

# **The End of an Era? The Impact of Early Islamic Expansion on Economic and Social Structures in the Byzantine East**

Michele Campopiano  
*University of York*

The Arab conquest of the North African provinces and of the East meant a huge financial loss for the Byzantine Empire. The power balance seemed to shift in favor of the Caliphate. John Haldon, in *The Empire That Would Not Die*, emphasizes that the Byzantine Empire did resist, albeit within new more limited boundaries, because of the political and social transformations it underwent in the seventh century. The Islamic caliphate, it should be noted, increasingly spiralled into rebellion and political fragmentation, which became evident in particular in the ninth century. Taking inspiration from Haldon's reflections in his book, this article endeavors to contribute to the debate on these issues. For reasons of space and economy, it cannot quote sources extensively, but will refer to other published research.

One of the crucial changes for the Empire was that provincial elites rose to prominence, and became more deeply involved not only in the administrative structure but also in the symbolic and ideological universe of the East Roman Empire (pp. 73-74, 189-192). This was the stratum from which fiscal and managerial officers were usually drawn. A novel of Justin II in 569 makes clear that the provincial governors were to be appointed by landlords and bishops of the provinces. These groups were able to rise to the level of the international, multiprovincial late Roman elite that held the highest military offices, an elite largely composed of the old senatorial establishment. As Haldon puts it: "With the vast losses of

territory incurred by the state and the accompanying damage inflicted on the property and sources of wealth of the highest level of the senatorial establishment in the course of the seventh century, the remaining provinces and their local elites – the strata from what both the older curial elite had been drawn as well as the most prominent provincial magnates – became far more important than hitherto to the survival of the empire, and hence even more closely bound to the capital and the imperial system” (pp. 162-163). As Haldon rightly points out, some geographical advantages may have contributed to this survival. The Taurus/anti-Taurus was an important frontier barrier, but it was the Anatolian plateau beyond them that represented the major challenge for the Arabs, being a very different geographical environment from the one to which the conquerors were accustomed (pp. 63-66). By contrast, although climatic fluctuations made some agricultural activities more difficult, East Roman society was flexible enough to adapt to safer modes of agrarian economy on the plateau, and the government to rethink the ways it supplied its armies (pp. 219-248).

The role of cities changed and they lost the central administrative functions they had performed in the late Roman Empire: large cities shrank, and now “only Constantinople could serve as a focus for acquiring wealth, status, and power” (p. 194). Taxation, and in particular land tax, delivered the crucial financial support to the East Roman Empire. This continued into the seventh and eighth centuries, but, as Haldon observes, tax collection was placed under more direct palatine oversight (p. 72-73). This process went hand in hand with another development: East Roman armies were increasingly rooted in local society and recruited regionally from peasant communities, and their unit and brigade commanders were largely members of local elites (pp. 149-150). The Empire succeeded in rooting military organization and tax extraction in local society, and also in cementing them within the administration of a large empire, with local elites receiving highest imperial offices, empire-wide mobility of top office-holders, and imperial oversight on taxation.

Haldon also believes that the Caliphate was unable to throw all

the resources of its newly acquired provinces into the struggle with the Empire owing to the “devolved nature of both taxation and provincial government” (p. 30). The members of the Islamic community registered in the *dīwān* drew their ‘*aṭā*’ (salary) from the province in which they established themselves with the conquest. In their administration, the Arabs often maintained a substantial continuity with their Byzantine and Sasanian predecessors, including the involvement of landed elites and administrators rooted in the previous regimes and the use of Greek, Coptic and Pahlavi in administration.<sup>1</sup>

In Iraq, the heartland of the Sasanian empire prior to the Islamic conquest, the landed elite of the Persian *dahāqīn* (we use here the Arab version of the Middle-Persian word *dehgan*) stood surety for the taxes on their land: their village estates represented the prevailing form of land tenure in post-conquest Iraq.<sup>2</sup> Village estates under the control of *dahāqīn* were the normal units of agricultural production and taxation at the time of the Arab conquest: *dahāqīn* helped in the collection of surplus and its transmission to the state in the form of taxes.<sup>3</sup> This role was actually due to transformations that had taken place in the late Sasanian empire during the wave of reforms initiated by Kawād (r. 488-496 and 498-531) and implemented by Husraw (r. 531-579), which strengthened the role of local landed elites in the administration of the Empire and made the *dahāqīn* the keeper of the Empire’s administrative and political traditions.<sup>4</sup> These reforms may have been connected to the wave of disorders usually associated with the religious reformer Mazdak, which may in turn have sprung from peasant resistance to the overwhelming power of the highest aristocracy. However, landed elites were already starting to change in the first decades after the Muslim conquest. I have analyzed this process in greater detail elsewhere, but it is worth mentioning here that one of the key developments was the establishment

<sup>1</sup> For a recent overview of the Arabic conquests, see Hoyland, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Banaji, 2009; Morony, 1981, p. 139.

<sup>3</sup> Daryaee, 2009, p. 29 and pp. 147-148; Morony, 1981.

<sup>4</sup> The essential reference is still Rubin, 1995.

of landed elites that obtained large grants of land thanks to their political connections with the ruling dynasties, lands on which they paid lower taxes than the local landed gentry. This, together with the overexploitation of these lands by elites, who could easily find new sources of power or were replaced by changes in the ruling dynasties, led to a decline in tax revenues for the Caliphate and to a deterioration in soil conditions in Iraq.<sup>5</sup>

I turn now to issues of taxation, administration and elites in three areas that had been under Byzantine rule but were conquered by the Arabs in the course of the seventh century: Egypt, Syria-Palestine (including most of present-day Israel and Jordan), and North Africa more widely.

## Egypt

The case of early Islamic Egypt presents a similar continuity of tax collection practices. The hierarchy of provincial administration was transmitted largely intact from the Byzantine period to the early Islamic: the Byzantine pagarchies, which succeeded the *nomes* of the fourth century, continued to exist as administrative subdivisions, Arabic *kūras*. Probably as early as the sixth century, the role assigned to administrators of town councils (*curiales*) diminished, and elites retreated to their rural estates. Large country estates took over the role of town councils, almost becoming semi-independent centers of rule. The Byzantine pagarchs belonged to this landholding class.<sup>6</sup> This continued after the Islamic conquest, although the Arabs did carefully supervise tax administration and introduce some innovations. In particular, Arabs penetrated the upper echelons of provincial administration (and introduced new offices as well), yet few families were able to establish real administrative dynasties.<sup>7</sup> Tax al-

<sup>5</sup> Campopiano, 2011; 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Sijpesteijn, 2013, pp. 36-38; Sarris, 2006, pp. 177-199.

<sup>7</sup> Mikhail, 2014, pp. 143-146. Space permits only the briefest description of changes after the Arabic conquest. For a discussion of Arabic administrative innovations, including the poll tax, see Sijpesteijn, 2013, pp. 67-73.

location, however, was not dealt with at the level of the pagarchy anymore. The governor or the *dux* (subordinate to the governor) allocated tax quotas. The pagarch merely forwarded tax demands; the landholding elite inherited from the Byzantine period was more heavily subordinated to the provincial government.<sup>8</sup> Governors were appointed by the Caliph, but these nominations could be challenged by the local Egyptian Arab elites, who always preferred governors drawn from their ranks.<sup>9</sup>

More radical changes seem to have occurred in the eighth century. With Caliph 'Abd al-Malik (r. 685-705), Arabic started to be used more extensively as a language of administration. Arabs began to replace local officials in tax collection, and tax assessment focused on individuals rather than villages. We also find the recompilation of traditions concerning land conquered by Muslims. Egypt was defined as conquered by *'anwa* (military force without a treaty) and liable to pay the highest land-tax rates, which of course translated into more stable funding to pay the *'atā'*.<sup>10</sup> The role of the old landed gentry, as well its financial wealth, was again seriously diminished. Sijpesteijn has interpreted the changes of the early eighth century as essentially "a restoration and tightening of the old, Byzantine administrative system of Egypt as well as an attempt to improve the system by closer Muslim and central control". In her view, it is also indisputable that the tax burden increased.<sup>11</sup> The eighth century was punctuated by revolts: these increasingly involved Arab Muslim landholders as well, since they were required to pay heavy land taxes comparable to those levied on the rest of the population.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Sijpesteijn, 2013, pp. 88-89.

<sup>9</sup> Sijpesteijn, 2013, p. 62.

<sup>10</sup> Mikhail, 2014, pp. 107-118.

<sup>11</sup> Sijpesteijn, 2013, p. 100.

<sup>12</sup> Mikhail counts eleven rebellions starting in 697 or 712 up to 801; Mikhail, 2014, pp. 118-127.

## Syria-Palestine

As Haldon points out, the failure of the Empire to protect cities in Syria threatened by the Arabs was crucial, and resulted in the surrender or flight of their elites (p. 198). However, the situation of elites in Syria-Palestine was probably being transformed well before the Arab conquest. Cities and their *curiales* lost their central administrative role from at least the sixth century.<sup>13</sup> Kennedy shows that several Syrian aristocrats (in the late sixth and early seventh centuries) combined landownership with the exercise of a governing authority (he talks of quasi-governmental powers) over their large estates: a situation reminiscent of that already described in Egypt. A number of small towns and estates were owned by magnates who were also responsible, to some degree, for their defense.<sup>14</sup> In addition, these magnates may have run the fiscal administration. This elite may have survived the Sasanian occupation or else returned afterward. New inhabitants settled, in particular under Mu'āwiya, and some were given *qaṭā'i'* or property grants. These were given out of tithe lands, which we are told came from abandoned estates. Some of the old elites, including religious elites, may have left Syria.<sup>15</sup> Some may have reinvented themselves as *mawālī*, in particular as *mawālī* of the Caliph (non-Arab converts to Islam), playing a major role in the administration of the region and of the Umayyad Caliphate in general. However, unlike Sasanian elites, they did not bear the memory of their pre-Islamic origin. The Sasanian elites brought with them the tradition of Sasanian kingship and administration, whereas memories of Roman government seem not to have been revived by the descendants of the pre-Islamic elites. Kennedy concludes: "It seems as if the *Rūm*, old hellenised ruling class, lost their status and identity, either by death in battle, emigration or by merging themselves in the new order as *mawālī* of the Umayyads".<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Whittow, 1990; Avni, 2003, p. 327; Avni, 2014, pp. 40-106.

<sup>14</sup> Kennedy, 2010, pp. 184-185.

<sup>15</sup> Kennedy, 2010, pp. 191.

<sup>16</sup> Kennedy, 2010, p. 198.

As in Iraq, Islamic elites, protagonists of the conquest or linked to the ruling clans of the Caliphate, increasingly acquired country estates in Syria-Palestine beginning with Caliph 'Uthmān (r. 644-656). A popular area was the Darum, a region of steppes in southern Palestine east of Ascalon, where 'Amr ibn al-'Āṣ, "Conqueror of Palestine," acquired an estate called 'Ajlan.<sup>17</sup> In particular, river valleys were increasingly occupied, while other sites were abandoned. New settlements in Syria may have been created at the expense of marginal zones.<sup>18</sup> In other cases, new estates belonging to Islamic elites may have been established where previous settlements existed. Long irrigation canals were dug on large agricultural estates owned by members of the ruling Umayyad family.<sup>19</sup> The rise of desert castles in areas dominated by Umayyad dynasties in present-day Jordan, Palestine, Syria, and Iraq, such as Qaṣr al-Ḥayr ash-Sharqī and Qaṣr Ḥayr al-Gharbī, is to some extent a related development.<sup>20</sup> The wealth of the new elites was largely dependent on dynastic or factional political support: some abandonments and abatements can be explained in Syria by a shift of political fortunes when the Abbasids succeeded the Umayyads.<sup>21</sup>

## North Africa

North Africa had played a crucial role in the grain and oil *annona* for Rome, supplying the Eternal City with essential agricultural products. After the Vandal conquest of Carthage in 439, this connection with the Roman heartland was severed. Changes may be detected at different levels. The Vandals continued taxation, but in Africa we also notice an end of city-based taxation: taxation was probably increasingly centralized at the level of the capital, as in the

<sup>17</sup> Walmsley, 2007a, p. 335.

<sup>18</sup> Walmsley, 2007b, p. 112.

<sup>19</sup> Walmsley, 2007a, pp. 350-351.

<sup>20</sup> Barach, 1996, pp. 30-31; Genequand, 2005; Kennedy, 2011.

<sup>21</sup> Wickham, 2005, pp. 458-459.

Eastern Empire.<sup>22</sup> Vandal elites quickly adopted the lifestyle of late Roman gentry, settling down and acquiring property in the countryside.<sup>23</sup> The Vandals probably also settled on *sortes* (land-shares) and received exemption from taxation in exchange for military service.<sup>24</sup>

After the Byzantines conquered North Africa, grain shipments (this time to Constantinople) resumed.<sup>25</sup> In Byzantine North Africa civil and military administration were sometimes unified, a fusion formalized with the creation of the rank of *exarch* at the end of the sixth century.<sup>26</sup> The province was highly militarized. The highest-ranking officials of the province often hailed from the Persian and Balkan borderlands, and it is likely that subordinate officers were also largely of eastern origin, at least in Justinian's reign. So the highest civil servants and military commanders were generally "foreigners" and often had close ties to the emperor.<sup>27</sup> Heavy taxation under the Byzantines probably facilitated the progress of the Arab conquest. The leading members of the administration continued to be mainly non-African elites, and the Byzantines were incapable of delivering continuous military support to the far-flung region. They demanded increasing revenues from Africa while failing to create an essential identity of interest between the empire and North Africans. We have references to discontent among Roman landholders.<sup>28</sup> As Kaegi writes, "The Byzantines failed to develop a strategy that coordinated imperial interests with those of local Romanized inhabitants of North Africa". No evidence of a thematic reform in late-seventh-century North Africa exists.<sup>29</sup> We have no record of a system of land grants to support the military. Resistance to the Arabs remained mostly frag-

---

<sup>22</sup> Wickham, 2005, p. 89; Conant, 2012, p. 98.

<sup>23</sup> Conant, 2012, pp. 50-53; Tedesco, 2012, pp. 201-211.

<sup>24</sup> Wickham, 2005, p. 90.

<sup>25</sup> Conant, 2012, p. 336.

<sup>26</sup> Conant, 2012, p. 198.

<sup>27</sup> Conant, 2012, pp. 202-210.

<sup>28</sup> Kaegi, 2010, pp. 284-285.

<sup>29</sup> Kaegi, 2010, p. 272.

mented and the Byzantines failed to develop a strategy to harness the strength of autochthonous tribes in Numidia, who essentially resisted Byzantine rule.<sup>30</sup> The Arabs recruited among the Berbers, but, like their Byzantine predecessors, they also had difficulty assimilating them. As Kennedy puts it, in Ifrīqiya (the area roughly comprising Tunisia, Tripolitania and East Algeria) the governor “had to be able to defeat or win over the Berbers, while at the same time retaining the loyalty of the local *jund* (militia), always concentrated to retain its privileged status. This meant that the choice of governors was limited to those with roots in and contacts in the provinces”.<sup>31</sup> Berbers refused to pay taxes, which were necessary to pay salaries to the *jund*. The Umayyad taxed the area heavily, whereas Arab settlements were limited. In the late Umayyad period North Africa witnessed the spread of Kharijism in its different forms. Kharijites, too, refused to pay taxes and had significant success among the Berbers. Sufrite Kharijites led a rebellion in 740. An ‘Ibadi rebellion with broad Berber support seized Qayrawān in 758. This meant that North Africa held no allegiance to the Caliphate. The Abbasids had to send an expedition of 40,000 Khurasani soldiers to retake North Africa. Another Khariji rebellion (768-771) wrested the region again from Abbasid rule. In the event, under the Abbasids the *jund* remained hard to manage. This can be seen in the period of the Barmakid hegemony, when Harthama ibn A’yan was appointed governor, and, after him Muḥammad ibn Muqātil Al-‘Akkī: the latter was deposed by a military uprising in 799, probably because he ordered a lowering of the taxes paid to the *jund*. This led to the rise of Ibrāhīm ibn al-A’ghlab in 800, who was confirmed in office by Caliph Hārūn ar-Rashīd. After his accession, the Abbasids lost their power to appoint and dismiss governors of the province. Ibrāhīm ibn al-A’ghlab agreed to pay 40,000 dirhams a year to Baghdad, major financial relief given that the province had cost the Abbasids about 100,000 a year. He again had to negotiate a complex relationship with the *jund*, and also re-

<sup>30</sup> Kaegi, 2010, pp. 280-281.

<sup>31</sup> Kennedy, 1986, p. 176.

cruited a bodyguard of about 5,000 black slaves. The *jund* rebelled again in 810 because of unpaid salaries and the importing of a slave army.<sup>32</sup> After the Abbasid civil war, North Africa effectively became independent at the beginning of the ninth century.

## Conclusion

If the resilience of the Byzantine Empire after the dramatic changes in the seventh century can be explained to a large extent by the successful balancing of local roots and imperial interests across its elites, a large part of the troubles of the Islamic caliphate can be explained by the lack thereof. My hypothesis is that the elites of the Arab caliphates were either deeply connected to dynastic and imperial interests, or rooted in their provincial status quo.<sup>33</sup> Even within a single province, conflict arose over the distribution of landed resources, extracted through the dyad tax/rent and distributed in different forms. By the ninth century, the Abbasid regime did not represent a variety of constituencies and interest groups in the empire. As Kennedy puts it, "Most Muslims had no direct involvement with the ruling elite, and were subjects of Abbasid power, rather than stakeholders in it".<sup>34</sup> The creation of a new military elite, recruited primarily from among the Turks and other marginal groups, relying solely on salaries and settled in the heartland of the Caliphate without having any roots in them, compounded the problem.<sup>35</sup> The previous military system based on the payment of '*atā*' to the *jund* often produced similar problems, with the *jund* struggling to gain control over the revenues of their provinces, as we have seen with the unruly militia of North Africa. As I have shown in previous articles, the decline in revenues from Iraq, the heartland of the Empire, also fol-

<sup>32</sup> These events are summarized in: Kennedy, 1986, pp. 187-195.

<sup>33</sup> New research is being undertaken on the theme of elites in the early Islamic empire. For an example of this see the conference report by Verkinderen, Gundelfinger and Heidemann (2016).

<sup>34</sup> Kennedy, 2004, p. 16.

<sup>35</sup> Kennedy, 2004, pp. 10-11.

lowed from the Caliphate's inability to harness the resources of the rich alluvium. The interests of specific elite groups, who rose to wealth and influence through political support, prevailed. The paradox of East Roman survival is largely attributable, as Haldon explains, to the fact that "the vested interests of the elite in the widest sense [...] coincided with the survival of the Roman state" (p. 291). This is an important lesson for the study of pre-modern polities, a lesson that can be better understood by viewing such polities using a theoretical framework developed by Haldon himself – that of the tributary mode of production. The tributary mode of production is based on a system of surplus extraction from peasant production that ultimately relies on coercion. "Tax" and "rent" are two possible forms taken by this coercive surplus extraction: there is no economic difference between the two concepts, "For both sides of the couplet tax/rent are, in fact, expressions of the political-juridical forms that surplus appropriation takes, not distinct modes [of production]."<sup>36</sup> This perspective also allows new insights into the relationship between patterns of surplus extraction, as expressed in the couplet tax/rent, and social conflicts. Social conflicts in the tributary mode of production may arise from the contraposition of different social groups *within* the ruling classes regarding access to the surplus in the form of rents or salaries paid from the taxes. The ruling class can appropriate land surplus by taking control of portions of land and therefore receive rents paid by the peasants cultivating the land (as, for example in the Carolingian Empire), or by redistributing taxes to a ruling group in the form of salary (as in the case of payment to Arabs after the conquest).<sup>37</sup> In the Islamic caliphates, provincial elites (and different elites within the provinces) and the central administration clashed over the division of the economic surplus. It seems to me, following Haldon's narrative, that the Byzantine empire was able to create a solidarity of interests in the extraction and distribution of surplus between local elite and the Roman state.

<sup>36</sup> Haldon, 1993, p. 77.

<sup>37</sup> Haldon, 1993, pp. 142-143; pp. 203-218.