Book Review:

Money, Power and Politics in Early Islamic Syria: A Review of Current Debates


Reviewed by Nadia Tahboub.

The book is concerned with the most complex and vague period in the history of early Islamic Syria - that is, the late antique-early Islamic transitional period (7th-8th AD), a period that has been understood as representing a fundamental- even a complete- break from the political, socio-economic, and cultural forms of late antiquity. It contains nine mind-stimulating articles that tackle some of the most controversial issues of this period with professional and careful scrutiny of both the archaeological and textual material.

The introduction by John Haldon (pp. 1-20) offers a brief overview with swift and frequent highlights of controversial historical events and debates that refresh the reader’s memory. His introduction also emphasizes the difficulties that researchers into the late antique/early Islamic transitional period face regarding the complex relationship of evidence with its inseparable dimensions: textual, archaeological and numismatic. In “Coinage and the Economy of Syria-Palestine in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries CE” (pp. 21-44) Alan Walmsley sheds new light on some major changes to the socio-economic conditions of Syria Bilād al-Shām stressing the important usage of evidence totality. Using a cross-disciplinary analytical approach, Walmsley’s conclusions are drawn from comparing and analyzing the numismatic evidence of four sites: the identified mints, coin types and its chronology, minting authorities and coin distribution with other archaeological data. In “Christian Communities in Early Islamic Syria and Northern Jazira: the Dynamics of Adaptation” (pp. 45-56) Stephen Humphreys examines the socio-economic and cultural conditions of the Christian population- who were the majority in Bilād al-Shām under the Umayyads. Humphreys’ “mixed bag” of evidence (pp. 54) provides researchers with possibilities and threads of evidence on the conditions and events that might have played a major role in determining the slow-waning fate of the social and economic foundations of Christian life in early Islamic Syria. In “Administering the Early Islamic Empire: Insights from the Papyri” (pp. 57-74) Arietta Papaconstantinou reconsiders the documentary evidence on the administrative policy of the early Islamic Empire, namely the 7th century between the period of the early caliphate and the end of Mu’āwiya’s reign. The well-scrutinized literary evidence on early Islamic taxation allows a new understanding of the method the empire was administered. The analysis stresses an innovative dialectical and dynamic process that characterized the early Islamic administrative system at such an early stage, rather than mere adaptation within themes of continuity as has been understood.

Clive Foss’ “Mu’āwiya’s State” (pp. 75-96) is a key that will fundamentally change our understanding of the governance of the early Islamic state. The article argues against the general view within the discipline that Mu’āwiya’s regime was relatively primitive, ruling through a loose tribal confederation. Foss examines Mu’āwiya’s rule (658-680 AD) over three regions: Syria, Egypt and the eastern provinces (Iraq and Iran). He depends on both the textual evidence that is the narrative sources, papyri and numismatics to highlight the evidence on a complex government and an organized state that existed as early as the time of this caliph. In “First Century Islamic Currency: Mastering the Message from the Money” (pp. 97-123) Gene W. Heck digs into the evolution and development of early Islamic currency, and its role in the dynamic economic growth of the early Islamic Empire. He employs evidence from medieval Muslim chronicles, supported by the residual mining evidence and coins, to track early Islamic currency development. He establishes that highly developed understanding of monetary policies application “today
deemed modern” (p 119) by the first Muslim caliphs was behind the evolving of such a huge commercial empire. This effort will certainly open new doors of research into this complex issue.

In ‘Abd al-Malik’s Monetary Reform in Copper and the Failure of Centralization (pp. 125-146) Lutz Ilisch discusses the copper coinage fulūs of Abd el-Malik’s monetary reforms as bearing ideological significance as part of a larger process that was intended to create a unified monetary system. By examining the numismatic evidence on the reform copper fulūs from different regions within the early Islamic Empire, Ilisch argues that reform copper coinage as part of a caliphate-wide monetary unity succeeded for a few years but was difficult to maintain later especially in the self-governed provinces. In “Early Islamic Urbanism and Building Activity in Jerusalem and at Hammath Gader” (pp. 145-163) Jodi Magness reconsiders the chronology of the two sites: the Umayyad structures excavated after 1967 at the southern end of al-Haram al-Sharīf in Jerusalem, and Hammat Gader. She presents evidence on intensive usage and occupational continuity of the two sites during the Abbasid period that debunks the general belief of a dramatic decline that affected Palestine after the fall of the Umayyads. In “Late Antiquity Legacies and Muslim Economic Expansion” (pp. 165-179) Jairus Banaji mainly depends on the textual material to argue the evolution of the first two centuries of Islamic economic growth and the contribution of late antique economic legacies in such an evolution. In “Syrian Elites from Byzantium to Islam: Survival or Extinction?” (pp. 181-200) Hugh Kennedy examines the question of continuity and change between the social political and social élites in pre-Islamic and early Islamic Syria. Combining both textual and archaeological evidence Kennedy concludes that whereas the old Hellenized ruling class of pre-Islamic Syria disappeared, the descendents of the Arab tribes the Ghassānids became the real élite of Syria after the Islamic conquest.

This book brings new insights into the history of early Islamic Syria through the ever-increasing archaeological and textual evidence on the complexity of this transformational process Syria/Bilād al-Shām witnessed. The contributors provide explanatory footnotes, and excellent bibliographies at the end of their articles. It addresses specialists and provides graduate students with new themes of research.

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