

Muslim Invasion into or Arab uprising within Syria

The Conundrum of the Seventh Century Sources

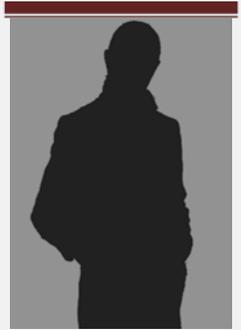
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Abstract

Mohammed died and almost immediately his faithful followers united the tribes of Arabia and burst into Syria to defeat a huge army of the Byzantine Empire for Allah and his prophet. This Muslim historical tradition was not written until a hundred and fifty years after the events. Revisionist historians of Islam are now re-examining this 'conquest' through seventh century Syrian eyes. By looking at the source documents and archaeology, however, it becomes clear that Syria already had a huge Arab population while the Arabian Peninsula at the time of Mohammed had been suffering from decline in trade and very little population for several centuries. Arabs not only appeared to be the majority ethnic group in Syria, but they had centuries of political experience in governance. They had produced both a caesar, Philip the Arab, as well as an Arab queen, the famous Zenobia, who ruled much of the East. By the seventh century, they had two centuries of political experience ruling as *foederati*.

Added to the pre-Muslim Arab population predominating in Byzantine Syria are the early seventh century texts that never mention any armies invading from the Arabian Desert or conquering the land. The texts are supported by archaeology which shows that there was no destruction layer but rather increased church building in this era. While the texts have some grumbling about the Arabs rising up and raiding, there is no mention of an invasion from outside, of any new religion or of Mohammed.

This paper argues that the Muslim tradition of an invading Arab army never happened. Syria already had a large Arab population by the sixth century. Byzantium retreated from active rule in Syria and hired locals to serve as her border guards. After the Byzantium financial crisis caused by the Persian wars, her Arab vassals rose up and took control of Syria. "Perhaps there was indeed a great invasion, with battle after battle between tens of thousands of opposing soldiers, over the course of several years (629 to 636). But if there were, it would seem that, at the time, nobody noticed." (Nevo, *Crossroads*, 135)



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After Mohammed died in Medina in 632 C.E. his successors, Abu Bakr and then Umar, ordered the Muslim armies north to Syria, (the region now known as Jordan, Palestine, Israel, Syria, and Lebanon) to conquer in the name of Allah and his prophet, Mohammed. In less than a decade, they were able to defeat in huge battles both the Byzantine army and the remnants of the Persian Sassanid Empire. The Muslims from the Arabian Peninsula then migrated into these regions building new cities and a new empire according to Islamic traditions. The problem, however, lies in that traditional Islamic history was not written until the Abbasids ruled in Baghdad 150 years after the events and long after all eyewitnesses were gone. When critically examined, these traditions appear to speak more of the political rivalries, theological disputes, and social tensions of the Abbasid Empire in the late eighth and the early ninth century.

Because the archaeological, numismatic, and textual records lack evidence to support the Islamic rendition of history, revisionist historians ask hard questions of the traditional account of the Muslim conquest. Why did early Arab rulers never mention Mohammed in their inscriptions? Why did the early Umayyads put Christian crosses or Zoroastrian fire temples on their coins? Why do the archaeological sites show no destruction layer and no change in material culture to mark the change? And the most important question for this discussion, why did the seventh century eyewitnesses in Syria never mention any Muslim invasion or armies in their writings? The most convincing explanation is that Arabs were already present in Syria with a long political heritage of ruling the countryside under both Rome and Byzantium. Rather than invading from the desert to conquer Byzantine armies, the Arabs already present in Syria rose up to fill the vacuum left by the Byzantines after the long war with the Persians which culminated in 622.

Arabs were present in Syria from early antiquity, leaving their faces and camels on limestone reliefs on Esarhaddon's (d. 681) palace walls in Assyria¹. Arabs were brought into Samaria by Sennacherib (d. 669) to replace the Israelites deported to Assyria. After the Bar-Kokhba Revolt, (132-136 C.E.) Syrians Arabs were brought in to replace the Jews and Judeo-Christians who were expelled from the whole municipal area of Jerusalem.² Remaining Jewish settlements felt strong Arab pressure, especially in Galilee and Transjordan.³ Inscriptions of the Negev, Transjordan, and Syria show that a high proportion of the population had distinctive Arab names.⁴ What linked these settled Arabs in Syria with the nomads of northern Arabia was their language of which about 40,000 graffiti inscriptions are found from Antiquity.⁵

Syria continued to attract migrants. "By the fourth and fifth centuries and continuing into the sixth, large scale migrations of Bedouin peoples in the North Arabian desert and to the margins of the fertile crescent were under way."⁶ When archaeologists were deliberately targeting Trans-Jordan and the Hijaz for seventh century remains, they found few signs of any population or any pagan cult centers although there were extant Arabian sites from the Hellenistic until the Byzantine period.⁷ Contrary to the tradition that Mecca was the crossroads of prosperous caravan routes, Arabia had lost its role in the incense trade. The spread of Christianity had reduced the demand for frankincense and myrrh as it was no longer used for pagan sacrifice and cremation.⁸ The trade

¹ These reliefs are now in the British Museum.

² Epiphanius, *De mens. Et ponder.* 14, 15, in Avi-Yohah, *Holy Land; A Historical Geography from the Persian to the Arab Conquest 536 B.C. to A.D. 640.* Text Revisions and Toponymic Index by Anson F. Rainey, (Jerusalem: Carta, 2002.), 215.

³ Bab. *Ketuboth* 112 a. in *Ibid.*, 217.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁶ I. M. Lapidus, "The Arab Conquests and the Formation of Islamic Society" in *Studies on the First Century of Islamic Society*, ed. G. H. A. Juynboll, (Carbondale, Ill: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982.), 60.

⁷ Yehuda D. Nevo and Judith Koren, *Crossroads to Islam; the Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State*, (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1992.), 13.

⁸ Robert G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs; From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam*, (London: Routledge, 2001.),

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from India no longer went overland as the route moved to the African side of the Red Sea. ‘There was no overland route for the Meccans.’⁹ The economic loss from these changes several centuries earlier could have pushed people out of Arabia and explain why few settled sites were found by archaeologists for the seventh century.

Increased prosperity, official desire to increase the tax base, or perhaps the need to repopulate the region after the cycles of Justinian’s plague¹⁰ gave an added pull for Arab migration into Syria. Yehuda Nevo, believes that “in the towns and villages, lived a Christian Rural population, of whom a large percentage, indeed probably the great majority were ethnically Arab.”¹¹ Adoption of a Roman or Christian name disguised even more Arabs in the cities.

One piece of evidence that the population growth in Syria was neither Hellenistic nor Roman can be seen in the archaeological ruins of Syria’s major cities. The recent digs at Scythopolis/Baysan reveal this change. Scythopolis represented the best of the Hellenistic grid system in orthogonal urban planning with its wide, straight colonnaded avenues and the covered sidewalks six meters wide flanked by rows of shops. During the fourth or fifth centuries, however, Scythopolis gradually changed in character; growing more oriental in city planning along with the other Syrian cities like Gaza, Ascalon, Neapolis/Nablus, Aelia/Jerusalem. These cities had all originally possessed colonnaded streets, squares, and monuments. These public spaces were now appropriated by private citizens who had little regard for Hellenistic urban planning ideals of open space and straight streets. New buildings, including many churches, were inserted *ad hoc* into the existing framework. New suburbs were planned loosely with crooked or curved streets. The once wide public sidewalks had transverse walls build over them by shopkeepers expanding the

⁹ Patricia Chroné, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987.), 45.

¹⁰ Estimates based on the Black Death are that one third of the population died in Justinian’s Plague and its after cycles.

¹¹ Nevo, *Crossroads to Islam*, 89.

length of their shops. Rows of rooms built in public spaces, some even attaching themselves to the old monumental buildings narrowed public squares into narrow alleys. Porticos turned into buildings that even penetrated into the carriageway. This “oriental” development model is even more predominant in the new towns built on the edge of the desert like Umm al-Jimal in Jordan and the Negev cities.¹² “The process of change ‘from (Roman) polis to (Arab) madina’ or ‘from Scythopolis to Baysan’ was already substantial in the sixth century and especially in the early seventh century”¹³ The fact that the cities no longer grew along the old rigid Roman city plans with straight lines and square corners strongly indicate the immigration of a new population.

Not only did Syria contain a substantial and growing Arab population but these Arabs played important political and military roles in Roman/Byzantine history. Several of them gained fame, others notoriety for their political prowess. A caesar with family roots in Arabia, Philip the Arab, was born in the Hawran province of Syria. From a quite humble background, he ruled as caesar for five years (244-249 C.E.) gaining the empire’s throne through his conquests over Persia. Another Syrian leader, Septimius Odaenathus, (d. 266-267) the chief of Palmyra and a Roman senator with an Arabic name (Othayna ibn Hairan ibn Wahballath ibn Nador) as recent as three generations back, led a band of “Syrian country folk” (most likely fellow Arab tribesmen) all the way to Ctesiphon¹⁴ to avenge the Roman Empire against Persia’s sack of Antioch. He became, by default, the Vice-regent of Rome in the East. His wife (and perhaps his murderer) was the famous Zenobia. Her Arabic name is Zainab al-Zabbā’ bint ‘Amr ibn al-Ẓarib ibn Ḥassān ibn Adhīnat ibn al-Samīda. Known for her exotic dark skin and black eyes, this queen led armies of her tribesmen to conquer Egypt and Asia Minor. Aurelian considered her claim to

¹² Yoram Tsafrir and Gideon Foerster “From Scythopolis to Baysan – Changing Concepts of Urbanism” in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East II, Land Use and Settlement Patterns*, ed. G.R.D. King and Averil Cameron (Princeton, N. J.: Darwin Press, 1994.), 103-108.

¹³ “Polis to Madina” quoted from Hugh Kennedy, “From Polis to Madina: Urban Change in Late Antiquity and Early Islam”, *Past and Present* 106 (1985), 3-27 in *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁴ Hoyland, *Arabia*, 75.

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the title of *Augusta* enough of a political threat to march across the empire to meet her army at Antioch. Zenobia ended up in golden chains in Aurelian's victory parade dying in Rome about 274 C.E. These Arab Romans aspiring to and wearing imperial purple left examples that Syrian Arabs could emulate with dreams to rule again someday.

Arab elite who aspired to being Caesar were not the only Arab influence on Roman policy. While Syria was annexed by Rome in 63 B.C.E., the Palmyrians and Nabateans became vassals in 20 C.E. and 106 C.E. respectively.¹⁵ This expansion of the empire's borders east and south meant that nomadic areas north out of Arabia became the new border. Until the fourth century, Rome built and manned limes, a line of forts within sight of each other, along their southeast border. The Tenth Legion was initially deployed to Aila/Eilat in this region along the Red Sea. The Nessana papyri two centuries later reveal that this policy eventually changed to dependence on local manpower. By the end of the sixth century these garrisons were staffed by "native horsemen" and also a few camels.¹⁶ Troops were recruited and lived locally although a few of the soldiers were detached to serve as far away as Caesarea or even Egypt.¹⁷

While some scholars like Benjamin Isaac would argue that these border troops functioned as an army in every respect until the seventh century, others believe that Constantinople was losing its political hold on Syria. Procopius claims that Justinian disbanded the standing army in the provinces.¹⁸ Archaeologists also conclude that many of the military sites in Palaestina III and Arabia were abandoned in the fifth and sixth centuries.¹⁹ Locally recruited units

¹⁵Ibid., 73-75.

¹⁶ For example, in one year, 64 camels were levied from the village of Nessana for use by the troops. Benjamin Isaac, "The Army in the Late Roman East: the Persian Wars and the Defence (sic) of the Byzantine Provinces" in Averil Cameron, ed., *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East Vol. III, States, Resources and Armies*, (Princeton, N.J.: The Darwin Press, 1995.) 147.

¹⁷ Ibid., 144-147.

¹⁸ Procopius, *Secret History* 24.1-14; cf. Isaac, *Limits of Empire*, 210-12. In Isaac, *The Army*, 126

¹⁹ Ibid., 126.

fulfilled local police duties until the Persian invasion when the military infrastructure disappeared. The last reference to an officer in the desert region was in an inscription in Beer Sheva in 605 and 613 C.E.²⁰ “The Byzantine collapse in the Near East in the thirties took place because the central authorities were incapable of responding adequately in the 630s, as they had done in the 620s.”(against Persia)²¹

Besides hiring locals as units of border guards to replace outgoing Roman troops, Rome co-opted local Arab tribal chiefs to serve them as *phylarchs* or vassals. In return for subsidies and titles to clan leaders, the Arab tribes were to desist from attacking imperial citizens, maintain order in the frontier regions and provide military aid when required.²² Persia was utilizing the same strategy on the other side of the border. Paying tribes for protection provided man/camel power against each other, protection from nomadic raids and prevented the tribes joining the enemy. The Arab tribal elite gained experience taxing and ruling the region.

Adapting the *foederati* system of using locals as border guards and the Arab elite as *phylarchs* worked for over two centuries until Byzantium was weakened by the Persian war. Later Christian sources and traditional Arab sources blame imperial economic straits for the last breakdown of Byzantine control over the troops. According to Theophanes in *Annus Mundi* 6123 (September 1, 631-August 3, 632):

“Some of the nearby Arabs received a small subsidy from the Emperor for guarding the mouths of the desert. At that time a eunuch came to distribute the soldiers’ wages. The Arabs came to get their pay, as was customary, but the eunuch drove them away, saying, ‘The Emperor pays his soldiers with difficulty; much more to such dogs as

²⁰ Ibid., 149.

²¹ Ibid., 151.

²² Ibid., 78.

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you!’ The oppressed Arabs went to their fellow tribesmen and showed them the route to the land of Gaza....which is very rich”²³

While Theophanes indicates a post Persian War economic crisis triggered the Arab attacks rather than religious zeal, it also gives clues that the revolt was local. The text does not say that their “fellow tribesmen” were from Arabia.

Besides the pre-Islamic evidence of a substantial Arab population with military experience and political expectations in Syria, there are several Islamic indications that the theory of an internal Arab take-over rather than foreign conquest from the Hijaz is valid. One is that the Arabs built garrison cities to separate themselves from the local population in Iraq and Egypt but in Syria, the *jund* organization assigned pastures and villages in the midst of the population to their tribes.

A second indication of Syrian roots for a local Arab uprising is that the first proclaimed ruler, Mu’awiya, of the new Arab Kingdom was crowned in Jerusalem and settled in Damascus. The Maronite Chronicle describes his coming to power. While the oldest extant version could have been redacted at a later time, it is still quite different from the Muslim tradition. “Many Arabs gathered at Jerusalem and made Mu’awiya king...In July of the same year the emirs and many Arabs gathered and gave their allegiance to Mu’awiya.”²⁴ The report that he “favoured the people of the West over those of the East, since the former had submitted to him”²⁵ would be further evidence that he was a ruler with local Syrian roots being raised up by his own people.

²³ Harry Turtledove, *The Chronicles of Theophanes; An English translation of anni mundi 6095-6305 (A.D. 602-813), with introduction and notes.* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982.), 36.

²⁴ Hoyland 1993: 31-32, and Hoyland 1997: 136-39, in Jeremy Johns, “Archaeology and the History of Early Islam: The First Seventy Years” *JESHO* 46, (Leiden: Brill), 423.

²⁵ Hoyland 1997: 644, n. 76 in *Ibid.*, 424.

And a third bit of evidence that the Arab uprising was internal comes from China. None of the Syrian sources about the newcomers ever describes what they looked like other than presenting derogative statements such as they were barefoot. That lacuna of physical description would indicate that their countenance and clothing were already common to both writer and reader or that there was no difference. Only a Chinese official held prisoner in Iraq for some time gives us an indication of the physical features of the new ruling people. “The men of this country have noses that are large and long, and they are slender and dark with abundant facial hair like the Indians.”²⁶ It required an outsider to describe the Arabs.

In the traditional version of Muslim history, four years of open warfare in Syria between Arab Muslims troops and Byzantium ended in the Battle of Yarmuk with tens of thousands of Christian fatalities. Seventh century Christian preachers could have wrested a lot of sermons on divine punishment from such catastrophic events but it is the much less ‘dramatic’ event of Arab rule which the contemporary writers use to teach the stereotypical lesson of divine wrath as punishment for sin.²⁷ “Christ has delivered us up because of sins and iniquities and subjected us to the hard yoke of the Arabians.”²⁸ Great bloodshed would have greatly bolstered the point of punishment for sin but none of the contemporary sources mention any great battles. “Only the fact of Byzantine loss of the provinces was pressed into service to support religious lessons.”²⁹ Christian preachers of the first generation of the so called Muslim invasion do not rail against competitive theology or make mention of Mohammed or even Umar, the caliph who according to Muslim traditional was the conqueror of Syria.

²⁶ From Tu Yu, *T'ung tien* CXCII, as translated by Wakeman, *Western Barbarians*, 892-925 quoted from Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: a Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian writings on Early Islam*. (Princeton, New Jersey: Darwin Press, Inc., 1997.), 245.

²⁷Bar Penkaye, Chs 14-15 in Hoyland and Nevo, *Crossroads*, 109.

²⁸ Jacob of Edessa, *Scholion* on I Kings xiv:21 etc in Phillips (1984) in Nevo, *Crossroads*, 105.

²⁹ Nevo, *Crossroads*, 106.

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One way to understand the character of the Arab uprising is to listen to the Christians of Syria in the 630's. Our longest accounts of the Arab takeover come from Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem. Traditionally, he was the one who negotiated with Umar for the surrender of Jerusalem although Muslim sources differ whether Jerusalem was surrendered in 636, 637, or 638 C.E. and whether the surrender was to Umar, Khalid ibn Thabit, 'Amr ibn al-'as or Khalid ibn al-Walid.³⁰ Despite being the main figure in the Muslim tradition of the surrender of Jerusalem, this Patriarch never mentioned any capitulation in his lengthy writings. He spent far more ink confronting the new 'heresies' Monoenergism and Monotheletism than opposing the two year siege mentioned by Muslim historians.

Arab violence intruding on life in Jerusalem received a passing mention in Sophronius's writings on three different occasions. First was an undated, long synodical letter to Pope Honorius assumed to be dated between 633-634. Rather than mentioning armies marching over the land, the focus is on the promulgation of Monenergism. After a very long letter with extensive lists of heretics needing to be anathematized, the "barbarians and especially of the Saracenes,"³¹ get only one paragraph of attention. They "who, on account of our sins, have now risen up against us unexpectedly and ravage all with cruel and feral design, with impious and godless audacity."³² The clue that the takeover is internal rather than from outside is the last line, the prayer that Christ may "deliver these vile creatures, as before to be the footstool of our God-given emperors."³³ An upheaval of the former social order with Arabs who were once at the bottom and

³⁰ Moshe Gil, *A History of Palestine, 634-1099*, trans. Ethel Broido, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992.), 52.

³¹ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 69.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

now menacing the Byzantine elite is reflected more than an organized conquering army.³⁴

A second reference to the Arabs comes again at the end of the Christmas Sermon in December 634 C.E. which is being held in Jerusalem because the Christians “are prevented from entering Bethlehem by way of the road....bound by fear of the Saracens.”³⁵ This could reflect a number of situations, perhaps the Muslim tradition of a two year siege ending in 636 or maybe measures by *foederati* applying pressure to Jerusalem or Bethlehem for the payment of taxes³⁶ or protection money or even perhaps, out of control Bedouin raiding. While Sophronius’s answer to the problem is to call for repentance, the sermon does reveal that Jerusalem had no Byzantine imperial troops able to guard the faithful on their five mile midnight procession. Byzantine troops quartered in Jerusalem only seem to be present in the Muslim tradition where Umar gives them the choice to remain as taxpaying *dhimmi* or to depart peacefully.

The last and most detailed mention of the Arabs by Sophronius was in the year 636 or 637. While the Arabs still only pay an insignificant part in the main drama which is the people’s need to repent, Arab atrocities are now listed,

*“the abomination of desolation clearly foretold to us by the prophets, overrun the places that are not allowed to them, plunder cities, devastate fields, burn down villages, set on fire the holy churches, overturn the sacred monasteries, oppose the Byzantine armies arrayed against them, and in fighting raise up trophies (of war) and add victory to victory.”*³⁷

³⁴ Nevo, *Crossroads*, 115.

³⁵ Sophronius, ‘Christmas Sermon’, 506 in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 70.

³⁶ Nevo, *Crossroads*, 119.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

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Two aspects of this text are problematic. The first dissonance is with Sophronius's voice. Both his vocabulary and mood have changed to match that of Christian descriptions from much later times. The description of Arabs has changed from godless barbarians to god haters whose leader is the devil. It appears from the types of changes made that a later scribe informed by the traditional account considerably embellished or added this section to fill in what he felt Sophronius had missed.³⁸

The second aspect of this text that speaks of its later redaction is that the archaeological records from Syria's villages and towns do not show the mentioned destruction layers. Even at the extensive dig at Baysan, the Israeli archaeologists conclude that "the crucial years 636-40 did not leave any visible signs in Bet Shean. We cannot point to a single abrupt change which may be related to the change of regime."³⁹ Not only is there a lack of destruction but there is more evidence of church building in the years of the Muslim conquest 635 to 640 than in the years of the Byzantine recovery.⁴⁰ The dates in the new or repaired mosaic floors of churches witness to the renewal and rebuilding of this period. Archaeology and change from the other writings by Sophronius hints that this piece has been severely redacted to reflect the change that the Muslim traditions made on Christian 'memory' of the events in the next centuries.

The experience of another Syrian monk was very different from that of Sophronius. While Sophronius was from the state Byzantine church, Maximus the Dyothelete, had been 'confined to a small cell' probably in a monastery since 634 hiding in fear of 'the emperor and the patriarchs who had anathematized his teaching.'⁴¹ The transfer of power to the Arabs is described in one sentence: "The Arabs (Tayyaye) appeared and took control of Syria and many other areas."⁴² Maximus was then able to emerge

³⁸ Nevo, *Crossroads*, 121.

³⁹ Tsafrir and Foerster, *Scythopolis*, 111.

⁴⁰ Schick, *Christian Communities*, 65.

⁴¹ Brock (1973) pp. 334-36 in Nevo, *Crossroads*, 123.

⁴² *Ibid.*

from his cell because, “The land was in control of the Arabs and there was no longer anyone to restrain and nullify his (heretical-Dyothetic) doctrine.”⁴³ The operative word is ‘controlled’, not conquered!

Archaeology shows an Arab presence in Syria from Antiquity, a population that grew and overwhelmed Hellenistic city planning by the fourth century. Arabs eventually replaced Byzantine troops in Syria and served the empire as foederati border guards giving them political and military experience. Seventh century sources, archaeological and textual, show that the social order was turned upside down enabling the Arabs to take over, but they have no mention of massive battles and destruction, of a new ethnic group or a new religion invading Syria from Arabia. As Yehuda Nevo said, “Perhaps there was indeed a great invasion, with battle after battle between tens of thousands of opposing soldiers, over the course of several years (629 to 636). But if there were, it would seem that, *at the time*, nobody noticed.”⁴⁴

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⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 135.

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