

Quraysh and the Roman army: Making sense of the Meccan leather trade*

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Abstract

This paper argues that the trade in leather and other pastoralist products, which the tradition ascribes to the Meccans, could make sense on the assumption that the goods were destined for the Roman army, which is known to have required colossal quantities of leather and hides for its equipment. The hypothesis that the Meccans were servicing the Roman military is examined and found to be impossible to prove in our current state of knowledge; it is at least compatible with the evidence, however, and also highly promising in terms of the light it could throw on the political aspects of the rise of Islam.

According to the Islamic tradition, Quraysh, the Prophet's tribe, made their living in pre-Islamic times as traders who frequented a number of places, above all southern Syria, where they sold a variety of goods, above all leather goods and other pastoralist products such as woollen clothing and clarified butter, perhaps live animals as well. That they made (or had once made) a living selling goods of this kind in Syria is the one of the few claims regarding the rise of Islam on which there is complete agreement in the tradition.¹ One is thus inclined to think that there is some truth to it. It raises two problems, however. The first is that the tradition also identifies Quraysh as the pagans (*mushrikūn*) who are addressed in the Quran. This is a problem because the Quran itself describes these pagans as agriculturalists rather than traders,² but I shall leave that problem aside here. What follows is based on the assumption that the rise of Islam had something to do with an Arabian community dominated by traders who sold leather goods and other pastoralist products in southern Syria. How this society relates to that reflected in the Quran is problematic, but we may take it that it existed, whether in Mecca, Medina or elsewhere. The purpose of this article is to suggest how the trade could have been viable.

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1 P. Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Oxford and Princeton, 1987), chs 4, 5, with the sources claiming that they stopped trading some time before the rise of Islam at 110 f.

2 P. Crone, How did the quranic pagans make a living?, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 68/3, 2005, 387–99.

This takes us to the second problem. The tradition locates the trading society in question so far away from southern Syria that it is hard to see how its members could have made a living by trading there unless they specialized in commodities which were low in bulk and weight and could be sold at very high prices. If the traders set out from Mecca, they had to make enough of a profit to cover food, water and other expenses, such as tolls, for men and animals for two months, this being how long it took for a caravan to make the journey to Syria and back according to one tradition;³ setting out from Medina would only shorten the journey by some 350 km. The spices and aromatics in which Quraysh have long been assumed to trade were the right kind of commodity from that point of view, but the idea that Quraysh traded in such goods has turned out to be what is nowadays called an Orientalist myth. Admittedly, there may have been some trade in gold. Several gold mines are attested in the Ḥijāz, and Gene Heck suggests that gold and silver (from silver mines run by the Persians) contributed to “the expansion of the local employment base” and served, among other things, as input in industrial production, as the investment capital that underwrote that production, and as “the currency base for financing import acquisitions”.⁴ A medieval scholiast, on the other hand, informs us that the caliph ‘Umar wanted to cut camel hides in the shape of dirhams for use as currency “because of the scarcity of gold and silver”.⁵ But however this discrepancy is to be resolved, the fact remains that it is leather, hides, woollens, and clarified butter rather than gold or silver that are consistently identified as the star items of export from Mecca; the only other item regularly mentioned is perfume. Muḥammad’s great-grandfather, Hāshim, is said to have founded the trade by obtaining permission from the Byzantine authorities for the Meccans to sell Ḥijāzī leather goods and clothing in Syria; of a Meccan who wanted to be client king on behalf of the Byzantines we are told that he intended to pay tribute to his overlords in hides, *qarḥ* (a tanning agent), and clarified butter; ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ sold leather and perfume in Egypt; of the Prophet himself we are told that he traded in hides; and the same is said of other Qurashīs, not just in Mecca but also in Medina: when ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. ‘Awf arrived in Medina, for example, we are told that he bought skins, cottage cheese and clarified butter which enabled him to import grain and flour from Syria.⁶ But hides, leather and other pastoralist products were heavy and bulky, and though camels would be self-transporting, all these goods were widely

3 Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-nabawiyya*, ed. M. al-Saqqā, I. al-Abyārī and ‘A.-Ḥ. Shiblī, second printing (Cairo, 1955), i, 398. For tolls, see the story in al-Zubayr b. Bakkār, *al-Akhhār al-muwafaqqiyāt*, ed. S. M. al-‘Ānī (Baghdad, 1972), 625, no. 413; Abū ‘l-Baqā’ Hibatallāh, *Kitāb al-manāqib al-mazyadiyya*, ed. Ş. M. Darāka and M. ‘A.-Q. Kharīsāt (Amman, 1984), i, 67 f.

4 G. W. Heck, “Arabia without spices”: an alternate hypothesis, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 123, 2003, 555; cf. also Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 93 ff.

5 *Dīwān Abī Tammām bi-sharḥ al-khaṭīb al-Tabrīzī*, ed. M. ‘A. ‘Azzām (Cairo, 1951–65), i, 260 f. (bāb al-madīḥ, qāfiyat al-bā’, ad 18:45).

6 Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 98; cf. also M. J. Kister, O God, Tighten thy Grip on Muḍar, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 24, 1981, 261 f.

available in the desert areas of Syria itself. How could Quraysh have made a living by laboriously carrying coal to Newcastle? That is how the problem was formulated in 1987.

In 2003 Gene Heck suggested an answer: Mecca and Syria imported and exported much the same products, just as Wisconsin, which has its own dairy herds, imports cheese from Michigan, or as Western business men will have their suits tailored in Hong Kong in preference to what they can get at home: the dynamic was “nothing more than demand, price, and preference – the basic functioning of free market economics”.⁷ Good though it is to see the problem taken up for serious discussion, Heck’s solution is difficult to accept. He unwittingly envisages Quraysh as participants in a modern consumer economy in which people buy all their requirements on the open market, presupposing an industrial economy in which goods are mass produced and rapidly distributed over huge distances at a low cost thanks to the replacement of human and animal labour by modern machinery and high-tech devices. A return trip from Michigan to Wisconsin does not take two months. But Quraysh served a society in which most people were peasants who produced the bulk of their requirements in their own households or villages and in which goods were few and expensive because they had to be made by hand and transported by humans or animals. Though Syria was a highly urbanized and commercialized society by the standards of the time, customers were not always numerous enough in a particular area to support permanent markets, as opposed to markets held at regular intervals. Still less, of course, were there any supermarkets offering endless choice at no particular cost.

For all that, Heck is right to think about supply and demand. There was at least one organization capable of generating significant demand in pre-modern times, namely the state, and Arabia did lie on the doorstep of the Roman empire. What the author of *Meccan Trade* did not know, twenty years ago, was that the Roman army swallowed up colossal amounts of leather. The army needed leather for tents, scabbards, shields, shield covers, baggage covers, kit bags, purses, horse armour, saddles, reins and other horse-gear, sandals, boots, belts, wine skins, water skins, as well as diverse slings, strings, laces and straps for use in arms and clothing.⁸ On top of that, hides were used in military fortifications.⁹ It has been estimated that a single legion of the classical type (about 5,000 men) required the hides of some 65,700 goats, or a smaller number of calves, simply for the tents it used on

7 Heck, “Arabia without Spices”, 573 f.

8 C. van Driel-Murray, The production and supply of military leatherwork in the first and second centuries A.D.: a review of the archaeological evidence, in M. C. Bishop (ed.), *The Production and Distribution of Roman Military Equipment* (BAR International Series 275, Oxford, 1985), 44; P. Stephenson and K. R. Dixon, *Roman Cavalry Equipment* (Stroud, 2003), 35, 39 f., 42, 80, 83 f., 95, 106 (fig. 92), 107, 112 f.; M. Leguilloux, *Le cuir et la pelleterie à l’époque romaine* (Paris, 2004), 145 ff. (this last drawn to my attention by B. Isaac); T. K. Kissel, *Untersuchungen zur Logistik des römischen Heeres in den Provinzen des griechischen Ostens* (27 v. Chr.–235 n. Chr.) (St Katharinen, 1995), 221 f. (drawn to my attention by D. Kennedy).

9 See below, note 32.

campaigns.¹⁰ The number of cattle required to supply all the troops with all the equipment of leather they needed must have been staggering. On top of that, of course, soldiers needed food and clothing, and live animals were needed for transport.

According to Wells, many communities in the frontier zone responded to the Roman presence by adapting their economic systems to the Roman demand for leather, foodstuffs or other things, and the new trade in its turn affected these societies, so that one can sometimes identify “increases in social status among individuals who played organizational roles in the expanding trade systems”; and the effects were not limited to the frontier area: the demand for supplies also had “significant effects in lands outside the imperial borders”.¹¹

Could it have been by supplying the Roman army in Syria with leather and other pastoralist products that Quraysh acquired wealth and organizational skills? The question can be restated as three. First, was the Roman army in Syria large enough to generate significant demand for such products? Secondly, were there any changes that could explain an apparent expansion of trade to the south of the imperial border in the period before the rise of Islam? And thirdly, is there anything in the Islamic tradition to support the idea that the leather goods that Quraysh exported were destined for military use? In a nutshell, the answer to the first two questions is positive while that to the third is “insufficient information”. Disappointing though this is, it should at least suffice to keep the hypothesis on the books until further information turns up, as one hopes it will; for as will be seen in the conclusion, the hypothesis has great explanatory potential.

The Roman army in Syria

It goes without saying that we do not have any reliable figures for the size of the Roman army in the east. We do have some rough information, however. Agathias claims that the Byzantine empire disposed of 645,000 men until Justinian (527–65) reduced the total to 150,000 men. Whitby suspects that the first figure is exaggerated and the second minimized, but he accepts the second *grosso modo*, arguing that the 150,000 men should be understood as the field army to the exclusion of the frontier troops (*limitanei*): the inclusion of the *limitanei* would double or even treble the figure, giving us some 300,000 to 450,000 in all.¹² Treadgold argues along

10 Kissel, *Untersuchungen*, 223 f., where the number of calves is put at 27,000; the number is doubled in P. S. Wells, *The Barbarians Speak: How the Conquered Peoples Shaped Roman Europe* (Princeton and Oxford, 1999), 145, who speaks of 54,000 calves, which sounds more plausible, but he does not give his source.

11 Wells, *The Barbarians Speak*, 141 ff., 225; cf. also his shorter version, Production within and beyond imperial boundaries: goods, exchange, and power in Roman Europe, in P. N. Kardulias (ed.), *World-Systems Theory in Practice: Leadership, Production and Exchange* (Lanham, 1999).

12 M. Whitby, Recruitment in Roman armies from Justinian to Heraclius (ca. 565–615), in A. Cameron (ed.), *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East, III: States, Resources and Armies* (Princeton, 1995), 73 f.

the same lines and arrives at a similar figure.¹³ In Whitby's view, this remained the rough size of the army throughout the sixth century, without any significant decline despite the plague which began in 541 and recurred at regular intervals thereafter.¹⁴ He regards it as conceivable that the total Roman military strength in the eastern provinces should have been in excess of 100,000,¹⁵ but does not volunteer figures for Syria and Mesopotamia on their own. Isaac, basing himself on inscriptions, papyri and documentary evidence rather than literary sources, agrees that there is no evidence for large-scale reduction of the provincial army in Palestine (though he emphasizes that the total number of troops was not large).¹⁶ Parker, by contrast, speaks of widespread abandonment of forts and demobilization of *limitanei* in favour of increased reliance on tribal allies such as the Ghassānids in the fifth and sixth centuries;¹⁷ and Kaegi holds that Heraclius's army can only have been about two-thirds or even one-third the size of Justinian's. In his view, Agathias' figure of 150,000 for Justinian's army is exaggerated rather than minimized. Like Whitby and Treadgold, however, Kaegi seems to assume that Agathias' figure is for the field army rather than the entire army inclusive of frontier troops, for he estimates Heraclius' troops at 130,000 at the higher end and 98,000 at the lower (as opposed to the 100,000 to 50,000 or fewer that would constitute two-thirds to one-third or less of Agathias' figure). Of these he thinks that about 50,000 were mobile.¹⁸

Kaegi further conjectures that under Heraclius a mere 18,000 troops were stationed in Syria and Mesopotamia, of whom only 5,000 or fewer remained in the three Palestinian provinces and Arabia, inclusive of "friendly but irregular Arab hired guards". Exactly what he means by that is unclear. He equates regular soldiers with non-Arabs and Arab soldiers with tribesmen providing irregular service, so that one cannot tell where he places the Arab *limitanei* (such as those at Nessana), who were regular troops.¹⁹ But 5,000 men is the size of a classical legion, and Roman soldiers apparently used leather tents in both halves of the empire, though it is only in the western half that tents and other leather objects are well represented

13 W. Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army 284–1081* (Stanford, 1995), 59 ff., 162, table 11.

14 Whitby, *Recruitment*, 92–103.

15 Whitby, *Recruitment*, 101, n. 188.

16 B. Isaac, *The army in the late Roman East: the Persian wars and the defence of the Byzantine provinces*, in Cameron, *States, Resources and Armies*, 137, 144.

17 S. T. Parker, *Retrospective on the Arabian frontier after a decade of research*, in P. Freeman and D. Kennedy (eds), *The Defence of the Roman and Byzantine East*, part i (BAR international series 297(i), Oxford, 1986), 633, 648 ff., where the defence of the region is handed over to the Ghassānids; S. T. Parker, *The Roman frontier in Jordan: an overview*, in P. Freeman et al. (eds), *Limes XVIII. Proceedings of the XVIIIth International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies held in Amman, Jordan (September 2000)*, i (BAR international series 1084 (i), Oxford, 2002), 80; cf. also Parker, *Romans and Saracens: A History of the Arabian Frontier* (Winona Lake (IN), 1986), 84 f., 111 f.

18 W. E. Kaegi, *Byzantine and the Early Islamic Conquests* (Cambridge, 1992), 39 ff.

19 Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*, 40 f., where the total number of troops is for "non-Arab Byzantine soldiers" that could be deployed against Arabs.

in the archaeological record (due to the preservation of vegetable-tanned leather in waterlogged deposits).²⁰ In a letter cited in the *Historia Augusta*, the emperor Valerian (253–60) orders his procurator of Syria, Zosimus, to furnish the legion *V Martia* with annual supplies including “thirty half-score of hides for the tents”: *legio IV Martia* (there was no *V Martia*) was stationed at Betthorus, possibly Lejjūn, in Arabia.²¹ Even the Bedouin used tents of leather, as well as of hair, in those days (as indeed in Old Testament times as well),²² and the quranic opponents of the Prophet also used “houses of the skins of cattle” on their journeys (Q. 16:80). If we take Kaegi’s “Arab hired guards” to include Arab *limitanei*, it would follow that even in a severely depleted state, the troops in southern Syria required some 65,700 goats just to equip themselves with tents. How often they could be expected to replace them in the course of their careers I do not know, but the quantities involved are enormous regardless: some 7,500–10,000 goats will also have been required to supply them afresh with shields,²³ and many more goats, sheep and camels will have been required for saddles, sandals, boots, belts, water skins, wine skins and other containers, scabbards, bridles, and straps of diverse kinds, most of which will have had comparatively short lifespans. Even in a severely reduced form, then, the military presence will have represented a substantial demand.

Of course, the demand will not have been as heavy if most of Kaegi’s 5,000 men were hired guards rather than *limitanei*. But leaving aside that Whitby and Treadgold would double or treble the number of regular troops, the Ghassānids, who may or may not have replaced them, will also have needed leather for their military gear (though there can hardly be much doubt that they were more lightly equipped); and in any case, we should not look at southern Syria alone, but rather consider the demand of all the Roman troops in Syria and Mesopotamia, for all drew on the resources of the same region. What is more, the Persian army must have drawn on that region too, presumably swallowing up leather and hides on much the same scale as its Roman rival. Between them, the two armies will

20 Van Driel-Murray, *Production and supply*, 43 f.; below, n. 70.

21 *Scriptores Historiae Augustae, Claudius*, 14, 3; *Notitia Dignitatum Or.* 37, 22, cf. S. T. Parker (ed.), *The Roman Frontier in Central Jordan: Interim Report on the Limes Arabicus Project 1980–85* (Oxford, 1987), 196, 807 f. It is perhaps also worth noting that the troops kept “under skins” (*sub pellibus*), i.e. in tents, during a freezing winter in Anatolia in the mid-first century had been transferred from Syria (Tacitus, *Annals*, 13, 35). But *sub pellibus* was a standard phrase for “in the camp” and could have been used even when the tents were made of something else.

22 G. Jacob, *Altarabisches Beduinenleben* (Berlin, 1897), 41; A. Khan, The tanning cottage industry in pre-Islamic Arabia, *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society* 19, 1971, 85; R. G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs from the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam* (London and New York, 2001), 173. Cf. *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, ed. P. J. Achtemeier (New York, 1996), s.v. tent, where it is also noted that the apostle Paul, a tent-maker who stayed with tent-makers in Corinth, could have worked with either leather or hair, since tents were often made of leather in Hellenistic times, too.

23 Cf. Kissel, *Untersuchungen*, 225, on the basis of van Driel-Murray, *The production and supply*.

have represented an enormous demand. In addition, the inhabitants of Arabia themselves used leather for military equipment such as shields, body armour, and siege engines,²⁴ and both they and their customers in the Roman empire (as in that of the Persians) used hides, skins and leather for a wide variety of non-military products too, such as writing material,²⁵ coffins, building material,²⁶ boats, tents, shoes (including camel shoes), sandals and other items of clothing, bags, buckets, basins, pillows, oil skins, butter skins, wine skins, water skins, water pipes, ropes and straps of various kinds.²⁷ As Conrad says, leather was the plastic of the age.²⁸ How one might go about estimating the size of the local supply I do not know, but what with so heavy an overall demand, the pressure on the local resources must have been considerable.

The demand of the Roman army for food, clothes and equipment was primarily met by taxation and requisitioning from the local population rather than market exchanges, but even so, the market played a considerable role in the process.²⁹ By the third century the supply of food to the military (*annona militaris*) had become a regular tax. Initially, it was paid in kind, but later it was often commuted, both for collection and for delivery; the same is true of that portion of the land tax which was assessed in foodstuffs for the army. Regardless of how it was collected, the troops always received their rations in kind when they were in transit, in garrison

- 24 F. W. Schwarzlose, *Die Waffen der alten Araber* (Göttingen, 1886, repr. Hildesheim 1982), 325, 353, 355; for siege engines, see al-Balādhurī, *Futūḥ al-buldān*, ed. M. J. de Goeje (Leiden, 1866), 55 (drawn to my attention by Michael Lecker).
- 25 Cf. S. A. Stephens, Book production, in M. Grant and R. Kitzinger (eds), *Civilization of the Ancient Mediterranean* (New York, 1988); H. Roberts and T. C. Skeat, *The Birth of the Codex* (London, 1983), ch. 2; M. Maraqtan, Writing materials in pre-Islamic Arabia, *Journal of Semitic Studies* 43, 1998, 288 ff.; Y. Rāghib, Les plus anciens papyrus arabes, *Annales Islamologiques* 30, 1996, 14, fig. 3 (document on leather from 44/664 f.; drawn to my attention by Lennart Sundelin); H. J. Colt (ed.), *Excavations at Nessana*, i (Princeton, 1950), 55 (codex cover); J. Naveh, A Syriac amulet on leather, *Journal of Semitic Studies* 42, 1997, 33, referring to other Syriac texts on leather. The Persians are said to have written on hides and parchment (*al-julūd wa'l-raqq*) to the exclusion of papyri because they did not want to write on imported material (al-Jahshiyārī, *Kitāb al-wuzarā' wa'l-kuttāb*, ed. M. al-Saqqā et al. (Cairo, 1938), 138.20).
- 26 Maraqtan, Writing materials, 291.
- 27 Leguilloux, *Cuir et la pelleterie*, 94 ff., 159 ff.; Khan, Tanning cottage industry in pre-Islamic Arabia, 85 f., 91; Jacob, *Altarabisches Beduinenleben*, 44 f.; M. Maraqtan, Wine drinking and wine prohibition in Arabia before Islam, *Seminar for Arabian Studies* 26, 1993, 96 f.; E. W. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (London, 1863-93), s.vv. *ṣurwa*, *naʿl*; Colt, *Excavations at Nessana*, i, 56 (pillow, purse, sandals, boots, belt).
- 28 L. Conrad, The Arabs, in *Cambridge Ancient History*, xiv (*Late Antiquity: Empire and Successors, A.D. 425-600*), ed. A. Cameron, J. B. Ward-Perkins and M. Whitby (Cambridge, 2000), 687 f.
- 29 Cf. Kissel, *Untersuchungen*, 221-34 (Leder als Bestandteil der "*annona militaris*"); Strabo, *Geography*, 4.5.2, 5.1.8, 11.2.3, on cattle and hides imported from Britain, Illyria and the Black Sea nomads in return for goods such as olive oil, wine, sea-food (to the Illyrians) and clothing (to the nomads) in the early empire (my thanks to D. Kennedy for these references).

towns or on active service; but at other times they might draw their rations in cash, and they seem to have preferred to do so whenever it was possible. They were in that case free to buy their own food on the open market. New recruits were given their first uniform for free, and probably horses, weapons and other equipment too, but they had to pay for such things thereafter and received an annual cash allowance for this purpose, too. Arms could only be purchased from imperial depots, or so at least in principle, for Justinian had made the manufacture of arms an imperial monopoly; but clothing and horses could be bought either through the military authorities or from private suppliers in the open market.³⁰ Where tents, bridles, straps, scabbards, belts, water skins, wine skins, sacks and bags were purchased is not stated, but one would assume items of direct military relevance such as tents, horse-gear, and shields to have been acquired from the military authorities as well, not (or not just) from private traders.³¹ The military authorities will also have been responsible for procuring hides for purposes such as strengthening the gates and posterns of forts.³²

Needless to say, soldiers did not like spending their allowance on equipment. Justinian's general Belisarius was praised for replacing weapons lost in battle out of his own pocket,³³ and another generous man, the Patriarch of Antioch, earned himself popularity by donating money, clothing, food and other things to freshly mobilized troops, or perhaps fresh recruits, in 589.³⁴ Since the troops were often poorly clad and ill-equipped, the emperor Maurice (582–602) proposed that they should be provided with free equipment and clothing in return for reduced pay, but the soldiers preferred their pay, and it is not clear that the proposal went through.³⁵ The troops continued to buy their own equipment partly from government depots and partly on the open market, or so at least one would infer from the information relating to Umayyad times. Generally speaking,

- 30 A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284–602* (Oxford, 1964), i, 670–74; J. Haldon, *Byzantine Praetorians* (Bonn, 1984), 113 f.; Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*, 36. On the *annona* see also B. Isaac, *The Limits of Empire: The Roman Army in the East*, revised edition (Oxford, 1992), 285 ff.; W. E. Kaegi, 'The "Annona Militaris" in the early seventh century', *Byzantina* (Thessalonika) 13, 1985; F. Mitthof, *Annona Militaris: die Heeresversorgung im Spätantiken Ägypten* (Florence, 2001).
- 31 Cf. Kissel, *Untersuchungen*, 230 f., with reference to an earlier period. For a seventh-century Greek letter from Egypt concerning a despatch of leather and hides, see A. Papathomos (ed.), *Fünfunddreissig griechische Papyrusbriefe aus der Spätantike* (Corpus Papyrorum Raineri, vol. 25, Munich and Leipzig, 2006), no. 35 (drawn to my attention by A. Papaconstantinou). Unfortunately, the context is not very clear.
- 32 Isaac, *Limits of Empire*, 291 (in connection with a visit of Diocletian to Egypt in 298, where they procure them as part of the *annona*).
- 33 Procopius, *Wars*, vii, i, 8 (cited in Jones, *Later Roman Empire*, i, 671; Haldon, *Byzantine Praetorians*, 113).
- 34 Whitby, *Recruitment*, 82. They were raised from the register (*ek katalogou* – or as the Arabs would say, *min al-dīwān*), but Whitby argues that they were fresh recruits.
- 35 Jones, *Later Roman Empire*, i, 670 f.; Whitby, *Recruitment*, 86.

the Byzantine system continued with some changes, notably the disappearance of the state monopoly on the manufacture of arms.³⁶

In short, sixth-century Syria and Mesopotamia accommodated some 18,000 men (according to Kaegi) or twice or three times that number (according to Whitby), all in regular need of food, clothing and a large variety of products manufactured from the skins and hides of sheep, goats, and camels, which were also required for the upkeep of the many forts in the region and for the acquisition of which they will have been in competition with their Persian counterparts. Some 5,000 or more of these men were to be found in the three provinces of Palestine and Arabia which constituted the southern part of Roman Syria. Against this background it is easy to see that it could have been highly profitable to transport leather, hides, woollens, foodstuff and other commodities produced by the pastoralists beyond the imperial frontier for sale in Syria, whether to the imperial authorities or private manufacturers and/or distributors, or directly to the soldiers themselves. But how far beyond the frontier? If the tradition is right, it was profitable to organize the supply of pastoralist products from a distance so enormous that we have to postulate acute demand and very high prices indeed. What could have generated such conditions?

The changes

Only three changes seem relevant. The first is the end of the commercial predominance of Palmyra after the suppression of its revolt in 273; we know that the Palmyrenes traded, among other things, in skins (though not necessarily for military use, of course).³⁷ The second is the growth of the pilgrim traffic to Mount Sinai and other sacred sites in the southernmost part of the empire from the fourth century onwards: sleeping in tents, carrying water in skins, and buying supplies from the Bedouin on the way, they must have added to the demand for pastoralist products in the region.³⁸ But the pilgrim traffic dwindles into insignificance compared to the third change, the escalation of warfare between Rome and Iran.

The wars had begun already in the second century, when the Romans expanded into Mesopotamia (Syria had become a Roman province as early as 64–3 BC). Trajan campaigned against the Parthians in 114–17, as did Marcus Aurelius and his co-emperor Lucius Verus in 162–5, as well as

36 M. El Abbadi, “Annona Militaris” and “rizk” at Nessana, *Atti del XVII Congresso Internazionale del Papirologia*, iii (Naples, 1984), 1057–62; P. Crone, The early Islamic world, in K. Raaflaub and N. Rosenstein (eds), *War and Society in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1999), 312 f. The topic deserves a monograph.

37 J.-B. Chabot, *Choix d'inscriptions de Palmyre* (Paris, 1922), 29 f.

38 C. A. M. Glucker, *The City of Gaza in the Roman and Byzantine Periods*, Oxford (BAR international series 325, Oxford, 1987), 96 ff.; cf. Antoninus Placentius in P. Mayerson, The first Muslim attacks on southern Palestine (A.D. 633–634), *American Philological Association* 95, 1964, 186 f. (where no money is passed because the Arabs would not trade during their “holy days”).

Septimius Severus in 195–6 and 198–9, and Caracalla in 215–17; as a result, Edessa and Hatra became client kingdoms of Rome while Mesene was annexed by the Parthians. Latin dedications show Roman detachments to have been present at Hatra in 235 and around 238–40.³⁹ At the same time, the Romans expanded southwards too. Trajan annexed the Nabataean kingdom in 106 AD and turned it into the province of Arabia, where Bostra became the base of the legion *III Cyrenaica*. By the time of Septimius Severus (193–211), the Romans had fortified and garrisoned al-Azraq at one end of Wādī Sirḥān and posted a centurion from the Bostra legion at Dumata (Dūmat al-Jandal, now Jawf) at the other end.⁴⁰ A bilingual Greek–Nabataean inscription at Rawwāfa, to the southwest of Tabūk, erected (probably) by a military unit of Thamūd commemorates the erection of a temple dedicated to Marcus Aurelius (161–80) and his co-emperor Lucius Verus (161–9).⁴¹ Even further south, between al-Ḥijr (Madāʾin Ṣālīḥ) and al-ʿUlā, graffiti dating from the second and/or third century reveal the presence of mounted units (one of them of *dromedarii*), a mere 300 km or so from Yathrib.⁴²

All this is likely to have had a major impact on the local economies whether northern Ḥijāz was actually incorporated in the Roman empire or not (which is disputed).⁴³ It is well known that the settled rural population increased enormously in Syria under Roman rule and that marginal lands such as dry steppe and stony highlands were occupied more intensely than

39 M. Sartre, *The Middle East under Rome* (Cambridge, MA and London, 2005), 135 f., 145 ff., 345.

40 G. W. Bowersock, *Roman Arabia* (Cambridge and London, 1983), 98 f.; M. Speidel, *The Roman road to Dumata* (Jawf in Saudi Arabia) and the frontier strategy of *Praetensione Colligare*, *Historia* 36, 1987 (reprinted in his *Roman Army Studies*, Stuttgart, 1992, ii), 213 f. The date of the Azraq inscription is disputed, see Sartre, *Middle East under Rome*, 555, n. 151, with further literature.

41 For the interpretation of the Thamūd in this inscription as an ethnic unit of the Roman army, see M. C. A. MacDonald, *Quelques réflexions sur les saracènes, l'inscription de Rawwāfa et l'armée romaine*, in H. Lozachmeur (eds), *Présence arabe dans le croissant fertile avant l'Hégire* (Paris, 1995), 98 ff. (drawn to my attention by D. Kennedy). For earlier views, see G. W. Bowersock, *The Greek-Nabataean bilingual inscription at Ruwwāfa, Saudi Arabia*, *Le Monde Grec ... Hommages à Claire Préaux*, ed. J. Bingen et al. (Brussels, 1975; reprinted in his *Studies on the Eastern Roman Empire*, Goldbach, 1994); Bowersock, *Roman Arabia* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1983), 96 f., 157; D. Graf, *Qura ʿArabiyya and Provincia Arabia*, in P.-L. Gatier et al. (eds), *Géographie Historique au Proche Orient: Actes de la Table Ronde de Valbonne, 16–18 Septembre 1985* (Paris, 1988; reprinted in his *Rome and the Arabian Frontier: from the Nabataeans to the Saracens*, Aldershot, 1997), with a helpful list of other literature on the inscription in note 6.

42 Bowersock, *Roman Arabia*, 95 f., 107, 157; cf. Graf, *Qura ʿArabiyya*, who rejects the idea that there was a toll station there and suggests that the troops were *exploratores*, “probes and protusions from the imperial borders [which] provided surveillance of the major routes leading into the provinces and monitored any dramatic settlement changes or population shifts along the frontiers”.

43 See Graf, *Qura ʿArabiyya*; also the preface to his *Rome and the Arabian Frontier*, xi f.

44 K. Butcher, *Roman Syria* (London and Los Angeles, 2003), 140.

at any time before.⁴⁴ Part of this expansion is likely to have been driven by the military need for supplies. In the province of Arabia the establishment of a legionary base at Bostra and detachments elsewhere undoubtedly stimulated the local production of grain at the expense of pastoralism, as shown in the steady extension of settlement into the steppe area between the Decapolis and Bostra in the centuries before the Arab conquests. One would infer that the Romans simultaneously drove up the demand for leather and caused the local supply to decline, causing the military to look further afield for its needs.⁴⁵

It was all in the nature of a mere prelude, however. Around 224 the Parthians were ousted by the Sasanids and under them the wars intensified. They launched their first attack on the Roman empire in 230, determined to take Nisibis, and there was intermittent war until they conquered it, perhaps in 235 or 238; there were battles again in 243–4, 252–3 (and/or 256), 259–60, 283, 297–8, 359 and 363, with localized warfare in 337–50 and 359–61. By then both Hatra and Palmyra had lost their autonomy, the former annexed by the Persians in 240–41, the latter suppressed by the Romans after its revolt in 273. Thereafter a spirit of co-operation between the empires prevailed, except for a brief interlude of war in 421–22 and 441. But in 502 Kavādh launched a surprise attack, to which Anastasius responded by assembling an army of 52,000 men; Kavādh annihilated this army, other troops took over and the war continued to 506. In 528 the Romans launched a counter-offensive, again with sizeable numbers of troops: Belisarius commanded 25,000 men at Dāra in 530 and 20,000 men at Callinicum in 531. In 540 Khusraw I invaded, starting warfare in Mesopotamia which continued until 544. In 573 Justin II invaded with an army said to have numbered 120,000 men, an obvious exaggeration, but we may take it that it was enormous; and this time warfare continued to 589. In 603 Khusraw II declared war on Byzantium, starting the all-out war which ended with Khusraw II's death and Heraclius' victory in 628.⁴⁶

To the settled people of Syria and above all Mesopotamia the constant warfare was a dire calamity, not only in the sense that they risked being killed or carried off into captivity, but also in the sense that they were squeezed dry whenever an army passed through their land, not least when the army was led by an emperor.⁴⁷ Common effects of the wars included “the depopulation of the countryside, shortages of agricultural labour, declining tax revenues, and the migration of skilled farmers to safer

45 I owe this point to David Kennedy.

46 Pieced together from J. Howard-Johnston, *The two great powers in Late Antiquity: a comparison*, in Cameron, *States, Resources and Armies*, 160–64; Whitby, *Recruitment*, 101; R. N. Frye, *The political history of Iran under the Sasanians*, in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, iii (1), ed. E. Yarshater (Cambridge, 1983). Where slightly different dates are given for the same campaigns, my choice is haphazard.

47 Cf. Isaac, *Limits of Empire*, 290 f.

48 F. R. Trombley, *War and society in Rural Syria c. 502–613 A.D.: observations on the epigraphy*, *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 21, 1997, 158. The earlier warfare is assumed to have been bad for trade in Palmyra too (cf. Sartre, *Middle East under Rome*, 351).

localities".⁴⁸ In other words, the wars will have served further to increase the imperial demand for leather while at the same time reducing the local supply; and from 541 onwards, the repeated outbreaks of plague on the Byzantine side will have reinforced the downward trend.⁴⁹

But for traders from the pastoralist regions, beyond the reach of the imperial taxation system, well away from the invasion routes and shielded by low population densities from the plague, the wars will have been a golden opportunity. The number of tents, weapons and other supply and equipment assembled, damaged, lost, replaced, and destroyed again by the two empires in the course of these campaigns must have been enormous. Not all of the troops will have bought their equipment from scratch when a campaign began, of course, nor will all of them have equipped themselves in Syria, since they were assembled from far afield; but it must have been in or near the war zone that the bulk of the equipment was obtained. That the demand exceeded the resources of the Syrian desert is hardly open to doubt, for an imperial army placed an enormous strain on local resources even at the best of times. Two centuries later, when the heir apparent al-Mahdī was stationed at Rayy with an army said to number a mere 30,000 men, the demand for supplies was felt as far away as Sīstān.⁵⁰ By analogy, the demand created by the Perso-Byzantine wars could have been felt not just in Mecca and Medina, but even as far away as Yemen (where Quraysh were active, too).

As in the earlier period, the warfare in Syro-Mesopotamia had repercussions further south. New legionary bases were established at Aela (Ayla) and Legio (Lajjūn);⁵¹ and Diocletian (286–316) linked the road which ran from Bostra to Dumata (at a distance of some 560 km) with the *Strata Diocletiana*, which ran from the Euphrates to southern Syria, joining them at al-Azraq (where al-Walīd II later resided); he also provided for regular patrolling of the Dumata road.⁵² But the Romans later withdrew from their southernmost positions, and in the sixth century they are not known to have had any outposts south of Tabūk.⁵³ They continued to involve themselves in Arabian affairs, however, now preferring to use client kings, partly tribal rulers such as those of Tanūkh, Ghassān and Kinda and partly the king of Ethiopia. By contrast, the Persians opted for direct occupation of the peninsula, though they too used tribal allies. They occupied the eastern coast in the course of the third century and in c. 570

49 Cf. Conrad, *The Arabs*, 696.

50 G. Khan (ed. and tr.), *Arabic Documents from Early Islamic Khurasan* (Oxford, 2005), nos. 3, 21, dated 148 and 158. The second document, which relates to the taxes for 157, is problematic in that al-Mahdī had by then been back in Iraq for six years. For the size of his army at Rayy when he was actually there, see al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa'l-mulūk*, ed. M. J. de Goeje et al. (Leiden, 1879–1901), iii, 304.19, year 145. See also Khan's discussion in the introduction, 37 ff.

51 Sartre, *Middle East under Rome*, 361, cf. also 350, on Bostra and Adraha (Adhrī'āt).

52 Speidel, Roman road to Dumata, 214 ff. (with a map). For (the future) al-Walīd II at al-Azraq, see Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, ii, 1743, and the annotation in C. Hillenbrand (tr.), *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, xxvi (Albany, 1989), 91, n. 465.

53 Cf. J. E. Dayton, A Roman/Byzantine Site in the Hejaz, *Proceedings of the Sixth Seminar for Arabian Studies* (London, 1973).

they added Yemen, where rivalry between Persia and Axum (representing Rome) is discernible already in the late third and early fourth centuries.⁵⁴ It is well known that the two empires were competing for control of the India trade, but given that armies could no more function without leather and hides in those days than they can without oil today, it seems unlikely that their involvement in Arabia should have been driven by the India trade alone.⁵⁵

The Islamic tradition

Who, apart from the tax-paying peasants of the Roman (or for that matter the Persian) empire supplied hides, skins and leather for use by the imperial troops? Palmyra may have continued to play a role in the trade even after the suppression of its revolt in 273, for numerous buildings on the outskirts of the city, observed on aerial photographs and still unexcavated, should perhaps be interpreted as lodgings for travelling merchants and some of them could have been erected (or simply remained in use) after the revolt.⁵⁶ In any case, there must always have been many suppliers. One would have expected the client kingdoms of Kinda, Ghassān, and Ḥīra to have been among them, but concrete evidence is hard to come by. We do hear that al-Nuʿmān of Ḥīra organized annual caravans to ʿUkāz, where he bought leather (*al-udum*) and clothing from Yemen.⁵⁷ According to Fraenkel, the tribute paid by the Arabs to Nuʿmān of Ḥīra included leather, but it is impossible to tell where he has the information from.⁵⁸ It is noteworthy, though, that the story of the would-be client king of Mecca assumes skins and other pastoralist products to be goods that the Byzantines would appreciate from such a king. This goes well with the claim that the king of Ethiopia liked leather goods better than other Meccan products,⁵⁹ and it fits the record on the Roman side as well, for the Romans are known to have collected tribute in hides from client kings on the Germanic frontier in the early empire.⁶⁰ Did a client king of Heraclius' such as Ukaydir of Dūma, a Christian relative by marriage of Abū Sufyān, also pay tribute in goods of

54 Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 46 ff.

55 Similarly M. G. Morony, The Late Sasanian economic impact on the Arabian peninsula, *Nāme-ye Irān-e Bāstān* i/2, 2001–2, 25.

56 J.-M. Dentzer, Khāns ou casernes à Palmyre? À propos de structures visibles sur des photographies aériennes anciennes, *Syria* 71, 1994, 45–112, esp. 107n (my thanks to Rebecca Foote for this reference).

57 al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-ashraf*, i, ed. M. Ḥamidullāh (Cairo, 1959), 101.2; also Abū ʿl-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī, *Kitāb al-aghānī* (Cairo, 1927–74), xxii, 57, without mention of their Yemeni provenance.

58 S. Fraenkel, *Die aramäischen Fremdwörter im arabischen* (Leiden, 1886), 178. The reference he gives is wrong.

59 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, i, 334.11; al-Wāqidī, *Kitāb al-maghāzī*, ed. M. Jones (Oxford, 1966), ii, 742–4; cf. the doublets involving ʿAmr b. al-ʿĀṣ, Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, ii, 277.10; Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, i, 232.11.

60 Tacitus, *Annals*, iv, 72, on the Frisians: they supplied ox hides for the use of the military.

61 See *EF*, s.v. Ukaydir b. ʿAbd al-Malik (Lecker).

this kind?⁶¹ No evidence seems to be available. Of the Persians we do know that they founded numerous tanneries in Yemen when they conquered it in the late sixth century;⁶² and of one caravan sent by the Persian governor of Yemen to the Persian emperor we learn that it included leather belts; but they were ornamented and probably luxury goods rather than humble products destined for troopers.⁶³

That leaves us with the Meccans. The tradition casts Hāshim, Muḥammad's great-grandfather, as the founder of Meccan trade, thereby dating its inception to *c.* 450–470;⁶⁴ but how seriously this should be taken is uncertain. The tradition tends to move the founder of the trade too close to Muḥammad's time,⁶⁵ while at the same time associating him with stories so legendary that one wonders if the trade did not start earlier than the tradition says. For all we know, they could have been traders long before we meet them in the Islamic tradition.

However this may be, the story does not identify Hāshim's customers, but the version given by Ibn al-Kalbī (d. 146/763) is certainly compatible with the suggestion that they included the military. According to him, Hāshim attracted the attention of the Byzantine emperor (*qayṣar*) in Syria by cooking *tharīd*, a dish unknown to the non-Arabs, and persuaded him to issue a safe conduct to Qurashī merchants in Syria so that they could sell leather goods and clothing there, arguing that this would be cheaper for the Syrians; thereafter he negotiated safe-conducts, allegedly called *Īlāf*, from the tribes between Syria and Mecca so that the Qurashī merchants could travel to Syria in peace; this he did by undertaking to have the merchants collect goods produced by these tribes on the way to Syria, and drive along their camels too according to some,⁶⁶ sell them on their behalf, and hand over their share of the profit on their return.⁶⁷ In other words, he stepped in as middleman between the pastoralist suppliers in the desert and unspecified customers in Byzantine Syria with the blessing of the Byzantine authorities.

This is one out of many stories told in explanation of a quranic verse in which the enigmatic word *Īlāf* occurs (Q. 106: 1). There is no reason to think that this verse alludes to any such arrangement or that pre-Islamic

62 Ibn al-Mujāwir in Khan, Tanning cottage industry in pre-Islamic Arabia, 97.

63 *Aghānī*, xvii, 318; C. J. Lyall (ed. and tr.), *The Mufadalliyyāt* (Oxford, 1918–24), i, 708 (where they are belts of gold); cf. also Morony, Late Sasanian economic impact, 36 f.

64 Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 98, and the sources cited there.

65 In the *Nihāyat al-ʿArab* “Caesar” is replaced by a Ghassānid king, Jabala b. Ayham, a contemporary of the rise of Islam who participated in the battle of Yarmūk rather than somebody active four generations earlier. Here Hāshim also negotiates agreements with Abraha, who only came to power around 531, and Kavādh (488–530), who did start ruling early enough to fit (M. J. Kister, Some reports concerning Mecca from Jāhiliyya to Islam, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 15, 1972, 61 f.).

66 Al-Jāhīz and al-Thaʿālibī in Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 103. We also hear of a Byzantine trader who sold a cloak for a hundred camels in Mecca itself (*Aghānī*, xviii, 123).

67 See the references in Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 98, n. 43.

68 Cf. Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 205 ff.

safe-conducts were actually known as *Īlāf*;⁶⁸ but though the story is wrong as exegesis, the agreements it invokes are likely to have been a genuine Arabian institution, and Quraysh could well have been among those who used it. If so, the Byzantine emperor who figures in it is presumably a legendary version of a Byzantine governor of southern Syria who authorized Quraysh to trade in the region. Without a safe-conduct (*amān*) from him, it is implied, they would be treated as hostile aliens. The Byzantines did in fact try to keep external trade under strict control for reasons of security and a regular flow of customs duties alike;⁶⁹ but for all that, the prominence of “Caesar” in the story is striking: it could be taken to imply that Hāshim organized the supply of pastoralist products from the tribes of north-western Arabia not just with the permission of the authorities, but also for the use of the authorities themselves.

This is impossible to prove, however. Quite apart from the fact that leather seems to be poorly represented in the archaeological record of Roman Arabia,⁷⁰ the literary sources do not preserve much information about the nature of the trade. Apart from “Caesar”, the people that the Meccans are described as encountering in Syria are mostly monks and ecclesiastical personnel: Baḥīrā who spots Muḥammad, an Alexandrian deacon who encounters ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ,⁷¹ a bishop in Damascus to whom al-Walīd b. al-Mughīra owed money. It is only in the last story that there is a suggestion of commercial dealings, and in another version of that story the money is owed to the bishop of Najrān, with different implications.⁷² All one can say is that the tradition envisages Quraysh as trading at fairs rather than at forts or military headquarters, and that it seems to think of their customers as Arabs rather than Greeks and Aramaeans, conjuring up a trade of a very different kind from that proposed here.⁷³ Of course, the people that Quraysh encountered in southern Syria will mostly have been Arabs, in the sense of people whose first language was Arabic; but judging from the Nessana and Petra papyri, the latter saw themselves as first and

69 An imperial edict of 408–409 identifies Nisibis, Artaxata and Callinicum as the only places where traders coming from Mesopotamia could bring their goods into the empire, and the peace treaty of 561 instructs the Arabs to bring their goods to Daras and Nisibis instead of trying to smuggle them in, threatening them with dire punishments. At the designated points of entry, they could be searched for proof that they were *bona fide* traders rather than spies and also made to pay (I. Kawar (alias Shahid), *The Arabs in the peace treaty of A.D. 561*, *Arabica* 3, 1956, 192 f, 196; cf. above, n. 3).

70 For a cheekpiece of an iron helmet with leather fragments adhering to its inner surface, see J. P. Olesen et al., Preliminary report of the al-Ḥumayma excavation project 1995, 1996, 1998, *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 43, 1999, 411 (drawn to my attention by Rebecca Foote); for other items, see Colt, *Excavations at Nessana*, i, 55 f. (codex cover, pillow, purse, sandals, boots, belt). Below, n. 78.

72 Ibn Ḥabīb, *Kitāb al-munammaq*, ed. Kh. A. Fārūq, Hyderabad, 1964, 226.3; Kister, *Some reports concerning Mecca*, 73, citing Zubayr b. Bakkār. There is also a version in which it is a Thaqaḥī who owes the money to al-Walīd b. al-Mughīra (Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, i, 411.1).

73 Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 151 f.; cf. ch. 7, and the explanation of the trade tried out there.

foremost Christians and loyal subjects of the Romans, and it will have been as imperial subjects rather than as Arabs that they traded with Quraysh if the latter were suppliers to the army. The stress on the Arab nature of Qurashī trade (including the strong stress on activities at fairs in Arabia itself) should perhaps be explained as a product of the rise of Islam, and the same is obviously true of the stress on encounters with men of religion. It is almost entirely in connection with events and institutions of religious significance that we hear about the trade. But though the impression conveyed by the sources is easily explained away, we do not thereby gain the information we need to answer the question.

One can still try to divine the ultimate destination of their goods by following them along their routes to see where they traded. Here the best one can say is that the information is compatible with the hypothesis that the wares of Quraysh were meant for military use; again, there simply is not enough information for an answer.

Where did Quraysh go?

Quraysh are said to have traded in (the later *junds* of) Palestine⁷⁴ and Jordan,⁷⁵ as well as in Phoenicia,⁷⁶ and Egypt.⁷⁷ Occasionally, they are depicted as also visiting major cities such as Jerusalem or Alexandria,⁷⁸ Damascus, Tyre, Antioch, and even Ankara.⁷⁹ But there are only two places in which they are regularly said to have been active, namely Buṣrā in Transjordan and Gaza on the Mediterranean. An exegete adds that they travelled not just to Buṣrā, but also to Adhriʿāt in Transjordan.⁸⁰ For this and what follows see the map in Figure 1.

Buṣrā is Bostra, the capital of the Roman province of Arabia, a garrison city housing the Third Cyrenaican Legion (which has left numerous

74 ʿIkrima in al-Suyūfī, *Kitāb al-durr al-manthūr fī 'l-tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr* (Beirut, 1983), viii, 638, *ad* 106:2.

75 See Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 119, n. 54 (Muqātil, supported by Abū 'l-Baqā').

76 E. W. Brooks (tr.), The chronological canon of James of Edessa, *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 53, 1899, 323.

77 Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. de Boor (Leipzig, 1883), AM 6122; tr. C. Mango, R. Scott and G. Greatrex, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern History, AD 284–813* (Oxford, 1997), 464.

78 In al-Kindī, *The Governors and Judges of Egypt*, ed. R. Guest (Leiden and London, 1912), 6f., ʿAmr b. al-ʿAṣ goes to Egypt for trade, which takes him to Alexandria; but in Ibn ʿAbd al-Hakam, *Futūḥ Miṣr*, ed. C. C. Torrey (New Haven, 1922), 53 ff., he and other Qurashīs are trading in Jerusalem when he meets a deacon who takes him to Alexandria without there being any suggestion that he traded there.

79 Cf. Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 118 f. (the story set in the Ḥawrān should be removed from 118, note 53, since it fits Buṣrā and Adhriʿāt, but cf. also the reference given below, note 188); al-ʿUmarī, *Masālik al-absār*, ed. Ahmad Zaki Pasha, I (Cairo, 1924), 342 (citing the fourth/tenth-century al-Khālidī), where a prediction story has ʿUmar go to Antioch for trade; Jacob of Edessa, above, n. 76, where Muḥammad goes down to trade in Tyre and elsewhere. Tyre was the Mediterranean outlet of Bostra (cf. Sartre, *Middle East under Rome*, 197; Sartre, *Bostra, des origines à l'Islam* (Paris, 1985), 132).

80 ʿIkrima in the report cited above, n. 74.

The Qurashi Routes to Syria

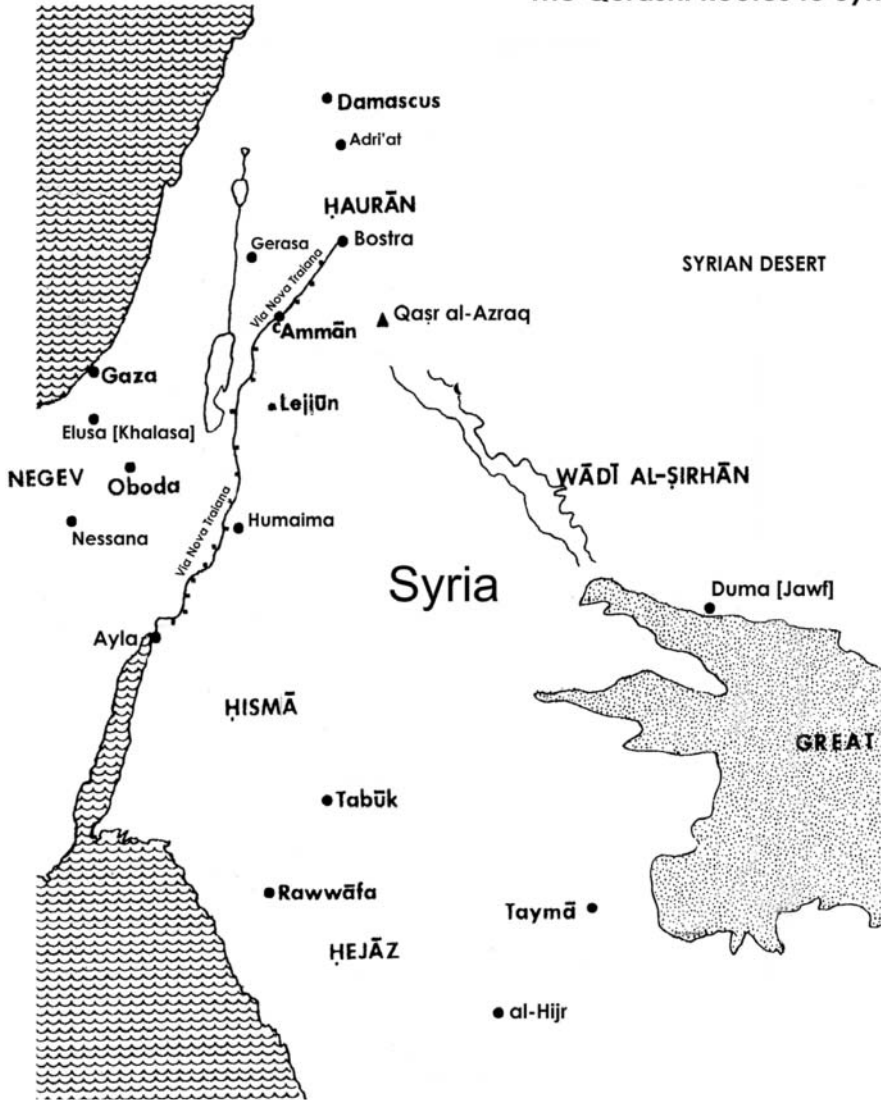


Figure 1. Qurashī routes to Syria.

inscriptions), raised to the status of metropolis by Philip the Arab, a native of Shahba in the Hawrān who rose through the army to become Roman emperor (244–49).⁸¹ It was also the site of a famous fair which Muḥammad

81 He was not necessarily an ethnic Arab (as opposed to just a native of the area known as Arabia), but he was clearly perceived as a (Syrian or Arab) non-Greek. His father, Iulius Marinus, was a Roman citizen, however; his brother was also a member of the army, and both sons spoke Greek, presumably also Latin, whatever they may have spoken with their mother. The entire family could have made it through the army. See F. Millar, *The Roman Near East 31 BC–AD 337* (Cambridge,

himself is said to have visited, both as a child and as the agent of Khadīja: this was where the monk Bahīrā spotted him.⁸² By Hāshim's time, legions were smaller than in the early empire and typically consisted of some 1,000–1,500 men, so it was not an enormous market. But it was not negligible either, and it did have a weapons industry: blades from Buṣrā are vaunted in pre-Islamic poetry.⁸³ It was a city in which the makers of goat-skin bags were sufficiently wealthy to have reserved seats in the theatre.⁸⁴ and it was also famed for products such as wine and grain, which were exported to distant destinations, by sea all the way to India and by caravan to the Arabian peninsula; perhaps they were among the goods carried back by Quraysh.⁸⁵

From Buṣrā one could travel to Adhrīfāt (Adra[h]ja, modern Der'a), some 106 km south of Damascus. It was the capital of the Ḥawrān, a region dominated by the Ghassānids, and the site of another famous fair, which Qurashī traders may have visited.⁸⁶ There too they could have sold their leather to local merchants, this time to those working for the imperial armoury in Damascus;⁸⁷ they could also have traded with the Ghassānids. Either way, they could have purchased grain, oil and wine for the return journey here too, the town being famed for all three. Grain and oil are both seen as coming from Syria in the tradition, and the same is usually (but not invariably) true of wine.⁸⁸ Gaza is where Hāshim is said to have died. Muḥammad's own father is envisaged as being on his way back from Gaza with merchandise when he died in Medina; and many other Qurashīs, including the Umayyads, are said to have traded there.⁸⁹ It does not seem to have had either an armoury or a military presence, though the sixty soldiers from Gaza allegedly martyred by the Muslims are presented as its

MA, 1993), 530 f.; C. Körner, *Philippus Arabs. Ein Soldatenkaiser in der Tradition des antoninisch-severischen Prinzipats* (Berlin, 2002), ch. 2.

82 Sartre, *Bostra*; Isaac, *Limits of Empire*, 123 f.; D. L. Kennedy and D. N. Riley, *Rome's Desert Frontier from the Air* (London, 1990), 125; *EP*, s.v. Boṣrā. See Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 116, note 34; 118, note 50; 219 f.

83 Schwarzlose, *Waffen*, 55, 131.

84 Sartre, *Middle East under Rome*, 199.

85 Schwarzlose, *Waffen*, 55, 131; Jacob, *Altarabisches Beduinenleben*, 98; Sartre, *Bostra*, 129 ff. (with much reference to Lammens); in Sartre, *Middle East under Rome*, 198 f., no evidence suggests that Bostra had a significant caravan trade, but this book stops in 273.

86 *EP*, s.v. Adhrīfāt.

87 Cf. Isaac, *Limits of Empire*, 275.

88 Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 98, 104 f., 139 f.; Maraqtan, Wine drinking and wine prohibition in Arabia, 96 ff., 101, 105.

89 *EP*, s.v. Ghazza; Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 110, 115, n. 21, 118; for Muḥammad's father, see Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-ashraf*, i, 92. 'Umar is said to have made his fortune there (al-Iṣṭakhrī, *al-masālik wa'l-mamālik*, ed. M. J. de Goeje (Leiden, 1870), 58; Ibn Ḥawqal, *Kitāb ṣurat al-arḍ*, ed. J. H. Kramers (Leiden 1938–39), 172).

90 The *Passio* is the only report we have of troops stationed in Gaza itself in the Roman and Byzantine period (Glucker, *Gaza*, 58); their presence would be due to the exceptional circumstances. See also R. G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It* (Princeton, 1997), 347 ff.; D. Woods, The 60 martyrs of Gaza and the martyrdom of Sophronius of Jerusalem, *Aram* 15, 2003, 129–50 (reprinted in M. Bonner (ed.), *Arab-Byzantine Relations in Early Islamic Times*, Aldershot, 2004).

garrison;⁹⁰ but it was a flourishing port from where the products brought by Quraysh could have been exported to other cities, such as Caesarea and Alexandria, and it was also a centre of the pilgrim traffic.⁹¹ Quraysh could have bought grain, oil and wine there as well, for all three were produced in the Negev at the time, and Gaza exported wine to places as distant as Gaul.⁹²

So far, so good. There is a major problem, however, in that in order to get to Gaza, Bostra and Adhri'āt, Quraysh must have passed through several places where one would have expected them also to trade if their goods were destined for military use, but which are not mentioned in connection with their commercial activities. Thus an exegete tells us that Quraysh journeyed to Syria by the coastal route via Ayla to Palestine in the winter and (by the inland route via Tabūk) to Buṣrā and Adhri'āt in the summer.⁹³ If Quraysh had travelled for something approaching a month by the time they reached Ayla (Roman Aela, modern 'Aqaba), one wonders why they did not simply unload all their goods there, for Ayla housed the *X Legio Fretensis*, or at least it had done so in the past. But though one can make a case for the view that they purchased goods at Ayla, presumably in return for some of their own,⁹⁴ there is no recollection of trade with either military authorities or soldiers in that town. But then it could simply be that the legion was not there any more, for it is last attested in the *Notitia Dignitatum* (early fifth century), and Ayla seems to have been denuded of troops by the time of the Prophet.⁹⁵

The problem recurs on the route to Transjordan. Contrary to what the exegete implies, the coastal route via Ayla could be used not just to reach Palestine (here presumably meaning Gaza), but also to travel to Buṣrā and Adhri'āt in Transjordan. If Quraysh travelled via Ayla to Transjordan, one would expect them to have continued from Ayla along the *Via Nova Traiana* to Adhruḥ or Udhrūḥ (Adroa), a legionary fortress some 120 km further north, and from there to Bostra. They will have passed several fortresses on the way,⁹⁶ but they are never said to have traded at any of them. In some cases the explanation could be that the fortresses had been abandoned: for example, the population of Auara (Hauare, Hauanae, Ḥumayma, where the 'Abbāsids were later to reside) between Ayla and Adhruḥ seems to have been entirely civilian from the early fifth century onwards,⁹⁷ and it is not clear whether Adhruḥ was still a legionary base in

91 Glucker, *Gaza*, 96 ff.

92 Colt, *Excavations at Nessana*, i, 272, 230; Glucker, *Gaza*, 93 f.

93 'Ikrima in al-Suyūfī, *Durr*, viii, 638, *ad* Q. 106:2. Compare Balādhurī, *Futūḥ*, 108.14, where Abū Bakr orders 'Amr b. al-'Āṣ to go to Syria by the Ayla route and others to go via Tabūk, 'Amr being headed for Palestine and the others for Jordan and Damascus.

94 Cf. below, texts to notes 119–20.

95 Mayerson, First Muslim attacks, 169 f., 174 f.; Isaac, The army in the Late Roman East, 141, 149).

96 See the maps in Parker, *Romans and Saracens*, 7, 38, 88, with discussion in chs 2–4.

97 J. P. Olesen, King, emperor, priest and caliph: cultural change at Ḥawar (ancient al-Ḥumayma) in the first millennium A.D., *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan* 7, 2001, 575. It had been abandoned already at the end of the third century, but only for a time (*ibid.*, 574; cf. J. P. Olesen et al., Preliminary report of

the sixth century (though it was certainly occupied).⁹⁸ But a recently discovered papyrus shows that there were regular troops at the fortress of Zadakathon (Zadagatta, Zodocatha, Şadaqa) to the north of Auara as late as 593–94, for example.⁹⁹ Though the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* claims that Adhruḥ was visited by Qurashī caravans, none of the sources listed in the bibliography says anything of the kind (the author is Lammens, revised by Veccia Vaglieri), and the only way to postulate that Quraysh traded there would seem to be by conjecturing that the sources have inadvertently turned Adhruḥ into Adhriʿāt.¹⁰⁰

If Quraysh went via Tabūk, they will have proceeded to Maʿān rather than to Adhruḥ.¹⁰¹ Maʿān was a well-known centre of caravan routes twenty kilometres south-east of Adhruḥ, and we do hear of Qurashīs at a place called al-Zarqāʿ between Maʿān and Adhruḥ.¹⁰² There is no evidence that they serviced any of the fortresses near Maʿān, however, though one of these forts may have been fully functioning in the sixth century.¹⁰³ Nor do

al-Ḥumayma excavation project, 2000, 2002, *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 47, 2003, 45. My thanks to Rebecca Foote for these references).

- 98 For Adhruḥ, see D. Kennedy, The Roman frontier in Arabia (Jordanian Sector), *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 5, 1992, esp. 480–2; Kennedy and Riley, *Rome's Desert Frontier*, 131–3; Isaac, *The army in the Late Roman East*, 141, 149; A. Killick, Udruh and the trade through Southern Jordan, *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan* 3, 1987, 173 ff.
- 99 L. Koenen, R. W. Daniel and T. Gagos, Petra in the sixth century: the evidence of the carbonized Papyri in G. Markoe (ed.), *Petra Rediscovered* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 2003), 254 (my thanks to Glen Bowersock for introducing me to the Petra papyri); cf. also Z. T. Fiema, The military presence in the countryside of Petra in the C6th, in P. Freeman et al. (eds), *Limes XVIII. Proceedings of the XVIIIth International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies held in Amman, Jordan (September 2000)*, i (BAR international series 1084 (i) (Oxford, 2002), 133.
- 100 It must in fact be Adhruḥ that lies behind Adhriʿāt in the passage discussed below, note 102, but in the exegetical claim that Quraysh travelled to Buṣrā and Adhriʿāt, the order of the names suggests that the exegete meant what he said (above, note 80). He could of course simply be correcting what he took to be a mistake in his material, and Buṣrā rather than Adriʿāt could lie behind all the general references to Quraysh in the Ḥawrān or Damascus region.
- 101 See the map in Parker, *Romans and Saracens*, 88.
- 102 Ibn Saʿd, *al-Tabaqāt*, ed. E. Sachau et al. (Leiden, 1904–40), iii/1, 37 (ed. Beirut, 1957–60, iii, 55): ‘Uthmān was between al-Zarqāʿ and Maʿān on his way to Syria when a voice told him that Aḥmad had come. Elsewhere it is a member of a Hudhalī caravan on its way to Syria who hears it (op. cit., i/i 105; ed. Beirut, i, 161); in Wāqidī, *Maghāzī*, i, 28, ‘Amr b. al-ʿĀṣ passes through al-Zarqāʿ on his way back to Mecca. Al-Zarqāʿ is here glossed as a place in the region of Maʿān “two *marḥalas* from Adhriʿāt”, but that is impossible: there were some 300 km between Maʿān (in the Sharāt) and Adhriʿāt (in the Ḥawrān), and a good pack camel can travel no faster than 40–45 km a day (Colt, *Excavations at Nessana*, i, 66). Wāqidī (or a later glossator) must be confusing Adhriʿāt with Adhruḥ here. For an enigmatic site between al-Zarqāʿ and Adhruḥ of possible relevance here, see D. L. Kennedy, *The Roman Army in Jordan*, second ed. (London, 2004), 182 f., on Jebel Tahuna, in conjunction with Yāqūt, *Muʿjam al-buldān*, ed. F. Wüstenfeld (Leipzig, 1866–73), ii, 924, s.v. al-Zarqāʿ.
- 103 Cf. Koenen, Daniel and Gagos, Petra in the sixth century, 254, on Ammatha (Hammam); also highlighted in Fiema, Military presence, 133.

they seem to have stopped further north at Lajjūn (Legio), a legionary camp 13 km east of the *Via Nova Traiana* which accommodated some 1,000–1,500 troops and which was occupied until the mid-sixth century.¹⁰⁴ The tradition barely even remembers its existence.¹⁰⁵ Nor is there any mention of Philadelphia/ʿAmmān, which they would also have passed through in order to reach Buṣrā, or of Gerasa/Jurash, unless Jurash is what the sources have in mind when they present Quraysh as trading in Jordan.¹⁰⁶ It is possible that travellers from the Ḥijāz to Bostra (whether via Ayla or Tabūk) could skirt the arable region of the Roman province almost entirely by using a military road running east of *Via Nova Traiana*, roughly along the lines of the later *ḥajj* route, the Ḥijāz railway, and the highway today.¹⁰⁷ If this is what they did, one would assume them to have been wholesalers who had no interest in customers on the way.

So much for the route to Transjordan. Now let us follow Quraysh to Gaza. Having gone to Ayla, as the exegete says, they could be expected to have proceeded northwards along the *Via Nova Traiana* to Petra (modern Wadi Musa, 10 km west of Adhruḥ), and to have taken the road north-west from there to Gaza, passing through settlements with a military presence such as Oboda (ʿAvdat) and Elusa (al-Ḥalaṣa) on the way.¹⁰⁸ But the sources do not seem to remember a single place between Ayla and Gaza in connection with Qurashī trade; most strikingly, they never seem to mention Petra. We do not even know what it was called in Arabic at the time. (Literally translated, Petra is al-Ḥijr, but al-Ḥijr is ancient Hegra near Madāʿin Ṣāliḥ and a place in Mecca.) Maybe Quraysh did not go to Petra, then, but rather headed north-west immediately on reaching Ayla, travelling along mere tracks. The tracks would eventually have brought them to a place where they could have turned north-east to go to Nessana (modern Awja Hafir), which had not only a military presence (until about 590), but also a ninety-six bed establishment for travellers;¹⁰⁹ and the track

104 See Parker, *Romans and Saracens*, 58 ff.; Kennedy, *Roman Army in Jordan*², 154 ff.

105 It is mentioned as a town in Palestine in al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm fī maʿrifat al-aqālīm*, ed. M. J. de Goeje (Leiden, 1906), 162; but Yāqūt, who identifies it as a place on the road from Syria to Mecca, places it near Taymāʾ, much too far south (*Muʿjam*, iv, 351, s.v. al-Lajjūn; cf. also R. Schick, El-Lejjūn in Arabic sources, in Parker, *Roman Frontier in Central Jordan*, 199 ff.). By al-Lajjūn, the geographers normally understand Legio in the Tiberias region, which is also the main topic of Yāqūt's entry and the only place mentioned in *EP*, s.v. Ladjdūn. The claim that it lay on the highway between Damascus and Egypt must refer to the Transjordanian Lajjūn, and presumably the same is true of Yāqūt's information that it had a *masjid Ibrāhīm* with a round rock and a spring that Abraham had caused to flow on his way to Egypt.

106 See the reference given above, note 75.

107 D. Kennedy, personal communication. The existence of this road is questioned by D. F. Graf, *The Via Militaris in Arabia*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 51, 1997.

108 Isaac, *The army in the Late Roman East*, 140.

109 C. J. Kraemer, *Excavations at Nessana*, vol. iii (*Non-literary Papyri*) (Princeton, 1958), nos 14–20 (soldiers' archive), 31 (division of estate including the "caravanserai"), cf. the discussion at pp. 19 ff., 27 f. The "caravanserai" may have been just one of two such establishments in the town.

continued from there to Elusa, where they would have joined the main road to Gaza. But Nessana and Elusa are also absent from the record. Maybe Quraysh went all the way from Ayla to Raphia and proceeded from there along the coast to Gaza. Whatever they did, it is hard to make sense of Theophanes's claim that when the Saracens invaded Palestine, they were guided to the district of Gaza by local Arabs alienated by the Byzantines: he implies that the invaders did not know the way themselves.¹¹⁰ It has been suggested that the invaders were coming by a route they did not normally take, more precisely from the direction of Sinai.¹¹¹ But it is difficult to believe that there was any route that Quraysh did not know, given that they had been trading in the region for at least a century by the time of the invasions and had been making themselves at home there too: Hāshim is credited with settling Qurashīs in the towns or villages (*qurā*) of Syria; several Qurashīs lived there for extended periods, and it was a Qurashī in the pay of the *vicarius* Theodore who acted as informant to the latter, thereby enabling him to defeat the Muslims at Mu'ta, according to Theophanes.¹¹² like the would-be client king ʿUthmān b. al-Ḥuwayrith, the Qurashī community in Syria would seem to have thrown in its fortunes with the empire. As far as the need for guides to Gaza is concerned, the most plausible explanation would seem to be either that Theophanes is passing on garbled rumours or else that the invaders were not the Arabs who normally traded there.

All in all, the sources cannot be said to remember anything about how Quraysh reached Gaza, Buṣrā, or (if they went there) Adhriʿāt. Perhaps this should be related to the problem of how to envisage the different communities involved in the rise of Islam. Alternatively, it could be construed as evidence that Quraysh were wholesalers: since they sold to regular customers in places where for one reason or another they had succeeded in establishing contacts, they did not stop to trade with other potential customers on the way, but on the contrary took the fastest routes, and so the places they passed through or skirted were forgotten.

But it has to be said that they do not come across as wholesalers. Apart from the fact that they are depicted as trading at fairs, at least one Qurashī, Abū Sufyān, is envisaged as trading in both Gaza and Transjordan.¹¹³ But the military presumably had much the same annual needs in Gaza and Transjordan, so that if Quraysh were wholesalers, one would have expected them to despatch separate caravans carrying much the same goods, led by

110 Theophanes, *Chronographia*, AM 6123 (tr. Mango, 466).

111 Mayerson, *First Muslim attacks*, 160 ff.

112 Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 117 f.; Theophanes, *Chronographia*, AM 6123 (tr. Mango, 466).

113 Gaza was the *matjar* of ʿAbd Manāf (who included the Umayyads and the Hāshimites), and a famous story has Abū Sufyān go to Gaza with other traders during the armistice between Muḥammad and the Meccans (Ṭabarī, i, 1561; *Aghānī*, vi, 345, both from Ibn Ishāq); elsewhere he goes all the way to the Ghawṭa (or, as the text has it, *ghuwayṭa*) of Damascus with Umayya b. Abī l-Ṣalt (Ibn ʿAsākir, *Taʾrīkh madīnat Dimashq*, vol. ix, ed. ʿA. Shīrī (Beirut, 1995), 262.1, s.v. Umayya b. Abī l-Ṣalt'); he also had an estate in the Balqāʿ during his trading days (Balādhurī, *Futūḥ*, 129.6).

much the same people, to the same destinations every year. By contrast, the needs of individual soldiers and quartermasters could well have varied sufficiently for one and the same trader to travel now here and now there, or even for the same caravan to visit both regions in the same season. That Quraysh catered to individual needs is perhaps also suggested by the very fact that they sold leather goods, that is to say tanned products, perhaps manufactured too, not just the raw hides that the western barbarians of the early empire are depicted as selling, though Quraysh traded in them too.¹¹⁴ As we have seen, the soldiers of the sixth-century army had cash to spend,¹¹⁵ and that Quraysh dealt with them directly is further suggested by the information that they also sold perfume.¹¹⁶ Perhaps we should envisage them as shifting local goods from one fair to another, trading as they travelled after the fashion of the caravaners attested in the Nessana documents, who seem to have turned their attention to any enterprise that looked remunerative as they went along: their main business was in live animals (camels, donkeys, horses), but wool, textiles, clothing, iron, grain, wine and oil figure in their records too.¹¹⁷ The supposition that Quraysh were traders of this type would make sense of an isolated report depicting a group of them as selling cotton (*quṭn*) in Syria, here in the sense of Damascus;¹¹⁸ for implausible though this sounds, they could have picked up cotton at Ayla, where it would have arrived from India, or in the Jericho area, where it is known to have been cultivated in the sixth century.¹¹⁹ Another isolated report depicts them as trading in “leather, clothes, pepper, and other things which arrived by sea”, an odd assortment of goods which is also suggestive of retailers who traded on the way: they could have picked up the pepper and other maritime goods at Ayla, too.¹²⁰ Casting them as traders of this kind would also suit the archaeological evidence suggesting

114 For the western barbarians, see above, note 29. It was hides that the would-be client king intended to send as tribute to the Byzantines and that the Prophet himself traded in and received as a gift from Abū Suyān; it was also hides that ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. ʿAwf traded in after his arrival in Medina; but it is leather which is mentioned in connection with Hāshim’s foundation of the trade, ʿAmr b. al-ʿĀṣ’s goods, and the gift to the Ethiopian king (cf. the references in Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 98, where the distinction is not properly brought out). For tanning at Ṭāʿif, Medina and elsewhere in Arabia, see Khan, Tanning cottage industry in pre-Islamic Arabia, 90 ff.; Ibn Saʿd, *Ṭabaqāt*, viii, 184 (Beirut, viii, 252). In Medina, it seems to have been a female activity, though the Prophet himself is also depicted as having been engaged in it.

115 Above, text to notes 30–35.

116 Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 95 ff.

117 Kraemer, *Nessana*, iii, 27, 251 ff. (no. 89). Incidentally, a satirical poem depicts Quraysh as selling donkeys too, but not in Syria (Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 104).

118 Ibn ʿAsākir, *Taʾrīkh madīnat Dimashq: tarājīm al-nisāʾ*, ed. S. al-Shihābī (Damascus, 1982), 322, with variants 322 ff.

119 Cf. A. Watson, *Agricultural Innovation in the Early Islamic World* (Cambridge, 1983), 34. Cotton does not seem to have been cultivated in lower Egypt or the Mediterranean in pre-Islamic times, but it is attested for Jericho in the sixth-century Gregory of Tours. For the India trade at Ayla, see Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 43 f.

120 Qummī in Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 78.

that most commercial activity along the road from Ayla to Gaza and elsewhere in the Negev during the Byzantine period was local in nature (though one wonders how far archaeology can really reveal such things).¹²¹

Conclusion

Did Quraysh make their wealth by organizing supplies to the Roman army? As things stand, a case can be made for it, but not proved. New sources keep being discovered, however, both by archaeologists and literary historians. On the archaeological front the most spectacular recent example is Petra, long assumed to have been ruined by the earthquake of 551, but now discovered to have been a flourishing settlement until the early seventh century; a whole family archive of papyri covering the period from at least 537 to 592 has been found there, carbonized, but in the process of being deciphered.¹²² (This discovery makes the Muslim silence on Petra particularly strange.) In general, we know vastly more about Roman Syria, Palestine and Arabia now than thirty years ago,¹²³ and the same is likely to be true thirty years from now. The constant stream of new publications, not to mention easily searched databases, also holds out hope that further evidence can be found. But for the moment, the hypothesis that Quraysh were suppliers to the Roman army must be said to involve an uncomfortable amount of guesswork.

The hypothesis is none the less attractive, not only because it completely solves the coals-to-Newcastle problem, but also because it would contribute to the explanation of the cataclysmic changes in Arabia that we know as the rise of Islam. Skins, hides, manufactured leather goods, clarified butter, Ḥijāzi woollens, and camels were all modest products on which it seemed impossible, twenty years ago, that Quraysh could have become very rich. But the army was by far the single largest item of public expenditure in the Byzantine empire on the eve of Islam, and no doubt the same was true of the Sasanid empire too; and as Brent Shaw reminds us, “the largest proportion of this military expenditure was directed (or redistributed) to the periphery of the empire, indeed mainly to the war zones on the frontiers

121 Cf. G. Avni, The Byzantine–Islamic transition in the Negev: an archaeological perspective (paper presented at the Jāhiliyya Conference in Jerusalem, 2006; to appear in *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 2008).

122 Koenen, Daniel and Gagos, Petra in the sixth century; cf. also J. Frösén, Archaeological information from the Petra papyri, *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan*, viii, 2004.

123 As late as 1975 not a single military site on the Arabian frontier had been excavated, as Parker observes (Retrospective on the Arabian Frontier, 633); for the “virtual explosion” in our knowledge of Roman Arabia, see also Graf’s preface to his *Rome and the Arabian Frontier*, vii. But it is still the case that “no excavation has been conducted with the economy as a primary focus along the entire length of the eastern frontier” (S. Kingsley and M. Decker, New Rome, new theories on inter-regional exchange. an introduction to the East Mediterranean economy in Late Antiquity, in Kingsley and Decker (eds), *Economy and Exchange in the East Mediterranean during Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2001), 9 (my thanks to Robert Hoyland for drawing this work to my attention).

where most of the military establishment was located”.¹²⁴ For some five-hundred years, and above all in the century and a half before the Arab conquests, the key war zone was the Syrian desert. For centuries, in other words, a significant proportion of the public revenues of the two empires which dominated the region was spent in areas inhabited by Arabs, in remuneration for services provided by Arabs and, as one would now like to add, for products supplied by Arabs such as the cheap leather goods and clothing promised by Hāshim to the Byzantine “emperor”. Humble though the products were, they could have generated very considerable revenues, over a very long period, and not just in Mecca: the entire region inhabited by the Arabs, from Mesopotamia to the Yemen, is likely to have been affected by imperial demands.

We see the effects of the wars in Syria itself. The constant presence of armies to be fed and equipped on the one hand, and the enrichment of desert-dwellers eager to spend their earnings in the local markets on the other, are likely to have been a factor in the profitability of oil, grain and wine production in peripheral areas such as the Syrian limestone massif and the Negev (though the wine came to be exported to distant regions as well).¹²⁵ Indeed, the constant warfare in Mesopotamia could have played a role in the general prosperity of Syria in the fifth and sixth centuries, often remarked upon but never entirely explained.¹²⁶ It also endowed the region with a new political importance. No less than three would-be emperors appeared in Syria in the third century, all three in connection with the Roman–Persian wars: Jotapianus in 248, Uranius Antoninus in 253, and Vaballathos (at the hands of Zenobia) in Palmyra in 270.¹²⁷

But we see the effects in Arabia, too. The shift from Arabian spices and foreign luxury goods which had dominated the Arabian trade with the empires in the past to leather and other pastoralist products will have enriched the rearers of goats, sheep and camels at the expense of the townsmen, whose once flourishing cities recede from the literary and archaeological record from the third and fourth centuries onwards. That the wars between the two empires played a role in this decline has long been surmised.¹²⁸ What the empires needed now were allies who could mobilize manpower and other resources for military use, not suppliers of the amenities of civilization; and as the cities linked with the empires by trade in high-class goods, shared artistic and cultural tastes, and their own penchant for the amenities of civilization¹²⁹ gave way to phylarchs and client kingdoms, new sectors of the Arabian

124 B. D. Shaw, War and violence, in G. W. Bowersock, P. Brown and O. Grabar, *Interpreting Late Antiquity: Essays on the Postclassical World* (Cambridge, MA and London, 2001), 141.

125 Cf. Kingsley and Decker, *New Rome*, 8 f.

126 Cf. S. Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* (Princeton, 2001), 212 f., and the literature cited there.

127 Sartre, *Middle East under Rome*, 347, 349, 350 ff.

128 Cf. A. H. Masry, The historic legacy of Saudi Arabia, *Aṭlāl* i, 1977, 16.

129 For the most striking example, see R. A. al-Ansary, *Qaryat al-Fau: a Portrait of a Pre-Islamic Civilisation in Pre-Islamic Arabia* (Riyad, n.d., preface dated 1982), especially the chapters on wall paintings and sculpture. The town was located

population were drawn into the imperial systems, encountering them mainly, or in many cases probably only, as war machines. It is from the third century onwards that we begin to encounter Arab kings in the inscriptions along with the tribal groupings and the language familiar from the Islamic tradition.¹³⁰ In short, in political and cultural terms alike, it would seem to have been in the period in which the Syrian desert was a major war zone that Muḥammad's Arabia was formed.

Given that the war zone lay primarily at the northern end of the Syrian desert, it is surprising that the principal Arab beneficiaries of the changes were not the politically organized tribes of the Syrian desert itself, but rather the hitherto stateless tribes of the northern peninsula, above all those of the Ḥijāz.¹³¹ But however this is to be explained, casting Quraysh as suppliers to the imperial armies would have the additional advantage of placing them at the heart of the network of military information, making them fully informed of the size and whereabouts of the Byzantine armies, their victories, defeats and immediate plans, and probably their modes of fighting as well. Arminius, the Germanic leader who annihilated Varus' army of 15–20,000 men in the Teutoburg forest in AD 9, had actually served in the Roman army. This is more than we can postulate for any Qurashī to date, but as suppliers to the army they will have been in a similarly advantageous position. We could moreover postulate that the Persian conquest of Syria and Egypt is likely to have been a serious blow to the suppliers and that this too is likely to have contributed to the drastic political changes in the peninsula.¹³²

The wars between Byzantium and Persia have often been considered an important factor facilitating the Arab victories in the sense that they left the two empires financially ruined, militarily depleted and, in the Persian case, politically disorganized as well. What has not been considered before is the possibility that the wars affected the Arabs themselves, allowing them to gain wealth, organizational skill, and knowledge of imperial ways, and eventually to use this knowledge against the by now ruined and disorganized empires. This is what is being proposed here. In other words, if Quraysh were suppliers to the Byzantine army or, more generally, if the Arabs were suppliers to the imperial armies, we would be able to reinstate trade as a major factor in the rise of Islam, but with the trade as the product of war rather than the imperial love of luxury goods. As far as the political aspect of the rise of Islam is concerned, in short, the theory would be that the Perso-Roman wars destabilized not just the empires, but also their Arab neighbours.

180 km north-east of Najrān and flourished between the second century BC and the fifth century AD (p. 29); according to Masry, it came to an end already in the fourth (cf. the preceding note).

130 R. Hoyland, Arab kings, Arab tribes, Arabic texts and the beginnings of (Muslim) Arab historical memory in the Late Roman inscriptions, in H. Cotton, R. Hoyland, J. Price and D. Wasserstein (eds), *From Hellenism to Islam: Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East* (forthcoming, Cambridge, 2007).

131 The problem is noted by Howard-Johnston, *The two great powers*, 164.

132 I owe this point to John Haldon.

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