an altered economic and political environment. The Wadi al-Hasa area, intensively surveyed in 1979-83 (MacDonald 1988), presents a good example of Byzantine settlement patterns characterized by a high population density, yet marked by the existence of three, well-defined, isolated clusters of settlements.

The resulting decline in the economic significance of southern Jordan as a whole would have created an unfavorable economic environment for the external government to continue investing in the infrastructure of the region, leading to a political and military decline in the following centuries. In particular, the economic situation of Byzantine southern Jordan apparently favored a policy by the central government involving local political arrangements and military self-sufficiency. This process culminated in the mid-sixth century in the domination of the system of phylarchies. Although the relinquishing of the defense duties to the local elements is also attested for other parts of the Byzantine East, the territory south of Wadi al-Hasa presents a striking example of this process. Under conditions of declining economic benefits relative to administrative and military costs, the Byzantine state seemingly "economized" by gradually cutting the costs of maintaining sociopolitical structures relative to the economic output of this outlying part of the empire.

The increased scarcity of historical sources related to the area during the Late Byzantine period reflects the growing political insignificance of southern Jordan and a gradual withdrawal of political commitment on behalf of the central government. The final stages of the Byzantine period exhibit patterns consistent with a minimal level of economic and administrative integration within southern Jordan. The overall decline of the area is well-exemplified by an apparent abandonment of Petra as an urban center by the end of the sixth century (Russell 1991).

In historical terms, this situation suggests the political and economic abandonment of southern Jordan by the central government. Such a state of affairs must have substantially increased the vulnerability of the study area to potential external threats. This situation apparently antedated the Persian invasions, and is readily apparent just prior to the Muslim attacks. The end result of this process was the virtual absence of significant political and military arrangements in southern Jordan by the second quarter of the seventh century A.D., a situation which must have facilitated the Islamic conquest.

It is suggested that a processual perspec-

tive, which focuses upon the regional scale of economic decline in southern Jordan and its effects on the political, social and demographic realms, provides a more dynamic and satisfying understanding of culture change in this area in general, and of its rapid conquest by the Muslim forces in particular.

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