

Donald Whitcomb: Archaeological Evidence of Sedentarization: Bilad al-Sham in the Early Islamic Period.
in: Stefan R. Hauser (Hg.): Die Sichtbarkeit von Nomaden und saisonaler Besiedlung in der Archäologie.
Multidisziplinäre Annäherungen an ein methodisches Problem. Halle 2006 (Orientwissenschaftliche Hefte
21; Mitteilungen des SFB „Differenz und Integration“ 9) 27–43.
© Donald Whitcomb 2006

Archaeological Evidence of Sedentarization: Bilad al-Sham in the Early Islamic Period

Donald Whitcomb

“Establish for the bedouin (*al-‘arab*) who are with you
a place of settlement (*dar al-hijra*)”
(Letter of ‘Umar to Sa‘d; Tabari I.2360)

“Mu‘awiya ... settled nomads (*al-‘arab*) in places far from cities and
villages and let them use unclaimed or vacant lands”
(Baladhuri, Futuh 178)

The Islamic conquest is an historical phenomenon which has tempted many scholars into explanations. Perhaps more interesting than this military accomplishment is the subsequent success in formulating a theocratic state on the basis of a population from the Arabian peninsula, many of whom were of bedouin tribes. Even with the consideration that many of these early Muslims may have been peasantry or town-dwellers from south Arabian states, a substantial portion of the Muslim armies must have been bedouin. The foundation of the *amsar* as part of the formation of the Islamic state introduced a large-scale process of sedentarization. One may suggest that recent archaeological research provides evidence of aspects of this process, when combined with new interpretations of nomad to sedentary transitions.

While this historical example may have implications for other times and places, the evidence is drawn in this paper from the Bilad al-Sham, Greater Syria, in the early Islamic period (the first three centuries A.H.). The foundation and development of early Islamic cities will be considered as a separate problem and most evidence drawn from peripheral regions, the interface of the so-called “desert and the sown.” The evidence and mode of argumentation is archaeological rather than historical in that the purpose is to elicit patterns of activity reflected in material remains.

The Islamic conquest was accompanied by establishment of Islamic settlements called *amsar* (sing. *misr*); these are usually described as garrisons. The geographer al-Muqaddasi in the 10th century gives five definitions of the *misr*, none of which has a military connotation. While Muslim armies and their families did settle in these foundations, they should not be considered cantonments but as incipient urban entities. Further, one wonders whether the powerful religious concept of the *hijra*, in the sense of moving into a new life and community, may have made

each of these settlements a *dar al-hijra* for many of these early Muslims. Creswell was not alone in his puzzlement of the success of the “chaotic, unruly rabble” in primitive settlements. Some light may be shed in considering pre-Islamic settlements, principally in Syria, around classical cities, known as the *parembole nomadon* or extra-mural camp of Arabs (the *hadir*).

Hadir Qinnasrin and the “hadir” hypothesis

The early Islamic city of Qinnasrin became the administrative centre of the northernmost Jund of al-Sham, probably under Yazid ibn Mu‘awiya. In this function Qinnasrin replaced the Byzantine city of Chalcis. The two cities have been assumed to be the same, unexcavated ruins; unfortunately the massive citadel and lower town of Chalcis revealed almost no evidence of Islamic occupation. About four kilometres to the east is a large village called al-Hadir, a mound covered with late Byzantine and early Islamic materials (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Town of al-‘Is, site of the ruins of Chalcis.

Chalcis was a classical city of some culture and sophistication, as suggested in the Syriac story of Rabbula who came from an aristocratic family in Qinneshrin. Beyond this relation of a conversion to Christianity is an implication of the existence of a separate Qinneshrin and its association with Arab tribes. This corroborates reports that by the latter half of the 6th century, the Banu Tanukh and Banu Tayyi' had settled at Chalcis. The Byzantine historian John Haldon has noted, "...substantial Arab settlements already existed near a number of cities [in Syria], and prior to conquest, very considerable numbers of Arabs ... were based at these sites, serving the Romans as federate or allied troops".¹

This suggests that Qinnasrin may be viewed as a military camp, a *hadir*. Such camps no doubt also served as extra-mural commercial centres for the Arab-dominated caravan trade. Thus, for Shahid, the *hadir* was an ethnic suburb with permanent architecture, the locus of tribal sedentarization.² This seems to be the idea expressed in the classical term, *parembole nomadon*, as a periurban settlement³ rather than Helms' broader interpretation (see below). In the case of the *hadir* of Chalcis, this camp retains its name in the modern town of Hadir (fig. 2).

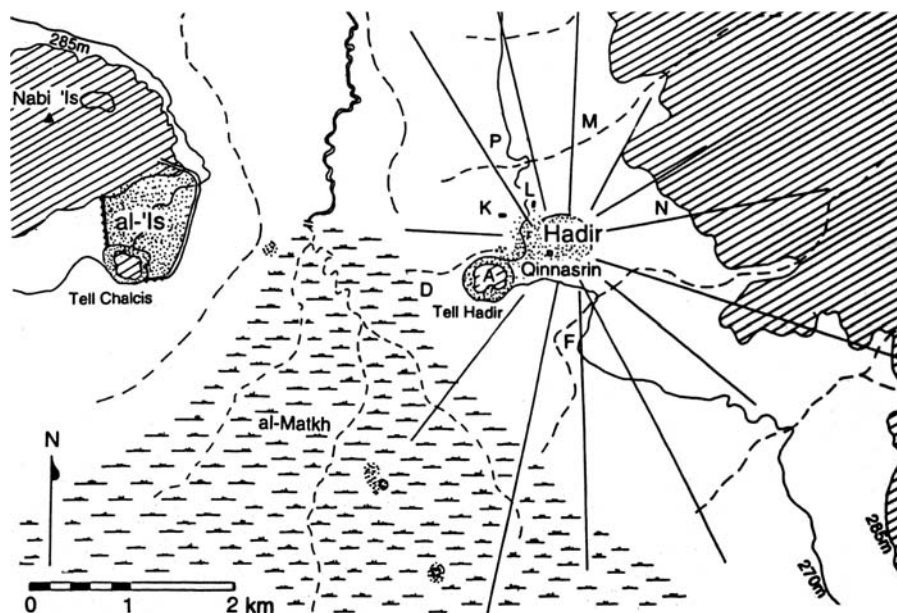


Fig. 2. Region of Chalcis and Hadir Qinnasrin.

¹ Haldon 1995, 416.

² Shahid 1979.

³ The term 'periurban' is taken from Glick's discussion of *huertas* around early Islamic cities in Spain; Glick 2002.

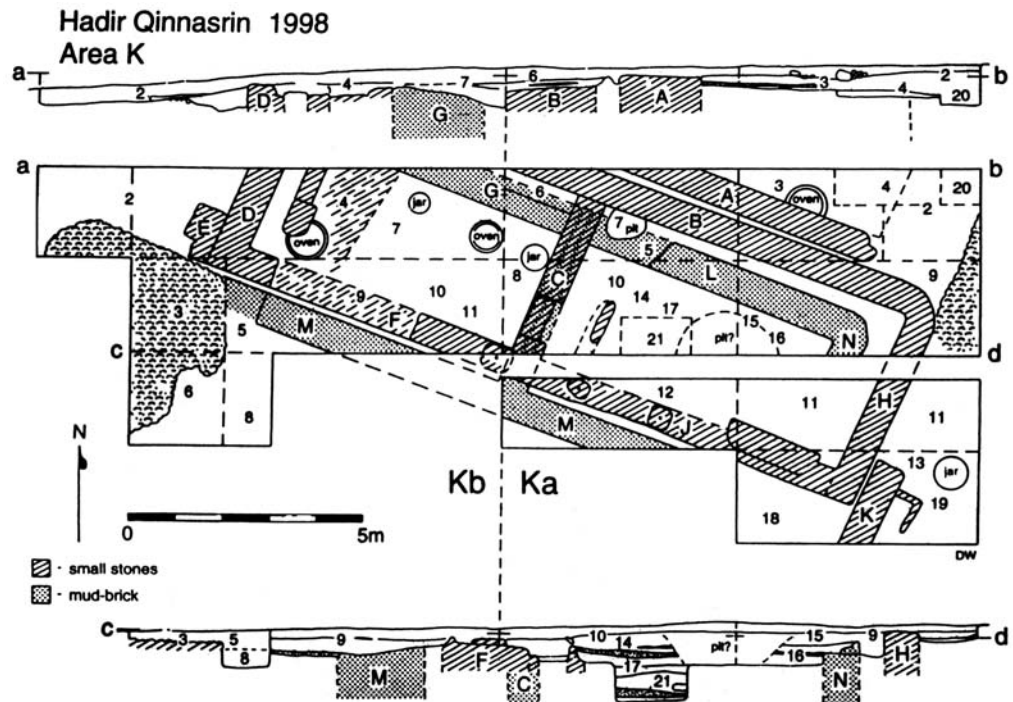


Fig. 3. Plan of the excavations at Hadir Qinnasrin, Area K.

The first excavations at Hadir Qinnasrin exhibited a classic example of luck: one of the trenches revealed a peculiar residence (fig. 3). The architectural plan of area K shows a structure of two rectangular rooms, made first in mud-brick and then duplicated in stone cobbles. Artifacts associated with these architectural remains, both ceramics and coins, fall into two phases: an earlier of the late 7th and early 8th centuries, and a second phase of the later 8th and early 9th centuries (pre-Samarra). The smaller of the rooms has a couple of ovens and storage vessels. The southwest wall of both rooms was very fragmentary with a series of column bases and seems to have been mostly open. These features add up to a very specific house form, a type derived from the “black” tent used by Arab tribes in the recent and immediate past. The translation of a nomad tent into more permanent material is not so uncommon. Ethnographic study of nomad tribes in Syria has documented a temporary house called a *sibat*,⁴ used for seasonal occupation and very similar to the remains which we uncovered (fig. 4).

⁴ Daker 1984, 54–6, fig. 3.



Fig. 4. Tribal structure, after Charles 1939, pl. X.

Evidence of sedentarization

The interpretation of excavated remains from Hadir Qinnasrin as an example of sedentism is an important interpretation for the history of Qinnasrin.⁵ There are a number of archaeological projects in al-Sham which have produced evidence of contemporary sedentism. Before turning to these archaeological remains, one might consider two ethno-archaeological aspects of such settlements.

1. Architectural change. The process of gradual loss of mobility, what Daker calls the “fixed tent”,⁶ may begin with the tendency to re-occupy earlier camping sites and to utilize elements of previous residences. Cribb notes a tendency to use such “fixtures” such as levelled floors, storage platforms, heaths, ditches, etc.; not the least important are pre-existing wall footings. “The use of substantial stone walls to enclose tent sites is so common that it must be considered a standard feature in

⁵ The second season of excavations in the year 2000 produced a set of similar buildings. These structures, in area A2b, were less well preserved and their interpretation not as persuasive.

⁶ Daker 1984, 52–4.

the repertoire of tent architecture”.⁷ This characteristic of built walls has led Cribb to a typology of residence in which the tent evolves into a more permanent walled structure, first with a tenting roof and then with more permanent materials. Organisation of space within tents and village houses is very similar,⁸ due in part to the persistence of nomad traits among sedentary populations.⁹ There seem to be sequential stages for *composite settlements*, explored by Sweet, Daker and especially Jarno. The intermediate stage is most revealing, with social activities (men’s domain) retained within the tent, and food preparation and storage activities (women’s domain) in fixed structures.

2. Change in settlement structure (fig. 5). Transitional settlements begin to have a history (contra Cribb), continuities in social relationships which are reflected spatially in clustering, changes in the acceptable *density* of occupation. As Barth notes, physical distance correlates with social distance in the layout of settlements.¹⁰ Increasing this *density threshold* may be a matter of increased *security*, among other social factors. The implication for an evolving settlement structure is one of territoriality and, more immediately, on mechanisms and attitudes toward property and land ownership. These changes are facilitated by supra-kinship spatial relationships of *tribal* organization in terms of land and urban-based state formations.¹¹ Acceptance of an increasing density threshold suggests, in spatial terms, the movement to pastoral peasantry and ultimately toward tribal urbanites.

⁷ Cribb 1991a, 88.

⁸ Watson 1979, 280.

⁹ Cribb 1991a, 97.

¹⁰ Barth 1961; Barth 1971; Cribb 1991a, 371.

¹¹ Marx 1996, 104. The Banu Tanukh and Tayyi’ tribes were later conceived as elements in the Qays (Mudar) and Yaman (Kalbi) confederacies; these had become political factions by the period of the Qinnasrin evidence at hand; see Cobb 2001.

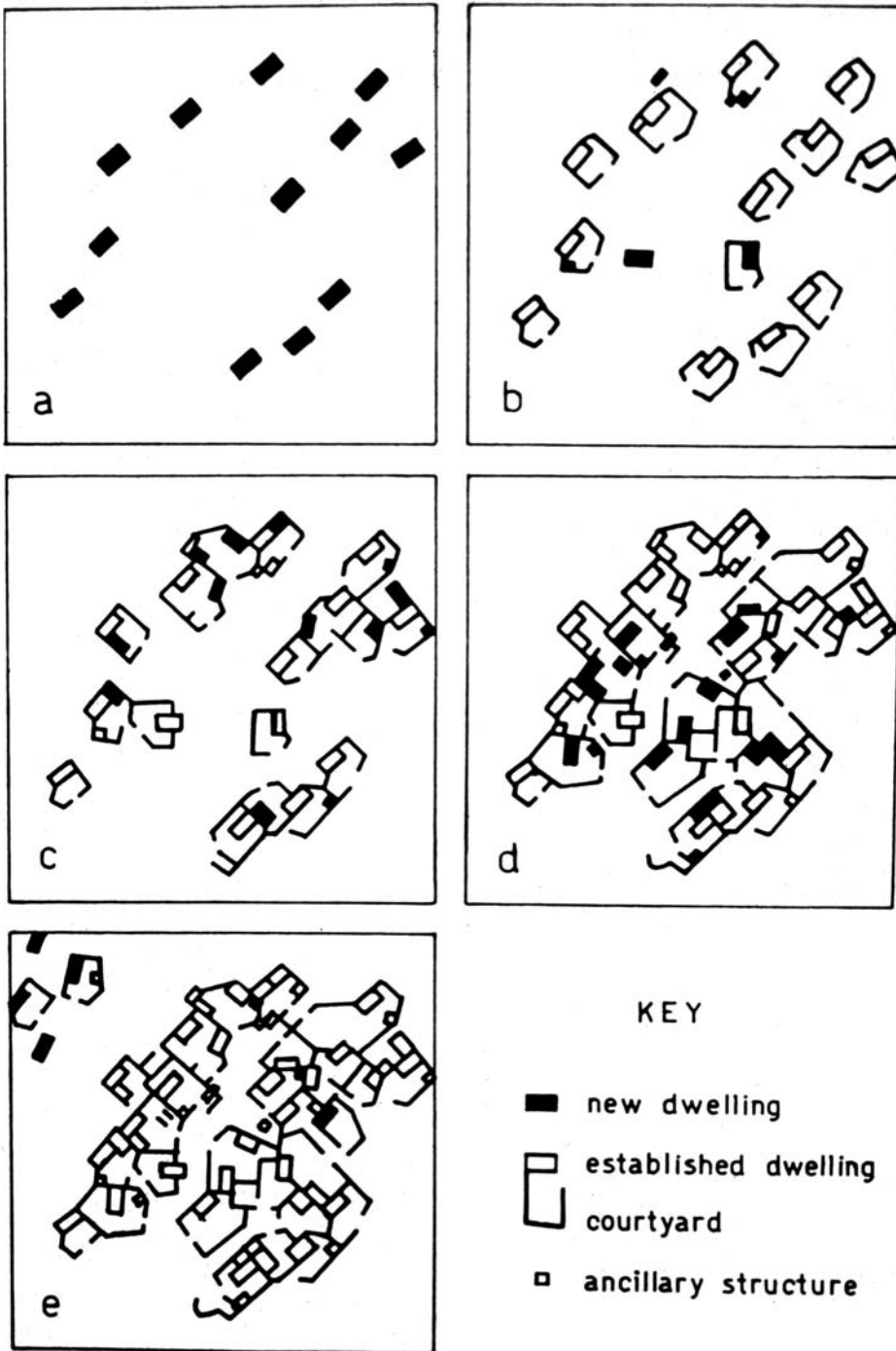


Fig. 5. Progression from tent to village organization, after Cribb 1991b, fig. 7.

Other archaeological examples

A recent study by Jodi Magness on the Palestinian site of Khirbet Abu Suwwana, east of Jerusalem, offers another example of a peripheral settlement of the early Islamic period (2004). The site was excavated by Sion (1997) and may be dated to 8th century for phase 1 and 9th–early 10th century for phase 2. The plan of Khirbet Abu Suwwana is the cumulative result of a long occupation (fig. 6).¹² Analysis of the peculiar clustering of structures suggests several developmental layers. Without the in-filling of vacant area and definition of courtyards, one may perceive modular architectural units, a standard pattern of ± 5 rooms in-line and opening in the same direction (here east). These units average 4 x 20m. These buildings expand by doubling some rooms and extension of one or more wings to form a courtyard. The original units appear to be spaced between 10 and 20m apart (a spacing ethnographically confirmed¹³).

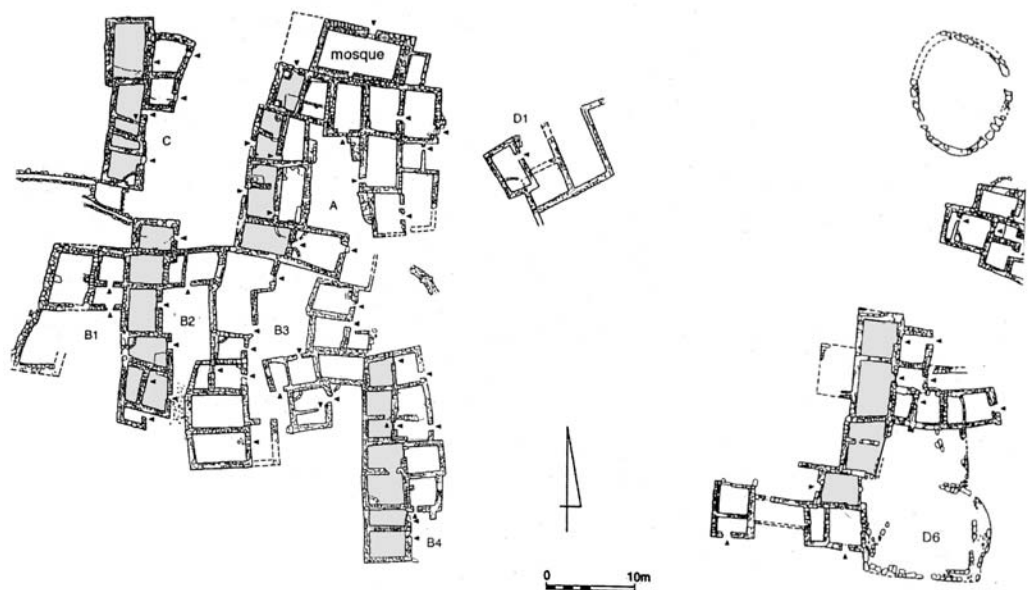


Fig. 6. Plan of settlement at Khirbet Abu Suwwana, after Sion 1997, fig. 3.

¹² Adjacent structures to the house at Hadir Qinnasrin, not discussed here, may indicate a similar in-filling during its occupation.

¹³ Cribb 1991a.

Magness notes several other sites with such modular architectural units, more often as isolate structures due to preservation and other factors. These include 'Ein 'Aneva and Elot village.¹⁴ This latter settlement lies in the immediate vicinity of early Islamic Ayla (Aqaba) and has been suggested as a composite settlement with tents¹⁵ and an example of bedouin sedentism.¹⁶ About 20 km north of Ayla was another early Islamic settlement with modular architecture;¹⁷ in this case, there seems an association with copper smelting from the famous Timna mines of contemporary (as well as earlier) date (fig. 7).

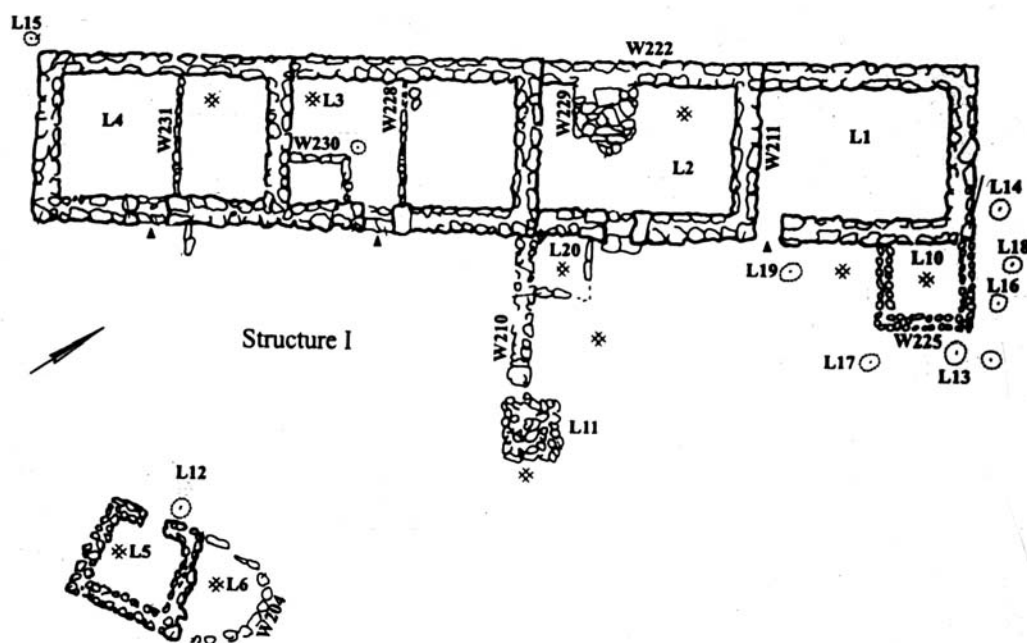


Fig. 7. Structures excavated at Be'er Ora, after Yisrael 2002, 163.

The intensive surveys of the western Negev revealed extensive nomad camps and settlements between 20 and 30 km south of the Byzantine/early Islamic cities in the region. Avni (1992) and Haiman (1990, 1995) clearly outline the association of these settlements with agricultural terracing in the same Byzantine and early Islamic period. Haiman describes these farmsteads as “nucleus units,” forming a

¹⁴ R. Avner 1996, fig. 128, 129.

¹⁵ R. Avner 1998, cf. Whitcomb 2000a.

¹⁶ Avner / Magness 1998, 40.

¹⁷ Yisrael 2002.

square of 1–3 rooms and a courtyard; the size compares closely with the modular units of Abu Suwwana and elsewhere.¹⁸

Berthier identifies a number of sites on the middle Euphrates as seasonal.¹⁹ These were modular units (3m x 4, 8, 12, 16m) and apparently repeatedly occupied, first in the Abbasid (period Ib = 750–900) and then in the Middle Islamic period (III–VI; 1000–1300). Many other examples may come to be identified with these patterns in mind; one is tempted to re-examine Poidebard’s air photographs of remains in the desert for post-Roman sedentism.²⁰

Contextualization in Helms’ theories

Helms’ monograph entitled *Early Islamic Architecture of the Desert* (1990) is an account of his survey and excavations at al-Risha, located about 200 km southeast of Damascus. He describes the site of al-Risha as a collection of modular architectural structures (fig. 8); the site is remarkably similar to Abu Suwwana in the linear arrangement of buildings of comparable (though slightly larger) size. The ceramics indicate a similar dating to the 8th and early 9th centuries; the relative lack of in-filling and contiguous courtyards may suggest a shorter duration of occupation. There is a variety of plans including an enclosed “khan” (structure C), which recalls the architecture of nearby Jebel Says.²¹ On the other hand, he suggests that the mosque may have had a tent roofing. The mosque, as manifestation of cult, is curiously peripheral to the camp or derived settlement, as exemplified in Abu Suwwana and typically in the Negev (e.g. Be’er Ora). This may indicate only a lack of planned nucleus for the settlement.²²

¹⁸ Haiman 1995, 35. Both Magness and Haiman see this type of modular house as reflecting the egalitarian social structure and as expression of the Bedouin ‘paternal house’, Haiman 1995, 41.

¹⁹ Berthier [et al.] 2001, 156–60.

²⁰ Cf. Dentzer 1994.

²¹ Helms 1990, 94.

²² This pattern of peripheral location for the mosque occurs in most of the ‘desert castles’ and Abbasid caravanserais, where the mosque is on the exterior and near the principal entrance; Whitcomb 1996a; 1996b.

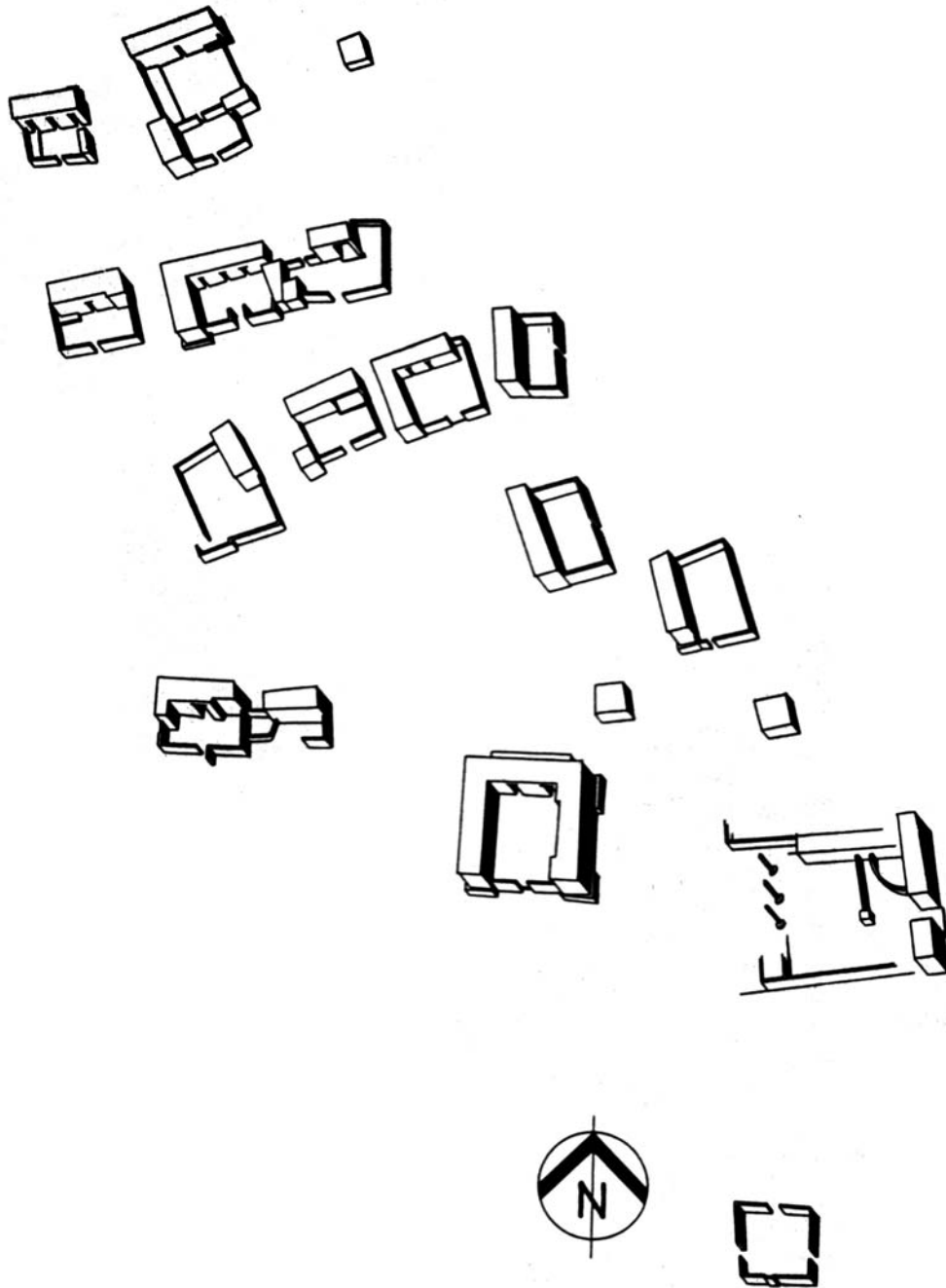


Fig. 8. Reconstructed settlement at al-Risha, after Helms 1990, fig. 72.

This archaeological site takes a particular interest in light of Helms' interpretation as "a unique opportunity to examine the effects of the coming of Islam on the bedouin tribes".²³ Having worked on a Bronze Age site with urban characteristics also in the desert, Helms has developed a detailed seriation of relationships between steppe and cultivated, settled lands. Thus there is a wide-spread pre-Islamic phenomenon of the *parembole nomadon*,²⁴ which may be reduced to the simple syllogism, "it exists in the desert, therefore, it is bedouin".

While the discussion in this paper hopes to suggest a detectible Arab origin and evidence for sedentism in archaeological sites, there are many more architectural (with socio-functional) phases to be isolated and described before one can state that the *amsar* are "a steppe reflection of the idea 'Islamic city'".²⁵

Conclusions: Identification and meanings of early Islamic sedentism

A corpus of archaeological information exists which may yield the following plausible interpretations:

1. Recognition of nomad origin of peripheral villages can be posited from the morphology of residences and their spatial arrangement;
2. There was a chronological event of sedentism in the 8th and 9th centuries, with possible antecedents in the 7th century;
3. The identity of these nomads may be both indigenous and immigrant populations. Thus for example, the Tanukh near Aleppo and the "Byzantines" in the Negev began settlement before Islam and the conquest may have accelerated an existing process (fig. 9).

²³ Helms 1990, 3.

²⁴ Helms 1990, 29.

²⁵ Helms 1990, 131.

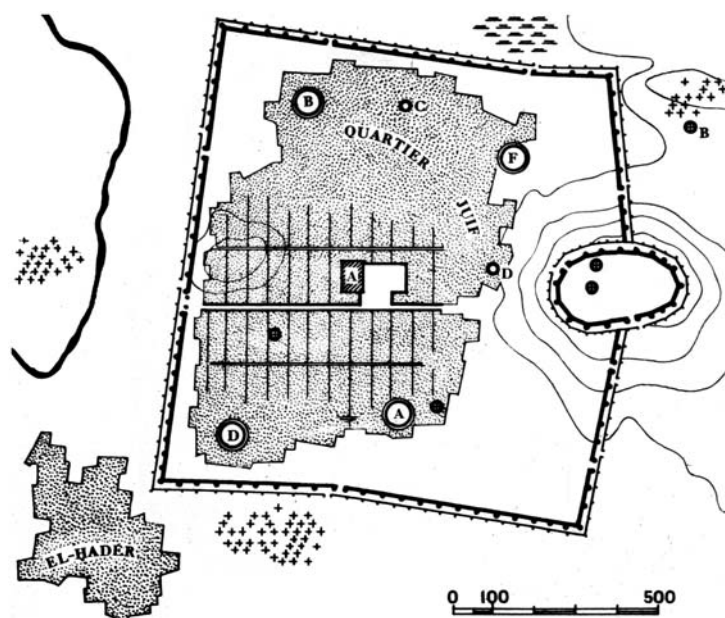


Fig. 9. Reconstructed city plan of late Byzantine Aleppo, after Sauvaget 1941, pl. 53.

The normative causal factor for increase of sedentism is the idea of state sponsorship, resulting from perception of nomad tribes as aliens, to be “settled,” as indicated in the Baladhuri observation on Mu‘awiya (above). Governmental control of bedouin elements in the aftermath of the conquest continued to be a serious concern.²⁶ One may posit an early affiliation with existing sedentized tribes through Qaysi/Yamani political alignments.²⁷ However, as Haiman suggests, the two tendencies, spontaneous settlement and governmental direction, are not mutually exclusive. An additional causation may have been ideological, a linkage with the concept of *hijra*, that part of religious reform which encourages adoption of a new life in a new place.

The reference is to the *hijra* of the Prophet from Mecca to Yathrib (later called Madina). This has usually been translated as a “flight,” or “emigration,” in fact an exodus, in the sense of abandoning an old life for a renewed faith in a new “land of milk and honey.” In the words of Paul Wheatley: “...by the time the *amsar* were being established, *hijra*, the sundering of bonds of family and lineage for the

²⁶ Donner 1989, 82; 1981.

²⁷ Cobb 2001.

sake of lodging in a permanent settlement, was being exalted as the consummate symbol of submission to the will of the One God”.²⁸



Fig. 10. Modern town of Hadir Qinnasrin.

Thus Duri describes settlement of new military and administrative centres during the conquest as *dur al-hijra*, encouraged “as a requisite for full membership in the Ummah.”²⁹ When these cities became centres of provinces, they were called *am-sar*, for which the underlying concept is the frontier and administrative centre. Massive population movement from Arabia may have drawn urbanites to existing cities or new foundations (fig. 10). Those populations that had been peasant or nomad would have used established patterns of sedentarization for organizing new settlements. This concept suggests that:

1. settlement was an important and structured matter for the community of believers
2. and careful description of the settlements a fundamental step toward understanding the earliest phase of the “Islamic city.”

²⁸ Wheatley 2001, 41.

²⁹ Duri 1980, 52–3.

Post-script

There exists an archaeological myth, often adopted by historians, that, by the mid-8th century, the displacement of the Caliphate from Umayyad Damascus to Abbasid Baghdad meant a shift in political patronage resulting in severe decline or stagnation from Syrian cities. This is often interpreted to mean an abandonment in urban culture and life, and literally, a corresponding rise in nomadism.³⁰

The present evidence suggests the opposite, that the Abbasid period inaugurated (or more likely accelerated) a phase of sedentism of the nomad/bedouin population. This may have resulted from a down-turn in the economics demand for meat in the cities and supply of urban products outside which encouraged nomadism. This sedentarization may have been necessary and spontaneous.

Bibliography

Avner, R.: "Elat", in: *Excavations and Surveys in Israel* 15 (1996), 119–21.

Id.: "Elat-Elot — an early Islamic village" (Heb.), in: *'Atiqot* 36 (1998), 21*–39* [124–25].

Avner, Uri / Magness, Jodi: "Early Islamic settlement in the southern Negev", in: *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 310 (1998), 39–57.

Avni, Gideon: "Survey of deserted bedouin campsites in the Negev highlands and its implications for archaeological research", in: Bar-Yosef Ofer / Anatoly Khazanov (eds.), *Pastoralism in the Levant: Archaeological materials in anthropological perspectives*. Madison, WI: Prehistory Press, 241–54.

Barth, Fredrik: *Nomads of South Persia*. Boston: Little, Brown 1961.

Id.: "General perspective on nomad-sedentary relations in the Middle East", in: Cynthia Nelson (ed.), *The Desert and the Sown*. Berkeley: University of California 1973, 11–22.

Berthier, Sophie / Monchambert, Jean-Yves / Gardiol, Jean-Blaise: *Peuplement rural et aménagements hydroagricoles dans la moyenne vallée de l'Euphrat, fin VIIe-XIXe siècle*. Damas: Institut français d'études arabes de Damas 2001.

Charles, H.: *Tribus moutonnières du Moyen-Euphrate*. (Documents d'études orientales VIII). Beirut: Institut Français de Damas 1939.

³⁰ Whitcomb 1995, 2000b.

Cobb, Paul M.: *White banners: Contention in 'Abbasid Syria, 750–880*. Albany State University of New York 2001.

Cribb, Roger: *Nomads in archaeology*. Cambridge, Cambridge University 1991(a).

Id.: “Mobile villagers: The Structure and organization of nomadic pastoral campsites in the Near East”, in: C. S. Gamble / W. A. Boismier (eds.), *Ethnoarchaeological approaches to mobile campsites*. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan 1991, 371–93. (1991b)

Daker, Naoras: “Contribution a l'étude de l'évolution de l'habitat bédouin en Syrie”, in: Olivier Aurenche (ed.), *Nomades et sédentaires: perspectives ethno--archéologiques*. Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations 1984, 51–79.

Dentzer, Jean-Marie: “Khans ou casernes à Palmyre? À propos de structures visibles sur des photographies aériennes anciennes”, in: *Syria* 71 (1994), 45–112.

Donner, Fred M.: *The Early Islamic conquests*. Princeton, Princeton University 1981.

Id.: “The Role of Nomads in the Near East in Late Antiquity”, in: F. M. Clover / R. S. Humphreys (eds.), *Tradition and Innovation in Late Antiquity*. Madison: University of Wisconsin 1989, 73–85.

Duri, Abd al-Aziz: “Governmental Institution”, in: R. B. Serjeant (ed.), *The Islamic City*. Paris: UNESCO 1980, 52–65.

Glick, Thomas F.: “Tribal landscapes of Islamic Spain”, in: J. Howe / M. Wolfe (eds.), *Inventing medieval landscapes: senses of place in Western Europe*. Gainesville: University of Florida 2002, 113–35.

Haiman, Moshe: “Agricultural settlement in Ramat Barne'a in the seventh-eighth centuries C.E.” (Heb.), in: *Atiqot* 10 (1990), 111–25.

Id.: “Agriculture and nomad-state relations in the Negev desert in the Byzantine and early Islamic periods”, in: *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 297 (1995), 29–53.

Haldon, John: “Seventh-Century Continuities: The *Ajnād* and the “Thematic Myth””, in: Averil Cameron (ed.), *The Byzantine and early Islamic Near East, III: States, resources and armies*. Princeton: The Darwin Press 1995, 379–423.

Helms, Svend: *Early Islamic Architecture of the Desert: A Bedouin Station in Eastern Jordan*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University 1990.

Magness, Jodi: “Khirbet Abu Suwwana and Ein 'Aneva: Two early Islamic settlements on Palestine's desert periphery”, in: Donald Whitcomb (ed.), *Changing*

social identity with the spread of Islam: Archaeological perspectives. (Oriental Institute Seminars 1) Chicago: Oriental Institute 2004, 11–23.

Marx, Emanuel: “Are there Pastoral Nomads in the Arab Middle East?”, in: Ugo Fabietti / Philip C. Salzman (eds.), *The Anthropology of tribal and peasant pastoral societies*. Como: Ibis 1996, 101–15.

Sauvaget, J.: *Alep, Essai sur le développement d’une grande ville syrienne, des origines au milieu du XIXe siècle*. (Bibliothèque archéologique et historique XXXVI). Paris: Geuthner 1941.

Shahid, Irfan: Byzantium in south Arabia, in: *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 33 (1979), 23–94.

Sion, O.: “Khirbet abu Suwwana” (Heb.), in: *‘Atiqot* 32 (1997), 183–94 (English summary, 50*).

Watson, Patty Jo: *Archaeological Ethnography in Western Iran*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press 1979.

Wheatley, Paul: *The places where men pray together: Cities in Islamic lands, seventh through the tenth centuries*. Chicago: Chicago University Press 2001.

Whitcomb, Donald: “Islam and the socio-cultural transition of Palestine, early Islamic period (638–1099 C.E.)”, in: T. Levy (ed.), *The Archaeology of Society in the Holy Land*. London: Pinter 1995, 488–501.

Id.: “Urbanism in Arabia”, in: *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 7 (1996), 38–51. (1996a)

Id.: “The Darb Zubayda as a Settlement System in Arabia”, in: *ARAM* 8 (1996), 25–32. (1996b)

Id.: “Excavations in Aqaba, Jordan, and a model of the early Islamic city”, in: *Adumatu* 1 (2000), 62–5 (2000a).

Id.: “Archaeological research at Hadir Qinnasrin, 1998”, in: *Archéologie Islamique* 10 (2000), 7–28 (2000b).

Yisrael, Y.: “Be'er Ora (Southeast)”, in: *Excavations and Surveys in Israel* 114 (2002), 102*–104* [125–29].