University of Groningen

The Byzantine-Islamic Transition in Palestine

Hansen, Annette

Published in:
Near Eastern Archaeology

DOI:
[10.5615/neareastarch.78.2.0116](https://doi.org/10.5615/neareastarch.78.2.0116)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2015

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Hansen, A. (2015). The Byzantine-Islamic Transition in Palestine: An Archaeological Approach by Gideon Avni. *Near Eastern Archaeology*, 78(2), 116-117. <https://doi.org/10.5615/neareastarch.78.2.0116>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

BOOKS TO DIG INTO

The Byzantine-Islamic Transition in Palestine: An Archaeological Approach

By **Gideon Avni**. Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2014. Pp. xvi + 424; 21 maps, 42 illustrations, 11 tables. Hardcover, \$185.00. ISBN: 9780199684335.

The Byzantine-Islamic transition in Palestine and Jordan, the sixth to eleventh century C.E., especially the economic performance of the region, has been subject to a lively debate over the last few decades. Did the period see a decline, supposedly started during the Byzantine Period, reach its zenith (Kennedy 1985) or had society and economy changed so profoundly that economic performance has to be measured using different parameters (cf. Watson 1983 and Brown 1989 for Late Antiquity)? Avni analyzes archaeological evidence collected over the past 40 years, provides a thorough and much needed archaeological synthesis, and demonstrates how this evidence can make a significant contribution to the historical narrative. Avni has produced an essential reader for any researcher and student of the Byzantine-Islamic transition, be they archaeologist or historian.

The book consists out of a prologue, six chapters, three appendices and an extensive bibliography. As each chapter thoroughly discusses a broad subject matter and a great amount of data, some chapters are rather long; Chapters Two, Three and Four could have benefitted from being split up thematically. The appendices are extensive and well structured. Appendix One is a list of cities from Byzantine Palestine, Phoenice, and Arabia that were occupied from the Hellenistic through the Early Islamic period or longer. Appendix Two is an overview of the 149 excavated sites discussed in the book, arranged by province, and with special attention to the moment of abandonment. At least one site mentioned in the text and that was occupied throughout the Early Islamic period, Khirbet Faris, is missing. Appendix Three contains the number of Byzantine and Early Islamic sites discovered during recent surveys in the Palestinian territories and Jordan. The graphic representation of the data in Appendix Two could have especially supported Avni's overall argument (see discussion and fig. 1). The layout and presentation of the book, including figures and pictures, are high quality though some minor spelling errors are present (e.g. Avni 2014: 1, 113). The bibliography is very extensive and a useful research tool.

The book's prologue deals with methodology and the two main primary sources that are used in Avni's argument: archaeology and eyewitness accounts. The prologue also serves as a historiography of the different explanatory models that have been used to describe the

Byzantine-Islamic transition. Chapter One discusses these models in detail ('Thundering hordes', 'Decline and fall' model, and 'Intensification and abatement' models). Avni emphasizes that though the state of the urban and rural landscapes in the sixth and the eleventh centuries were antithetical, archaeological evidence suggests that change in settlement patterns, economy, and landscape was far more gradual than formerly presumed. Moreover, settlements within Jund Filastin and Jund al-Urdunn overall showed continuity despite these changes.

Chapters Two through Four focus on the archaeological evidence. Chapter Two discusses the development of major Islamic cities and their hinterland (e.g. Caesarea Maritima, Beth Shean, Tiberius, and Jarash-Gerasa). Building preferences and settlement patterns, within the context of concurrent socio-political, economic, and environmental changes, feature prominently in the discussion. Chapter Three compares archaeological evidence from Jerusalem and Ramla. This 'Tale of Two Cities' clarifies the complicated, gradual transformation of the urban tradition in Palestine by contrasting them in role (religious center vs. administrative and commercial hub), urban development and city plan. Chapter Four divides the area of study into nine regions in order to highlight variations between them. Several types of rural settlements are discussed in order to characterize the transformation of rural settlement patterns.

Chapter Five synthesizes the archaeological evidence presented in Chapters Two through Four and places it into the context of the main agents of change and their impact on settlement patterns. Avni examines the following aspects: military conquest and political instability (the Persian and Arab conquests), the Byzantine sea raids and Bedouin land raids, earthquakes, plagues (e.g. outbreaks of the 'Justinianic' bubonic plague), famine, climate change, and religious change (i.e. Islamization). Chapter Six is the conclusion and conveys that the combined effect of these agents of change had a noticeable impact on the settlement patterns, yet the impact of some are difficult to pinpoint in the archaeological record. Much of the region experienced agricultural and industrial intensification and increased monumental building projects dur-

Figure 1. Graphic representation of the periods of abandonment for cities, towns, and 'other' (rural) settlements for Jund Filastin, Jund al-Urdunn/Jund Dimashq and the Jerusalem Area that are presented in Appendix 2 (Gideon Avni 2014: 356-362).

ing the eighth century C.E. Moreover, settlement abatement did not occur everywhere simultaneously, but with regional variation.

Appendix Two offers an overview of (most of) the sites, designated as city, town or 'other' (rural settlements) that Avni uses in his argument and emphasizes the moment of decline and abandonment. Regional variations in the data can be better discerned through graphic representations. In fig. 1, we can observe that the settlement within cities was continuous until the eleventh century C.E., as Avni argues. The data for the 'towns' leads to a somewhat different picture than Avni suggests. Avni argues towns declined in the tenth century C.E. in all of Palestine, though the graphs suggest that in Jund Filastin and Jund al-Urdunn, this decline took place in the ninth and eleventh centuries C.E. (Avni 2014: 341). For rural sites, decline can be seen in Jund al-Urdunn and the Jerusalem Area in the tenth century C.E., whereas in Jund Filastin, decline can be observed both in the ninth and eleventh centuries C.E., which is consistent with Avni's conclusion of a gradual settlement abatement. Only 12 sites were continuously inhabited throughout the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods conveying the mass abandonment of the area prior to the arrival of the Crusaders in 1099 C.E. (fig. 1).

The subject of agriculture receives relatively little attention if compared to the construction of buildings. However, as an economic sector agriculture would have been more important, and there is evidence for profound changes during the Byzantine-Islamic transition (e.g. Watson 1983). Only a few archaeobotanical and zooarchaeological studies are sparsely referenced, while important studies for the region (e.g. Hoppe 2001, Hoppe and Charles 2003) are absent. Brief mentions are made to the wine, olive oil, cotton and linen trade and the adaption of new water technologies (e.g. the qanats). Garden agriculture in cities like Ramla would have been present as Avni mentions like it had occurred in the past in Pompeii; however, their production output would not have lessened the dependence on the larger scale rural agriculture for subsistence crops. A chapter describing agricultural developments in the transitional period and explaining the relationship between these and economic performance and settlement patterns could have been useful.

Avni's argument for an increased industrial importance of cities and of a subsequent decline in importance of the agricultural sector and economic decline in rural areas is somewhat reminiscent of the consumer versus producer city debate (Avni 2014: 104, Finley 1973, Brown 1989). However, urban development does not necessitate rural decline. Rather the opposite may be the case since larger urban populations can only exist by the grace of greater agricultural productivity. The city will still need to obtain food for its population as well as the raw materials for its industries from the countryside. With the relocation of final-product production from the countryside to the city the nature of the rural economy would be transformed.

Annette M. Hansen
University of Groningen, The Netherlands

Figure 2. Map of Bilad al-Sham and its provinces, Jund Filastin, Jund al-Urdunn, and Jund Dimashq, in the 9th century. Map courtesy of Wikimedia User Ro4444, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Battle_of_the_Mills.svg.

References

- Brown, Peter. 1989. *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150–750*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Charles, Michael and Chantelle Hoppe. 2003. The Effects of Irrigation on the Weed Floras of Winter Cereal Crops in the Wadi Ibn Hamad (Southern Jordan). *Levant* 35: 213–30.
- Finley, Moses. 1973. *The Ancient Economy*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Hoppe, Chantelle. 2001. *A Thousand Years of Farming: Agricultural Practices from the Byzantine to Early Ottoman Period at Khirbet Faris, the Kerak Plateau, Jordan*. PhD diss., University of Sheffield.
- Kennedy, Hugh. 1985. From Polis to Madina: Urban Change in Late Antiquity and Early Islamic Syria. *Past and Present* 106: 3–27.
- . 2008. Inherited Cities. Pp. 93–113 in *The City in the Islamic World*, eds. Salma Khadra Jayyusi et al. Leiden: Brill.
- Denoix, Sylvie. 2008. Founded Cities of the Arab World from the 7th to the 11th Centuries. Pp. 115–39 in *The City in the Islamic World*, eds. Salma Khadra Jayyusi et al. Leiden: Brill.
- Watson, Andrew M. 1983. *Agricultural Innovation in the Early Islamic World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.