

**The First Muslim Attacks on Southern Palestine
(A.D. 633-634)**

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I. INTRODUCTION

There is general agreement among scholars of Islam and the late Roman Empire that the Arab traditions (*hadith*) concerning the history of the early Muslim wars of conquest are confused in their chronology and distorted by partisan fabrications, whereas the credentials of the Byzantine chronographers for historical accuracy are more secure and reliable.* Hence, critical scholars like De Goeje, Caetani, and Becker¹ have relied primarily upon the latter in reconstructing the causes and events that resulted in the Muslim conquest of Syria and Palestine. As a result of this lack of balance in the sources, historians have leaned too heavily on the Byzantine writers, evidently in despair of detecting a meaningful pattern in the seemingly "non-objective" design of Arab expansion into Mediterranean territory. As a further consequence, some scholars have indulged in sweeping generalizations, imaginative reconstructions, and oversimplifications that give to the historical canvas a kind of one-dimensional aspect. In particular, no satisfactory explanation has been given for the conditions which made Southern Palestine the choice of the Muslims for their first attacks rather than, say, the southern extension of the former Ghassanid principate in Syria.

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¹ M. J. De Goeje, *Mémoire sur la conquête de la Syrie (Mémoires d'histoire et de géographie orientales* ² (Leiden 1886) 1-2; L. Caetani, *Annali dell' Islam* 2 (Milan 1907) 561-69. Most historians follow De Goeje and Caetani for this difficult period. See *inter alios* C. M. Becker, "The Expansion of the Arabs," *Cambridge Mediaeval History* 2 (New York 1923) 339; B. Lewis, *The Arabs in History* (London 1950) 36-37; P. K. Hitti, *History of Syria* (New York 1951) 412; J.-J. Waardenburg, *L'Islam dans le miroir de l'occident* (Paris 1963) 53-54.

In all fairness to these scholars, however, we must keep in mind that, when the sources were being critically studied in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the focus of scholarly interest was on the Arabian peninsula, Syria, and Transjordan; very little was known of the archaeology and topography of Southern Palestine and Sinai.² In recent years, exploration and excavation, particularly in that part of Southern Palestine known as the Negeb,³ have made the region less of a *terra incognita* than it had been before; and we are offered fresh material with which to reframe and reinterpret the evidence long known from literary sources. Although radical revisions of early Islamic history will not be forthcoming, the evidence can be made more plausible historically; and certain generalizations, at least in their application to Southern Palestine, will be stripped of their cogency.

II. THEOPHANES AND NICEPHORUS CONSTANTINOPOLITANUS

The most detailed description of the early Arab invasions appears in Theophanes' chronography for the years 633–634.⁴ An earlier reference to the Muslims appears in the chronicle for the year 632. Theophanes notes the death of Muhammad, the accession of Abu-Bakr, and then gives a brief biography of the prophet, including the information that he married the widow Chadiga (Khadija), who had commercial dealings with Palestine and Egypt, and that Muhammad learned about Christian and Jewish doctrines when he came to Palestine on business matters.⁵ The only other previous notice in Theophanes concerning the

² Note for example that map No. 23 in the *Cambridge Mediaeval History* (above, note 1) and Hitti's map (above, note 1) 413 show the Wadi 'Araba curving southwest into the Sinai peninsula instead of emptying directly into the head of the Gulf of 'Aqaba.

³ I.e. the region of Southern Palestine, roughly a right triangle in shape, whose northern limit is a line extending from Gaza through Beersheba to the southern end of the Dead Sea; its eastern boundary is the Wadi 'Araba, and its hypotenuse corresponds to the present international boundary between Israel and Egypt (Sinai) running from the Gulf of 'Aqaba to the Mediterranean.

⁴ *Chronographia*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig 1883) 1.335–36; Latin translation by Athanasius Bibliothecarius, 2.210–11: *Anno mundi* 6123–6124, *anno divinae incarnationis* 623–624, 22nd and 23rd years of the reign of Heraclius, 1st and 2nd of Abu-Bakr, 23rd and 24th years of the episcopate of Sergius at Constantinople, 1st and 2nd of the episcopate of Modestus at Jerusalem, 13th and 14th of the episcopate of George at Alexandria. On the irregularities in Theophanes' dating formulae, see *ibid.* 2.464–515.

⁵ *Chronographia* (above, note 4) 1.332–34, 2.208–9.

Muslims is a brief mention of the three bloody battles of Yarmuk, Gabatha, and Dathesmon (Athesmon), in which the Roman army suffered severe losses at the hands of the "desert Amalec."⁶

For the year 633 Theophanes records a number of events, none of which occurred in that particular year. After noting the civil war in Persia and the great quantities of precious stones sent to Heraclius by the sovereign of India on the occasion of his victory over the Persians, Theophanes recalls certain earlier events: Muhammad was dead (632); he had appointed four emirs to wage war against the Christian Arab tribes (629); the Muslims marched against a town called Moucheôn, in which Theodorus the Vicarius was stationed, and wished to attack the Arabs on the day they were to sacrifice to their idols; learning of this from a member of the Quraish tribe, Theodorus gathered all the soldiers of the desert garrisons, and, knowing the day on which the Muslim forces intended to make their attack, anticipated them in a region called Mothous (Mu'ta) where his forces killed three of the emirs and most of the host; one of the emirs, Khalid, whom they called "the sword of God," escaped. Theophanes then states:

There were some neighboring tribes who received a modest money allowance from the emperors for guarding the entrances of the desert. At this time a eunuch came to distribute the soldiers' allowance; and when the Arabs came according to custom to receive their pay, the eunuch chased them away, saying, "The emperor scarcely gives money to his soldiers, much less to these dogs." The Arabs were upset, went to their compatriots and showed them the way to the district of Gaza, the entrance of the desert extending toward Sinai, and exceptionally rich.⁷

⁶ *Chronographia* (above, note 4) 1.332, 2.208.

⁷ *Chronographia* (above, note 4) 1.335-36, 2.210: ἦσαν δέ τινες τῶν πλησίον Ἀράβων λαμβάνοντες παρὰ τῶν βασιλέων ρόγας μικρὰς πρὸς τὸ φυλάξαι τὰ στόμια τῆς ἐρήμου. ἐν αὐτῷ δὲ τῷ καιρῷ ἦλθέ τις εὐνοῦχος δίδων τὰς ρόγας τῶν στρατιωτῶν, καὶ ἐλθόντες οἱ Ἀραβες κατὰ τὸ ἔθος λαβεῖν τὴν ρόγαν αὐτῶν, ὁ εὐνοῦχος ἀπεδιώξεν αὐτοὺς, λέγων ὅτι "ὁ δεσπότης μόγισ τοῖς στρατιώταις δίδωσι ρόγας, πόσω μᾶλλον τοῖς κυσὶ τούτοις;" θλιβέντες οὖν οἱ Ἀραβες ἀπῆλθον πρὸς τοὺς ὁμοφύλους, καὶ αὐτοὶ ᾤδηγησαν αὐτοὺς ἐπὶ τὴν χῶραν Γάζης στομίον οὗσης τῆς ἐρήμου κατὰ τὸ Σιναῖον ὄρος πλουσίας σφόδρα.

erant autem quidam Arabum iuxta positorum, qui accipiebant ab imperatoribus rogas pauxillas ad custodiendum stomia heremi. eodem vero tempore venit quidam spado daturus militum rogas. et cum venissent Arabes secundum consuetudinem accepturi rogam suam, eunuchus impulit dicens, quia "dominus vix dat militibus rogas, quanto minus canibus istis." videntes ergo Arabes hoc abierunt ad sui generis viros et ipsi duxerunt eos in regionem Gazae, quae aditus erat heremi contra Sinaeon montem locuples valde,

For the year 634, Theophanes continues the story of the invasion:

In this year Abu-Bakr sent four commanders—they too having been shown the way, as I said before, by the Arabs—who came and took Heran (*var.* Ran, Eran) and the whole district of Gaza. Then Sergius, scarcely having come from Caesarea of Palestine with a few soldiers, engaged them [the Muslims] in battle and was the first to be killed; his soldiers, numbering three hundred, died with him. And taking many prisoners and much booty, they withdrew with a splendid victory.^{7a}

In addition to the references in Theophanes, a brief passage in Nicephorus Constantinopolitanus alludes to a similar but not, as De Goeje and Caetani believe, the same incident. In describing the events of the year 635, Nicephorus relates the barbarous way in which Sergius, who seems to have been the *magister militum* before Theodorus Trithyrius, had been put to death by the Arabs. He brought it upon himself, says Nicephorus,

because he induced Heraclius not to accede to sending the Saracens their customary allowance of thirty pounds of gold through commercial exchange [*i.e.* in the form of commodities worth thirty pounds of gold] from the Roman government; henceforth they began to inflict outrages on Roman territory.⁸

De Goeje, conflating these two sources, makes the generalization that the Arab tribes of Southern Palestine and of Arabia Petraea

^{7a} *Chronographia* (above, note 4) 1.336, 2.210–11: Τούτῳ τῷ ἔτει ἐπεμφεν Ἀβουβάχαρος στρατηγοὺς τέσσαρας, οἱ καὶ ὀδηγηθέντες, ὡς προέφην, ὑπὸ τῶν Ἀράβων ἦλθον καὶ ἔλαβον τὴν Ἡραν καὶ πᾶσαν τὴν χώραν Γάζης. μόγις δὲ ἐλθὼν ποτε ἀπὸ Καισαρείας Παλαιστίνης Σέργιος σὺν στρατιώταις ὀλίγοις καὶ συμβαλὼν πόλεμον κτείνεται πρῶτος σὺν τοῖς στρατιώταις τριακοσίοις οὖσιν. καὶ πολλοὺς αἰχμαλώτους λαβόντες καὶ λάφυρα πολλὰ ὑπέστρεψαν μετὰ λαμπρᾶς νίκης.

Mundi anno VICXXIII, divinae incarnationis anno DCXXIII, anno imperii Heraclii vicesimo tertio cum misisset Abubacharus praetores quattuor, qui ducti fuerant, ut praetuli, ab Arabibus, venerunt atque ceperunt Ran et totam regionem Gazae. tandemque aliquando cum venisset a Caesaria Palaestinae cum militibus paucis, inito bello perimitur primus cum exercitu, qui trecentorum erat virorum, et multis captivis acceptis et exuviis plurimis reversi sunt cum victoria splendida.

⁸ *Opuscula historica*, ed. C. De Boor (Leipzig 1880) 23: αἰτίαν δὲ αὐτῷ ἐπηγον ὡς αὐτὸς παρεσκεύασεν Ἡράκλειον μὴ συγχωρεῖν Σαρακηνοῖς [ἐκ τῆς Ῥωμαίων γῆς ἐκπορεύεσθαι] τὰς συνήθως παρεχομένας αὐτοῖς τριάκοντα χρυσίου λίτρας δι' ἐμπορικῆς ἀμοιβῆς ἐκ τῆς Ῥωμαϊκῆς πολιτείας ἐκπέμπειν ἐντεῦθεν τε αὐτοὺς ἄρξαι τῇ Ῥωμαίων λυμαίνεσθαι χώρα. I have not translated the clause bracketed by the editor but I shall comment on it below, page 167.

received an annual allowance from the emperor of thirty pounds of gold for guarding the entrances of the desert. Angered at having their subsidy suspended, the Arabs believed themselves relieved of their obligations to the Byzantines and served as guides to the Muslim troops in their invasions of Palestine.⁹ De Goeje also advances the view that Heraclius, his treasury empty owing to the war with the Persians, had unwisely suspended the yearly subsidy to the border Arabs as a measure of economy. To this De Goeje adds the observation that the Syrian inhabitants, who were burdened by financial obligations to the state and split by religious differences, gave passive encouragement to the invading Arabs; and when they saw that the Arabs did not pillage or devastate the land, they did not hesitate to show their partiality for the Arabs.¹⁰

Caetani, with but minor modifications, adopts De Goeje's interpretation of the Byzantine sources and further elaborates on the evidence by assuming that *all* Arabs in the pay of the Byzantines were Christians, and that the eunuch was sent as a special emissary of Heraclius to announce formally to the assembled chiefs of the Arab tribes that the revenues of the empire did not permit the continuation of the usual stipend.¹¹

Becker, whose treatment of the early Arab attacks is commended by historians, prudently removes some of the sharp edges from De Goeje's and Caetani's conclusions; but he still retains the

⁹ *De Goeje* (above, note 1) 29.

¹⁰ De Goeje (above, note 1) 29–30. He cites the works of A. Müller, G. Weil, and H. Gelzer in support of this generalization, but their observations are mostly inferential and based on theological differences in the large cities of Syria and Egypt. The application of these generalizations to Southern Palestine and Sinai for the early years of Muslim penetration should be considered highly speculative. Caetani (above, note 1) 1115, note 3, attempts to find in the Armenian chronicler, Sebeos, evidence for a discontented population inviting invasion by the Muslims; but Sebeos places the blame on the Jews of Edessa who had been punished by Heraclius for their rebellion, and not, as Caetani would like to see, on the Christian Arabs. See also Caetani's generalization (*ibid.* 1120, note 2c) on the assistance given to the Muslim invaders by the inhabitants out of their hatred for the Byzantine government.

¹¹ E.g. Caetani (above, note 1) 1112–13: “È detto in Teofane che dopo la infelice spedizione di Mu·tah, nella quale i Musulmani subirono sì gravi perdite, si presentò un eunuco (della corte imperiale) e percorse la provincia di confine della Siria e della Palestina, nel tempo quando secundo l'antica consuetudine si distribuiva agli Arabi cristiani lo stipendio, che solevasi sempre concedere ai capi delle tribù di confine, quale compenso per la difesa della frontiera.” *Ibid.* 1114: “L'eunuco di cui parla Teofano, dev'essere stato l'emissario dell'Imperatore per annunziare agli Arabi cristiani che le finanze dell' Impero non consentivano temporaneamente la continuazione degli stipendi soliti.”

essence of their inferences that are based largely on Theophanes and Nicephorus.¹²

In reviewing the evidence, I find nothing in Theophanes, Nicephorus, or for that matter in the Arab *hadith*, to support the three major conclusions advanced by De Goeje, Caetani, or Becker: (1) that the Arabs involved were Christians, (2) that Heraclius suspended the yearly subsidies to *all* the border tribes,¹³ (3) that the settled inhabitants of Syria and Palestine had given active or passive aid to the Muslims as early as 634. And one major question emerges, one which goes to the heart of the problem: why should the Muslims, who had in their ranks experienced merchants and guides, have to rely on Arabs, particularly Syrian Arabs or Arabs of Central Arabia, to guide them over the well-known and well-marked route to the district of Gaza? Similarly, is it conceivable that the first Caliph, Abu-Bakr, who had lived as a well-to-do merchant in Mecca, or ʿAmr ibn al-ʿAs, who was of Quraishite birth and who, according to Arab tradition, was the leader of the detachment assigned to Southern Palestine, would need the help of disgruntled Arabs to show him the way to Gaza, the established terminus of Meccan caravans?¹⁴

¹² Becker (above, note 1) 339–40. For an evaluation of Becker, see *inter alios* J. Sauvaget, *Introduction à l'histoire de l'Orient Musulman: Éléments de bibliographie* (Paris 1946) 116.

¹³ Caetani (above, note 1) 1114, and Becker (above, note 1) 340 take into account the fact that the Ghassanids fought on the side of the Byzantines against the Muslims, and hence they agree that the northern tribes received different treatment from those of the south. Becker admits that we know very little about the tribes of North Arabia and claims that the defeat of the Muslims at Mu'ta shows that they were enemies of Medina. The latter conclusion must be based on the assumption that Theodorus the Vicarius commanded Bedouin mercenaries or that Muhammad's forces were attacking a large number of hostile tribes in the region of Mu'ta. In my view, Theodorus carried out a police action, not unlike the one mentioned by Choricus (below, page 181), with troops stationed in various garrisons around Moucheôn (see below, note 30). Lewis (above, note 1) 52 states simply that the sources say nothing about the tribes that lay between Medina and Syria.

¹⁴ Theophanes (above, note 4) 1.333 states that Muhammad himself had come to Palestine, presumably traveling with the caravans owned by his wife. ʿAmr ibn al-ʿAs, the leader of one of the early attacks on Southern Palestine, possibly even the one mentioned by Theophanes, was a member of the Quraish and undoubtedly had traveled often on the Mecca-Gaza route. According to Arab tradition, the tomb of Muhammad's great-grandfather or great-uncle was located in Gaza, "the market for the people of the Hedjaz" (Guy Le Strange, *Palestine under the Moslems* [London 1890] 442). ʿUmar ibn al-Khattab, who later became caliph, lived for a period of time in Gaza and grew rich there. And following Heraclius' victory over the Persians, Arab tradition also tells us that a body of Quraish merchants migrated to Gaza

The answers to these questions, I believe, lie in interpreting Theophanes' statements more restrictively; that is, his information does not refer to a general condition on the southern borders of Syria and Palestine but to a specific region whose inhabitants possessed special knowledge of routes that were unknown or unfamiliar to the Muslims. While we do not know the source of Theophanes' information, it seems, clearly, that it originated in Palestine, possibly in Gaza or Caesarea, and that the report concerned itself with, as Theophanes says, "the district of Gaza, which was the entrance (*stomion*) of the desert extending towards Mount Sinai."¹⁵

A key point in this problem is the identification of the site that Theophanes calls "Heran." The Muslims, he says, "came and took Heran (*var.* Ran or Eran) and the whole district of Gaza."¹⁶ De Goeje does not attempt an identification but frankly admits that he does not know exactly what place or region Theophanes meant by this name.¹⁷ Caetani suggests that it is possibly an error and a confused reference to the capture of Lakhmid Hira, on the Euphrates, by Khalid ibn al-Walid.¹⁸

I would suggest, however, that it is not an error and a confused reference, but rather that Heran, Eran, or Ran, is a garbled version of the Greek name of a site in Sinai, namely Pharan (*Φαράν*), modern Feiran; more likely it is a garbling or a clipped form of the Arabic name of the same site, Fârân Hârûn (Ahrûn).¹⁹ It is true that Theophanes cites Pharan in an earlier reference; but here he is speaking of Theodorus as the "bishop of Pharan," and the title obviously came from Greek ecclesiastical sources.²⁰

(M. A. Meyer, *History of the City of Gaza: Columbia University Oriental Studies* 5 [New York 1907] 74). It is hardly likely that there was any route which the Arabs of the Hedjaz knew better than the one which led to Gaza.

¹⁵ Theophanes, *loc. cit.* (above, note 7).

¹⁶ Theophanes, *loc. cit.* (above, note 7a). See also the critical apparatus for line 16.

¹⁷ De Goeje (above, note 1) 34.

¹⁸ Caetani (above, note 1) 1143, note 1.

¹⁹ Place names, of course, are particularly subject to corruption in manuscript tradition. In general, Theophanes' text shows a rather loose handling of Arabic names both in orthography and accentuation. For the possibility of a clipped form of an Arabic place name in the Nessana papyri, see *PCollt* 89 in C. J. Kraemer, *Excavations at Nessana: Non-Literary Papyri* 3 (Princeton 1958) 260. For the appearance of Pharan in Arab sources, see Le Strange (above, note 14) 44.

²⁰ Theophanes (above, note 4) 1.330, 2.206. Theodorus was condemned for monothelitism by the council of Latran (649) and by the sixth oecumenical council of Constantinople (680) (M. Le Quien, *Oriens Christianus* 3 [Paris 1740] 753). On the meaning of Pharan in his title, see below, page 197.

If, as I believe, Theophanes' source for the early Muslim attacks on Southern Palestine was derived from the Arabic translated into Greek, it is reasonable to expect that the name of Pharan was garbled in its transmission. The confusion in the various codices and in Athanasius' Latin version leads me to suspect that it was. But even if this is a mistaken assumption, the context very clearly refers to a site in Sinai.²¹ Theophanes' statement emphasizes the fact that the district of Gaza was the entrance (*stomion*) of the desert extending towards Mount Sinai and that the Muslims, guided by disgruntled tribesmen, came and took "the site" and the whole district of Gaza. Mount Sinai is in south-central Sinai; the desert associated with it is the Tih wilderness, the "Desert of the Bani Isra'îl,"²² and its extension into the Negeb on the north and to the mountain ranges in the south-central portion of the Sinai peninsula. In other words, the Muslim attack on Palestine came from the south of the Sinai peninsula and worked its way northward to the district of Gaza. The Muslims, therefore, must not have followed the commercial route to Gaza, which bypassed the Sinai peninsula, but rather entered the desert near Aila and then headed south and west into the wilderness of Sinai toward Mount Sinai and, most probably, toward Pharan.

In the Byzantine period we know of three entrances or approaches (*stomia*) to the desert and Mount Sinai: at Gaza (the western), at Elusa and the Central Negeb (the central), and at

²¹ A less likely candidate for the site would be the oasis of Gharandel on the road from Pharan to Clysma (Suez). It is called Surandala by Antoninus Placentius (*Itinera Hierosolymitana saeculi IIII–VIII* in *Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* 39, ed. P. Geyer, [Vienna 1898] 187; Arandara by Petrus Diaconus (*ibid.*) 118; Arandoulan by the monk Anastasius (F. Nau, *Les Récits inédits du moine Anastase*, *Revue de l'Institut catholique de Paris* 7 [1902] 116; "Le Texte grec des récits du moine Anastase sur les saints pères du Sinai, *Oriens Christianus* 2 [1902] 77). R. Weill, *La presqu'île du Sinai* in *Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études, Sciences historiques et philologiques* fasc. 171 (Paris 1902) 99–103, 203, 232, 266, identifies the Taran of Arab geographers, some of whom associate it with Pharan, with Gharandel. The site, however, appears to have been little more than a fortlet enclosing a church and two hospices and hardly worth the effort of a *razzia*. Antoninus Placentius (*loc. cit.*) describes it thus: "modicum castellum . . . nihil habet intus praeter ecclesiam cum presbytero suo et duo xenodochia propter transeuntes."

²² See art. "al-Tih" in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. M. Th. Houtsma, *et al.* (Leiden 1913–1934) 4(2).763. According to the description of Arab geographers, al-Tih was 40 *farsakh* (ca. 150 miles) long and equally broad, had few palm trees and springs, consisted of partly stony and partly sandy soil, and took about six days to traverse.

Aila and the head of the Gulf of 'Aqaba (the eastern). These *stomia* lay on the roads or tracks leading into the wilderness and were points at which travelers could make arrangements for supplies, caravans, and guides before entering the desert.²³ The route from Gaza to Sinai proceeded along the *via maris* to a point in Egypt from which a road went to Clysma at the head of the Gulf of Suez and then on to Mount Sinai. This was the *grande route ordinaire* for pilgrims en route to the Holy Mountain from Palestine; and at the time of Egeria's pilgrimage in the sixth century, the desert road from Clysma to Egypt was protected by soldiers who escorted pilgrims from one fortified station to the next.²⁴

The central route led from Elusa, "at the head of the desert that leads to Sinai," through the Central Negeb to Nessana and then through the heart of the Tih desert to the mountain ranges to the south. This is the most direct route of all, but the least secure.²⁵ The eastern route from Aila, shorter but perhaps not as safe or as comfortable as the *via maris*, led from Jerusalem (or Gaza) to Elusa in the Central Negeb and then by the trans-Negeb

²³ Cf. Antoninus Placentius' praise of Gaza (*op. cit.* [above, note 21] 180): "... magnificent, delightful; its inhabitants most respectful, friendly in every way, lovers of travelers (*amatores peregrinorum*)." Antoninus, who is known under the names of Antoninus Martyr and Antoninus of Placentia or Piacenza did not, of course, write the *itinerarium* (see Ch. 1, page 157) but since his name is the only one associated with it, I shall, for the sake of convenience and simplicity, use his name as the writer of the account.

²⁴ See *Sanctae Silviae peregrinatio in Corp. script. ecc. Lat.* (above, note 21) 47: "Sunt ergo a Clesma, id est a mare rubro, usque ad Arabiam civitatem [Thou or Bubastis?] mansiones quattuor per heremo, sic tamen per heremum, ut cata mansiones monasteria sint cum militibus et praepositis qui nos deducebant semper de castro ad castrum." The date of the pilgrimage is still debated (see *Itinerarium Egeriae*, ed. O. Prinz [Heidelberg 1960] viii), but I follow A. A. Vasiliev, *Justin the First* (Cambridge 1950) 276, note 30; 364, note 44. Petrus Diaconus (above, note 21) 115, copying an early *itinerarium*, gives the number of way stations from Jerusalem to Mount Sinai as twenty-two; from Pelusium to Mount Sinai as twelve: "Ab Hierusalem autem usque ad montem sanctum Syna sunt mansiones viginti duo... A Pelusio autem usque ad montem Syna sunt mansiones duodecim."

²⁵ Antoninus Placentius (above, note 21) 181-82: "et inde [Gaza] venimus in civitate Elusa in caput heremi, qui vadit ad Sina... Proficiscentes de civitate Elusa, ingressi heremum. Ad XX milia est castrum in quo est xenodochius sancti Georgi (Sergii), in quo habent quasi refugium transeuntes vel heremitae stipendia. Exinde intrantes interiorem heremum." On the identification of the castrum as Nessana, see P. Mayerson, "The Desert of Southern Palestine according to Byzantine Sources," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 107 (April 1963) 170-71; see also Kraemer (above, note 19) 29.

route to Aila. From Aila, the road apparently ran for a short distance along the eastern coast of the Sinai peninsula and then turned southwest toward Mount Sinai and Pharan.²⁶ St. Jerome speaks of Pharan as being a three-day journey from Aila, indicating the existence of a direct route between the two towns.²⁷ There were also lesser routes emanating from these *stomia* which, though unrecorded in the Byzantine period, were undoubtedly known by the Bedouins and other inhabitants of the desert. The biblical Way of Shur, for example, running more or less parallel to the *via maris*, avoided the coastal sand dunes and connected with roads leading into Palestine.²⁸

To return to Theophanes' description of the events immediately after the defeat of the Muslims at Mu'ta, he states that:

There were some neighboring [*plésion*] tribes who received a modest money allowance [*rogas*] from the emperors for guarding the entrances of the desert. At this time [in 633? or right after the defeat at Mu'ta in 629?] a eunuch [*tis eunouchos*] came to distribute the soldiers' allowance; and when the Arabs came according to custom to receive their pay [*roga*], the eunuch

²⁶ Theodosius, *De situ terrae sanctae* (ca. 530) in *Corp. script. ecc. Lat.* (above, note 21) 148: "De Hierusalem in Elusath [Elusa] mansiones III, de Elusath in Aila mansiones VII . . . De Aila usque in monte Syna mansiones VIII, si compendiaria volueris ambulare per heremum, sin autem per Aegyptum, mansiones XXV." The number of stations between Elusa and Aila agrees quite well with the Peutinger map: Elusa, Oboda (Eboda), Lysa, Gypsaria, Rasa (Gerasa), Ad Dianam, Haila (Aila). For a discussion of these stations, see Y. Aharoni, "The Roman Road to Aila (Elath), *Israel Exploration Journal* 4 (1954) 9-16. Petrus Diaconus (above, note 21) 115 may have preserved a description of this same route: "Pars Arabiae iungitur Palaestinae, inaccessibile iter habet; nam licet mansionibus quindecim . . . eat (interiaceat?) loca tamen ipsa sine aqua sunt." The number of stations agrees with Theodosius if the writer had in mind the road from Elusa to Aila to Mount Sinai. The inaccessibility of the road and the lack of water should be regarded as an overstatement.

²⁷ *De situ et nom. Hebr.* in *Patrologia Latina* (J.-P. Migne) 23 Col. 944: "[Pharan] est . . . trans Arabiam contra australem plagam, et distat ab Aila contra Orientem itinere trium dierum."

²⁸ See W. F. Albright, "Abram the Caravaneer: A New Interpretation," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 163 (October 1961) 37-38 for an appreciation of the quality of this road for caravans. Another road might be the Darb el-Haj (the biblical Way of the Wilderness?) which cuts across the northern part of the Tih plateau and is a direct route from Aila to Egypt and to connecting roads to Mount Sinai and Pharan. It is quite possible that Bedouins used this route throughout all periods of history and it may even be the one which Jerome had in mind (above, note 27). However, at an important way station on this road, Qual 'at Nakhil, no evidence predating medieval times has been found (see B. Rothenberg, *God's Wilderness: Discoveries in Sinai* [London 1961] 67).

chased them away, saying, "The emperor scarcely gives money [*rogas*] to his soldiers, much less to these dogs."²⁹

The statements regarding "neighboring tribes" and "a eunuch" are couched in language so vague as to make it impossible to say whether the Arabs were Syrian (*i.e.* trans-Jordanian), Palestinian, or Sinaitic, or whether the unnamed eunuch was a high ranking emissary and treasurer of Heraclius' court. Nor is it possible to determine whether these Arabs were paid by the Byzantines to prevent the infiltration of other Arabs from the Arabian peninsula, or, as I believe, were merely the tribes on the roads leading to Mount Sinai who were paid off so that pilgrims could journey in safety to this celebrated Biblical site. These are questions which none of the sources bears upon and can only be answered by conjecture. What is clear, however, is that, after defeating the Persians, Heraclius organized some form of defense in Syria just south of the Dead Sea; and when Muhammad's forces threatened the pagan Arabs in the region of Mu'ta, Theodorus the Vicarius was able to "gather all the soldiers of the desert garrisons" and repulse the Muslim attack.³⁰ What is also clear is the fact that the southern line of defense in 629 was no longer near Aila, a border point of *Palaestina Tertia* on the Gulf of 'Aqaba,³¹ and that Bedouins had relatively free movement from the Arabian peninsula up to the region near the Dead Sea.

The remaining portion of Theophanes' entry for the year 633 and the notice of events for 634 place us on a surer footing:

The Arabs were upset, went to their compatriots [*homophylous*] and showed them the way to the district of Gaza, the entrance of the desert extending towards Sinai, and exceptionally rich.

²⁹ Theophanes, *loc. cit.* (above, note 7). The use of the technical term *rogas* gives the account an authentic sound even if other elements, particularly the reputed words of the eunuch to the tribesmen, appear fabricated. *Roga* is the word used in a Nessana document, *PColt* 92 dated *ca.* 685, for a cash allowance (Kraemer [above, note 19] 291). With regard to the eunuch, there might be some derogatory implication in the use of the word if we were more knowledgeable of early Islamic attitudes towards eunuchism (see art. "Eunuch" in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* 5, ed. J. Hastings [New York 1928], 582, 584).

³⁰ Theophanes (above, note 4) 1.335: . . . ὁ βικάριος . . . συνάγει πάντας τοὺς στρατιώτας τῶν παραφυλάκων . . . On the use of the word *stratiōtai* to indicate regular troops, see Vasiliev (above, note 25) 243, and Kraemer (above, note 19) 20.

³¹ See below, page 169.

For 634:

In this year Abu-Bakr sent four commanders—they too having been shown the way, as I said before, by the Arabs—who came and took Heran [Ran or Eran] and the whole district of Gaza. Then Sergius, scarcely having come from Caesarea of Palestine with a few soldiers, engaged them [the Muslims] in battle and was the first to be killed; his soldiers, numbering three hundred, died with him. And taking many prisoners and much booty, they withdrew with a splendid victory.³²

The area of conflict now becomes sharply defined: we are no longer in the region east of the Wadi 'Araba but in Southern Palestine and the Sinai peninsula. Theophanes' evidence should therefore be restricted to this region; whatever conclusions may be drawn from this evidence must rest on the nature of conditions (topographical, demographic, political, and military) of the region itself.

In contrast to Theophanes, the evidence in Nicephorus is far less informative, far less detailed:

[Sergius] induced Heraclius not to accede to sending the Saracens their customary allowance [*tas synéthōs parechomenas*] of thirty pounds of gold through commercial exchange [*i.e.* in the form of commodities worth thirty pounds of gold] from the Roman government; henceforth they [the Saracens] began to inflict outrages on Roman territory.^{32a}

As stated above, Caetani believes that the incidents reported by Theophanes and Nicephorus are one and the same, and, like De Goeje before him, has taken considerable liberties in interpreting the text:

De Goeje in reporting this highly important passage [in Theophanes] cites another in Nicephorus Constantinopolitanus which also alludes to the same event. The Emperor, it is said, was accustomed to pay the Saracen border tribes the sum of thirty pounds of gold per year so that they might serve as a check on the other Saracens from the interior of Arabia. However, when he suspended the payment of this stipend, the angry Arabs invaded Palestine and when they captured the patricius Sergius somewhat later, they considered him to be the chief supporter of the imperial measure and wished to avenge themselves in a cruel and barbarous manner.³³

³² Theophanes, *loc. cit.* (above, note 7a). ^{32a} Nicephorus, *loc. cit.* (above, note 8).

³³ Caetani (above, note 1) 1113. Cf. De Goeje (above, note 1) 29.

There is no suggestion whatever in Nicephorus that the purpose of the money was to pay the Arabs to act as a check on others coming from the interior of Arabia. On the contrary, there is a strong intimation in the portion of the text bracketed by the editor De Boor that the purpose of the payment was *to induce these Arabs to leave Roman territory*.³⁴ As for identifying the Sergius mentioned by Theophanes as the leader of the small detachment from Caesarea with the Sergius who was tortured to death by the Saracens, we certainly cannot be sure that they were one and the same person: the name Sergius, like Theodorus, George, and John, was a very common one, and the two Sergii could have been entirely different persons.³⁵ And lastly, there is no indication in Nicephorus that Muslim or Christian Arabs invaded Palestine proper.

We must conclude that the statements of Theophanes and Nicephorus do not refer to the same incident. At best, the point of similarity between the two is that they reflect a general condition arising from Heraclius' decision to cut down on payments of various kinds to Arab tribes: payments not only to prevent Arabs from infiltrating from the interior of Arabia, but payments also to Arabs within the empire to keep peace along the roads and highways, and payments to other tribes to stay out of the empire. Further, we should not believe that one payment of thirty pounds of gold a year, or its equivalent in commodities, took care of all the Arab tribes on the southern borders of Roman territory.³⁶ On the contrary, the likelihood is that individual payments were made to a number of Arab tribes and that Theophanes and Nicephorus were reporting separate incidents which arose as a result of cutting off payments to two such groups.

³⁴ Nicephorus, *loc. cit.* (above, note 8).

³⁵ See *inter alios* the onomastica in Theophanes (above, note 4) 2.555 ff., and Kraemer (above, note 19) 333-41 for the Nessana papyri. For the difficulties in sorting out men named Sergius, see Caetani (above, note 1) 1137, note 1.

³⁶ Thirty pounds of gold would have been a nominal sum for protecting the eastern borders of the Roman Empire. The sum, approximately 2200 *solidi*, would have hardly bought 400 camels at the rate of 5-7 *solidi* a camel, the price in Southern Palestine at about this time (see *PColl* 89 in Kraemer [above, note 19] 255-57). E. Stein, *Studien zur Geschichte des byzantinischen Reiches* (Stuttgart 1919) 4, estimates that at the end of Justinian's reign, the Lahkmid 'Amr received 100 pounds of gold as part of the Roman policy in keeping peace on the Syro-Mesopotamian border. The 30 pounds of gold mentioned by Nicephorus is insignificant in comparison with the hundreds and thousands of pounds of gold donated to the church in an earlier period (see M. Avi-Yonah, "The Economics of Byzantine Palestine," *Israel Exploration Journal* 8 [1958] 42-45).

We are therefore left with the account of Theophanes as the most reliable Greek source for the initial attacks of the Muslim forces on *Palaestina Tertia*. It remains for us to see whether Theophanes' report dovetails with other evidence of the region, and whether the interpretation that follows is consistent with conditions in the desert of Southern Palestine for the early decades of the seventh century. One *caveat* must be entered, however. We must disengage ourselves from the rather full descriptions that we possess of Arab life in Northern Syria, particularly along the Syro-Mesopotamian *limes*. The political vicissitudes and intrigues of these Arabs (especially those of the Ghassanid and Lakhmid dynasties), their complex relations with the Byzantine emperors and Persian kings, their association and consequent involvement in non-orthodox forms of Christianity, their relations with the wealthy cities of Syria such as Bostra, Damascus, Homs, and Antioch,³⁷ have very little or no bearing on the life and conditions of the Arabs in the desert of Southern Palestine and Sinai. This region was far removed from the perennial conflict between the Byzantines and the Persians; its faith was solidly Orthodox and not subject to the proselytizing interests of the Monophysites or Nestorians;³⁸ and its commercial routes, while of some importance, did not attract the hordes of tribes and create the highly developed urban life of the cities mentioned above. Most significantly, our sources do not record one bishop of the Arabs or one bishop of the Arab encampments (*parembolê*) for this region; the area where these bishops were concentrated lay to the north of the Dead Sea and along the Syro-Mesopotamian border.³⁹

Throughout recorded history the Sinai peninsula and the Negeb have been primarily transit areas, unsuited by climate and topography for settled habitation except under unusual circumstances. The perennial inhabitants of this marginal region were Bedouins who, in addition to eking out an existence by their flocks and herds, added to their livelihood by trading and raiding:

³⁷ See e.g. P. Henri Charles, "Le christianisme des Arabes nomades sur le limes," *Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études, Sciences religieuses* 52 (1936) 29 ff; I. Kavar, "Procopius on the Ghassanids," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 77 (1957) 79-87.

³⁸ Charles (above, note 37) 96. A. A. Vasiliev, "Notes on Some Episodes Concerning the Relations between the Arabs and the Byzantine Empire from the Fourth to the Sixth Century," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* Nos. 9-10 (Cambridge 1956) 309-10.

³⁹ For the distribution of the bishoprics, see Charles' map (above, note 37) 66.

trading whenever the strong arm of authority kept them under control, raiding whenever that control was absent or relaxed. A supplementary source of income was no doubt derived from tribute exacted from the settlements that managed to establish and maintain themselves in this inhospitable area, or from service as guides over the lesser-known routes of the desert. Notices of these activities have largely gone unrecorded; but with the interest of the Roman government in maintaining open lines of communication in and near this region, and with the mounting attraction of Christian ascetics to that part of the desert associated with the Bible, our sources begin to record contact between Bedouins and the settled people of the region.

III. AILA AND MUHAMMAD

A notable move on the part of the Roman government toward the end of the third century or the beginning of the fourth was the stationing of a legion, the *Legio decima Fretensis* in Aila on the Gulf of 'Aqaba.⁴⁰ Most scholars attribute this to the reforms of Diocletian⁴¹ but, in any case, the placement of a military unit

⁴⁰ R. E. Brünnow and A. v. Domaszewski, *Die Provincia Arabia* 3 (Strassburg 1904-1909) 275; Art. "Legio" in *RE* 12 [1925] 1674.

⁴¹ The attribution of this move to the military reforms of Diocletian does not, in my opinion, pinpoint the specific need for a legion at Aila. If we take a closer look at what was happening along the major trade routes at the end of the third century, the move begins to make more sense. From the first century onwards, the bulk of east-west trade moved through Egyptian ports on the Red Sea or through the Persian Gulf-Euphrates Basin routes to North Syria *via* Palmyra. Towards the close of the third century both Palmyra and Egypt were in a state of upheaval: Palmyra desiring to take advantage of anarchical conditions to carve out a caravan empire for herself; Egypt being beset by the revolt of Firmus—the trader whose ships sailed to India—and by marauding Blemmyes. It was Aurelian, *restitutor Orientis*, who destroyed Palmyra in 273 and brought to an end her role as an *entrepôt* between east and west. In Egypt, the chaos occasioned by Firmus and the Blemmyes must have, in like fashion, caused a disruption in its share of the Red Sea trade. (Trouble in Egypt did not cease with the death of Firmus since Diocletian had similar difficulties with Achilleus, and the Blemmyes continued to be bothersome up to the time of Justinian. See Vasiliev [above, note 24] 288.) In the light of these developments, it seems best to interpret the shift of the *Legio X Fretensis* to Aila as part of the revival of the old South Arabian trade routes which had declined in the years following 106 when Roman emperors adopted a deliberate policy of taking control of east-west trade out of the hands of Arab caravaneers (M. P. Charlesworth, *Trade-Routes and Commerce of the Roman Empire* [Cambridge 1924] 62; Avi-Yonah [above, note 36] 40-41). We may date the shift of the legion as early as Aurelian's reign, possibly about 274, when he reinforced Syria Phoenice and Arabia with two new legions (H. Mattingly, "The Imperial Recovery," *Cambridge Ancient History* 12 [New York 1939] 308-9). With the

as large as a legion at this particular junction of Palestine and the Hedjaz of Arabia unquestionably resulted from the recognition of Aila's strategic position as a border control point at the crossroad of key highways into Syria and Palestine: the *via nova Traiana*, extending northwards to Bostra and Damascus, and the old trans-Negeb roads leading to Gaza (*via* Eboda and Elusa) and Jerusalem (*via* the Wadi 'Araba, Mampsis and Hebron).⁴² At the beginning of the fifth century, Aila is signalized in the *Notitia dignitatum*⁴³—our last reference to the Tenth Legion—as the only city in the three Palestines in which the Romans stationed a legion; the defense of other posts along the *limes Palaestinae* was left to smaller military units.

The main approach to Aila from the north and the east, by the *via nova Traiana* and all later roads, is through the Wadi Ithm (*var.* Jitm, Yutm, Jetoum), a gorge-like pass that descends steeply for several thousand feet from the high plateau region of the northeast to a point in the Wadi 'Araba a short distance above the ancient town.⁴⁴ Access to this pass was guarded by a number of forts of which one, Praesidium, garrisoned by the *Cohors quarta Phrygum* in the early fifth century, protected the opening to the pass.⁴⁵ The southern approach to Aila was the coastal road from the Hedjaz, a passageway so narrow as to be often flooded by the tides of the Gulf of 'Aqaba. In the late ninth century, a new road was laid over the ridge of Djebel Umm Nsele in order to make the town more accessible from the south. Until the opening of the Suez Canal, Aila, or its later counterpart 'Aqaba, was a central point for assembling pilgrims from Syria, Egypt, and North Africa en route to Mecca and for all traffic going to and from the Hedjaz to Egypt across the Sinai peninsula.⁴⁶

beginning of the fourth century, we note a heightened activity in trade and trading communities that increases in tempo as Rome entered into an era of perennial conflict with the aggressive dynasty of the Sassanids.

⁴² P. F.-M. Abel, *Géographie de la Palestine* 2 (Paris 1938) map 10; Aharoni, (above, note 24) 9-16; M. Harel, "The Roman Road at the Ma'aleh 'Aqrabbim," *Israel Exploration Journal* 9 (1959) 177-79.

⁴³ Ed. O. Seeck (Berlin 1876) 73.

⁴⁴ Brünnow and v. Domszewski (above, note 40) 1.471-72; A. Musil, *Arabia Petraea* (Vienna 1907) 2(1).256-64, 2(2).187-89.

⁴⁵ Abel (above, note 42) 182.

⁴⁶ A. Musil, *The Northern Hegaz* (*American Geographical Society Oriental Studies and Explorations* No. 1 New York 1926) 321-22. Art. "Aila" in *Enc. Isl.* 1 (above, note 22) 210-11.

Aila was in fact a *stomion*, an entrance to the desert extending to the commercial *entrepôts* of Arabia just as Theophanes' Gaza was an entrance to the desert extending toward Sinai. With a legion stationed at Aila, tariffs could be collected and commercial transactions conducted peaceably at a point where caravans or ships entered Roman territory.⁴⁷ And since it is axiomatic in these regions that commercial highways are also avenues of invasion from the desert, Aila was also a key outpost for protecting Palestine, and Sinai as well, against an influx of marauding Bedouins from the Hedjaz.⁴⁸

With the strategic importance of Aila in mind, the capitulation of the city to Muhammad in 630 (9 A.H.) assumes an importance far greater than has been heretofore attached to it. In this year,

⁴⁷ See art. "Mecca" in *Enc. Isl.* 3 (above, note 22) 437: "They [the Meccans] obtained from them [states adjoining Arabia] safe conducts and capitulations, permitting free passage of their caravans. This is what their chronicles call the 'guarantee of Caesar and Chosroes' . . . Commercial transactions were carried through at the frontier towns or in towns specially designated for this purpose. In Palestine these were the ports of Aila and Ghazza and perhaps also Jerusalem." Epiphanius, *Haer.*, in *Patrologia Graeca* (J.-P. Migne) 42.29-32, cites Aila as one of the *stomia* on the Red Sea to Roman territory. For ships originating from the port of Aila, see Vasiliev (above, note 24) 295.

⁴⁸ Cf. Y. Aharoni, "The Negeb of Judah," *Israel Exploration Journal* 8 (1958) 35. The strategic importance of Aila (ʿAqaba) has not been overlooked in modern times. During World War I, the successful attack and occupation of the port by Bedouins in July 1917, was designed, according to the organizer of the attack, T. E. Lawrence, to remove the threat to the flanks of the British army along the Beersheba-Gaza line as well as the possibility of an attack on the Suez Canal by way of Sinai. Once in the hands of the British, an attack was mounted from ʿAqaba on the Turkish army opposing the British on the borders of Palestine. The Turks did not anticipate an attack from the desert since ʿAqaba was strongly protected by its high hills, which the Turks had fortified, but weakly manned for miles back. If a landing had been attempted by sea, a small Turkish unit could have held up a much larger force in the passes (T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* [Oxford 1935] 167-68). In 1925, the British government, alarmed by the activities of the marauding bands of Wahhabis in the northern districts of the Hedjaz and by the possibility that they might capture the port and become a source of disturbance on the southern borders of Palestine, annexed ʿAqaba to the mandated territory of Transjordan (H. St. J. B. Philby, *Arabia* [New York 1930] 313). In 1948, following the establishment of the State of Israel, the Israelis were quick to build the city of Eilat on the west shore of the Gulf of ʿAqaba as a counterpoise to the Arab position on the eastern shore, thereby protecting the backdoor to the new state. In the nineteenth century, there were at least two west-east attacks on Arabia *via* Sinai and ʿAqaba. In 1811, Tusun Beg led 800 cavalry across Sinai through ʿAqaba to Yenbo for his assault on Medina. The March took fourteen days (J. B. Glubb, *War in the Desert* [London 1960] 48). Ibrahim Pasha, in the middle of the century, used a similar route when he attacked the Hedjaz. For military activity around ʿAqaba during the twelfth century, see art. "Ayla" in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (new ed.), ed. H. A. R. Gibb *et al.* 1 (Leiden 1960) 784.

Muhammad, having heard a report in Medina that a great Byzantine army composed of "Greeks, ʿĀmila, Lakhm, Judhām, and others"⁴⁹ was advancing into Arabia, led an expedition against the oasis of Tabuk about 300 miles northwest of Medina. Hitti's account of this event is as follows:

... Muhammad led in person an expedition against the oasis of Tabūk in northern al-Hijāz, whence he opened negotiations with neighboring settlements which led to their submission. The people were granted security and the right to retain their property and profess their religion on condition that they paid an annual tribute. First among those settlements was Aylah (Aila) at the head of the Gulf of al-ʿAqabah, whose population was Christian. South of it on the gulf stood Maqna with a Jewish population mostly engaged in weaving and fishing. Another was Adhruh, with a population of about a hundred families, which lay between Petra and Maʿān. An hour's journey to the north of Adhruh, on the Roman road from Busra to the Red Sea, lay al-Jarbāʾ, whose people were also Christians.⁵⁰

We possess two texts of the agreement entered into by Muhammad and the "chief" of Aila, Yuhanna ibn-Ruʿbah: one preserved by Ibn-Ishaq, the other by Ibn-Saʿd. Caetani is not sure whether these texts are two different versions of the same document or two distinct documents.⁵¹ It seems clear, to me at least, that the version preserved by Ibn-Saʿd is the letter Muhammad placed in the hands of his envoys and contains the terms of agreement, threats against the city if the terms were not met, and the assurance that the envoys had power to negotiate.⁵² The

⁴⁹ al-Balādhuri, *The Origins of the Islamic State (Kitāb Futūh al-Buldān)*, trans. P. K. Hitti, in *Columbia University Studies in History, Economics and Public Law* 68 (New York 1916) 92.

⁵⁰ Hitti, (above note 1) 410. Cf. his *History of the Arabs* (London and New York 1956) 119 where he speaks of the "Jewish tribes in the oases of Maqna, Adhruh and al-Jarbāʾ to the south [of Aila?]." Becker's account (above, note 1) 326 lumps the four settlements together as "small Jewish and Christian settlements" and further on (339-340) he seems to imply—if he is not referring to the "year of declarations"—that these agreements created "friendly relations with at least a few tribes on the southern boundary of Palestine."

⁵¹ Caetani, (above, note 1) 253.

⁵² The letter ends with the statement: "Furnish supplies to the people of Maqna so that they may return to their country." It appears that the Jews of Maqna, who dwelt far to the south of Aila near the outlet of the Gulf of ʿAqaba, had migrated to Aila, probably seeking some protection within Roman territory against Muhammad's campaign against Jews following his success against the Meccans in 627. (Hitti

version of Ibn-Ishak contains the text of the final agreement—or an abstract of it since the amount of the tribute (*jizyah*) is not stated—worked out between Yuhanna and Muhammad at Tabuk. Be that as it may, it is clear that the agreement gave the people of the city of Aila, as well as their ships and caravans, the right of protection [against raids] by Muhammad and the tribes under his control. In return, Aila gave the Muslims

access to water from the wells, when they desire it, nor are they [the people of Aila] to prohibit them from the road, which they desire to travel, whether by land or sea.⁵³

To this al-Baladhuri adds that Yuhanna ibn Ru'bah agreed to pay on every [non-Muslim] adult in his land one *dīnār* [*i.e.* one *solidus*] per annum, making it 300 *dīnārs* in all. The Prophet made it a condition on them that they provide with board and lodging whosoever of the Moslems may pass by them.⁵⁴

The interpretation of this important agreement between Muhammad and Aila must be viewed from both sides. For Muhammad, the capitulation of Aila opened the back door to Palestine and Sinai for raids by his tribes. By terms of the agreement, the narrow passes surrounding Aila lay open to undisturbed passage by his forces; the town itself could provide a rest area and, most importantly, an ample supply of water for a large force of men before it entered the arid wastelands of Palestine and Sinai. That Muhammad had in mind a raid against Palestine is hardly disputable, for in 632 (11 A.H.) he organized a raiding party under the leadership of Usama, the son of one of the commanders who had fallen at Mu'ta. When Muhammad died before the expedition departed, Abu-Bakr, his successor, had Usama execute the orders of the prophet.⁵⁵ According to the tradition communicated by Ibn-Ishak, Usama was to make a *razzia* "on the borders of al-Balqā' [*i.e.* the region east of the Dead Sea], and the Dārum of Palestine [Southern Palestine]."⁵⁶ De Goeje

[above, note 50] 117. al-Baladhuri [above, note 49] 93–94 details the subsequent agreement between Muhammad and the people of Maqna.) It also appears that later tradition confused the religion of the frontier town of Aila with that of Maqna; hence we find De Goeje (above, note 1) 9 speaking of the Jewish inhabitants of Aila and Maqna.

⁵³ Caetani (above, note 1) 254, note 1.

⁵⁴ al-Baladhuri (above, note 49) 92.

⁵⁵ De Goeje (above, note 1) 20.

⁵⁶ De Goeje (above, note 1) 17.

cites a number of Arabic sources that could support the view that Southern Palestine was the main, if not the sole, objective of this expedition.⁵⁷ The failure or success of this raiding expedition—or expeditions, if there were two—is not known.⁵⁸

In 633, following the wars of the *rida* (apostasy) and the restoration of the *status quo* in the Arabian peninsula, Abu-Bakr renewed Muhammad's plan and sent an appeal to the tribes of Arabia, "calling them for a 'holy war' and arousing their desire in it and in the obtainable booty from the Greeks."⁵⁹ Once more arrangements were made for the invasion of Syria and Palestine. The detachment under the command of 'Amr ibn al-'As was instructed by Abu-Bakr "to follow the way of Aila with Palestine for objective."⁶⁰ All this would probably have been in vain had not Muhammad opened up the *stomion* into Palestine and Sinai by his agreement with the people of Aila.

On the Byzantine side, the inhabitants of Aila were on the horns of a dilemma. Arabs though they were (but Christianized and settled), they could not have had any sympathy for, interest in, or perhaps even knowledge of, the new religion that Muhammad had fostered among the tribes of Arabia. To them, in the absence of a military force and strong centralized authority in the region, Bedouins meant raids or the payment of tribute or, more likely, both. And no matter how unbearable the tax burden may have been and whatever religious differences the community may have had with the officially recognized church, it is hardly conceivable that Aila or any border settlement would have welcomed Bedouins as their masters.⁶¹

At the time of Muhammad's expedition to Tabuk, the *Legio decima Fretensis*, or whatever was left of it, had long been dis-

⁵⁷ De Goeje (above, note 1) 18–19. On Dârum, De Goeje states: "Par le Dâroum d'Ibn Ishâk il faut entendre, non pas la forteresse au Sud de Gaza, mais le district de ce nom dans le Sud-Est de la Palestine, dont parlent si souvent Eusèbe et Jérôme et que Yacout mentionne sous la forme syrienne de Dâroumâ."

⁵⁸ C. Brockelmann, *The History of the Islamic People*, trans. J. Carmichael and M. Perlmann (New York 1947) 45–46.

⁵⁹ al-Baladhuri (above, note 49) 165. Note that the appeal was sent to the inhabitants of Mecca, Taif, Yemen, and all the Arabs in the Nejd and Hedjaz; no appeal was made to any of the tribes within Roman territory.

⁶⁰ al-Baladhuri (above, note 49) 166–67.

⁶¹ The inhabitants certainly would never have agreed with the statement made by John the Lydian (*De magistratibus* 3.70) in Justinian's time that "a foreign invasion seemed less formidable to the tax payers than the arrival of the officials of the treasury."

banded or removed from Aila. If it did not suffer the fate of other regular border troops during Justinian's reign,⁶² it most assuredly did not survive the long Persian war between Heraclius and Chosroes (613–628). At best, Aila might have had a self-organized police unit, somewhat like the one at Pharan,⁶³ but it could only have been effective against desultory raids of small bands. As for fortifications that might have survived the withdrawal or disbandment of the Tenth Legion, they doubtless went the way of similar installations at Nessana and Eboda in the Negeb and Adhruh in Syria: they lost their effectiveness as forts and were converted to other uses.⁶⁴ Hence, in the face of the overwhelming forces that Muhammad had gathered at Tabuk, and in the face of his threats of raids and destruction, Aila could only agree to negotiate with the prophet and attempt to get the best possible terms. It is also quite likely that the city had on other occasions paid tribute to other tribes that made a show of force in its vicinity; payment and tribute in the form of gifts, money, or both, were the usual procedure when desert settlements wished to survive without the strong hand of governmental authority to support them.⁶⁵

The negotiant for the city of Aila, Yuhanna ibn-Ru'bah (John son of Rubah), is described in Arabic sources as "king" or "chief" of Aila who, when he presented himself to the prophet, carried a cross of gold on his chest.⁶⁶ This "king" or "chief" was unquestionably the bishop of Aila⁶⁷ who, in the absence of civil or military authorities, negotiated with Muhammad for the safety

⁶² Procopius, *Anecdota* 24.12–14.

⁶³ Antoninus Placentius (above, note 21) 186. See below, page 182.

⁶⁴ For Nessana and Eboda, see below, pages 185–86. For Adhruh, Brünnow and v. Domszewski 1 (above, note 40) 431–63. Note (pages 431–34) how the area enclosed by the walls of the fort became filled with private dwellings.

⁶⁵ We may cite the example of the town of Pharan in the late fourth century making a private agreement with a sheikh named Ammanes for protection against harassment by the tribes under his control (Mayerson [above, note 25] 162). See J. L. Burckhardt, *Travels in Syria and the Holy Land* (London 1822) 213, 343, 403 for examples of Syrian towns under Turkish rule paying tribute to Bedouin sheikhs for a measure of peace.

⁶⁶ Caetani (above, note 1) 253.

⁶⁷ See art. "Ayla" in *Enc. Isl.* 1 (note 48) 784. Kawar (above, note 37) 85–86 calls John of Aila an Arab phylarch of *Palaestina Tertia* and states that he should be included in the list of known phylarchs. In the absence of supporting documentation, it is difficult to understand why John son of Rubah should be considered an Arab phylarch.

of the city's inhabitants and for the preservation of its commercial interests. It is well known that, from the fourth century on, the bishop was not only a spiritual leader but also the protector of his flock against gouging officials and the defender of the community against desert raiders and barbarian invaders.⁶⁸ It was, in fact, the church that maintained law and order in regions forgotten or forsaken by the imperial government⁶⁹ and, more important, provided the *raison d'être* for the continuation of settled life in the wilderness. Whatever sense of responsibility these abandoned communities felt for the central government or for their neighboring settlements is, of course, not known; but we can speculate that, like most isolated communities, they fended for themselves without the knowledge of, or regard for, the consequences that might arise as a result of an *ex parte* decision, or whether their actions were in agreement with official policy.⁷⁰ We may speculate further that the people of Aila considered that their bishop had concluded an exceptionally reasonable agreement with the Muslims, and that by the payment of only 300 *solidi* (about four pounds of gold) they were able to escape destruction and at the same time have Muhammad's guarantee of protection.

Aila was neutralized in 630, and the way to Southern Palestine was open; yet Muhammad did not mount an offensive against Roman territory. Perhaps the defeat of his forces at Mu'ta in the previous year convinced him that he was not strong enough for the task. In 630/1 (A.H. 9), the "year of delegations," tribes from

⁶⁸ C. H. Coster, "Christianity and the Invasions: Synesius of Cyrene," *Classical Journal* 55 (1960) 291; R. MacMullen, *Soldier and Civilian in the Later Roman Empire* (Cambridge 1963) 139–40.

⁶⁹ Cf. Procopius, *Anecdota* 24.12–14: "[Justinian] . . . took away from them [the *limitanei*] the very name of regular troops. Thereafter . . . the soldiers found themselves obliged to look to the hands of those accustomed to works of piety." (Loeb trans.) The Nessana documents, although not specifying in all instances the clerical titles of the people involved (cf. *PColt* 75 in Kraemer [above, note 19] 212–14), illustrate how church officers became responsible officials of the town after the border militia unit had been disbanded toward the end of the sixth century. At Aila, conditions must have been quite the same: the bishop became the political leader of the community and was aided by a group of elders.

⁷⁰ Cf. H. A. R. Gibb, "Arab-Byzantine Relations under the Umayyad Caliphate," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* No. 12 (Cambridge 1958) 222: "The complex of [medieval] society was made up of a mosaic of small communities that lived their own lives, carried on their own affairs and fended for themselves, often in isolation from the other communities, and almost always without much notice being taken of what they were doing or whether it was in agreement with official policy."

the Arabian peninsula offered their allegiance to the prophet and swelled the ranks of his army; still no move was made against the Byzantines.⁷¹ Sometime in 632 (A.H. 10), Muhammad seemed ready to undertake an expedition against Syria and/or Palestine (under the command of Usama); but the prophet's death and the consequent upheaval caused by the wars of the *ridda* delayed any serious consideration of an attack against the Byzantines. After Abu-Bakr had unified the peninsular Arabs with the sword of Khalid ibn al-Walid, the time was ripe for a "holy war" and *razzias* against the "Greeks"; hence Abu-Bakr's appeal to the Arabian tribes. It should be kept in mind, however, that, until the autumn of 633, the sources record only *one* contact between Muslims and Byzantines—possibly two if Usama's expedition reached its objective—and that was at Mu'ta where the Muslims were soundly defeated. Therefore, it is understandable that Muhammad and Abu-Bakr may have been somewhat hesitant and reluctant to launch a large-scale offensive into Roman territory; the Muslims apparently were not as sure as historians are of the weaknesses of the empire. It may also explain why the first raids into Southern Palestine did not proceed along well-known roads to the district of Gaza but went into Sinai and then northward into Palestine.

IV. SINAI AND THE NEGB

It is at this point that the Byzantine and Arab sources on the first Muslim attacks on Southern Palestine converge. The Saracens of whom Theophanes speaks were, in my opinion, Bedouin tribes of Southern Palestine and Sinai who, angered at the refusal of the imperial government to pay them, turned to their Muslim compatriots and "showed them the way to the district of Gaza, the entrance of the desert extending towards Sinai." The success of the first raids must be attributed not only to Muhammad's foresight in opening the back door to Palestine, *i.e.* Aila, but also to the fact that Arab tribes had made no real

⁷¹ Hitti (above, note 50) 119. It should also be noted that the Muslims, before and after Muhammad's death, were far more aggressive against Arab tribes in the Arabian peninsula than against those within Roman territory. Cf. al-Baladhuri (above, note 49) 143-62.

show of strength in this region for over two hundred years and hence defensive installations, many of which in the first instance had never been designed to meet massive attacks, had been allowed to deteriorate. However, all had not been peaceful prior to 633, for it is possible to show a pattern of raids and incursions in Sinai and Palestine extending back to the fourth century.⁷² Toward the end of this century, Byzantine sources record a number of Bedouin raids within the borders of the Roman Empire, but the most successful was one undertaken by the widow of a sheikh, Mavia or Mauvia, who succeeded in defeating the army sent against her by Valens (*ca.* 376). Peace was established when the Romans acceded to her request to ordain as bishop a Saracen named Moses, who lived as an eremite "on the borders of Egypt and Palestine, and who was preeminent for his faith, piety, and miracles." As a result, a large number of conversions were said to have been made, including the whole tribe of Sheikh Zokomos; and these Christianized Arabs fought against the Goths, Persians and other Saracens.⁷³

This is the last that we hear of anything that might resemble a large-scale movement of Bedouins in Sinai or Southern Palestine before 633. The likelihood is that considerable numbers of them were siphoned off to serve as auxiliaries in, or allies of, the Roman army, or were absorbed by the border settlements of Palestine and Egypt either as members of militia units (*limitanei*) or as inhabitants of the towns of the Negeb.⁷⁴ But Bedouin raids and harassment continued to be a part of life, not only for the communities in the desert but throughout Palestine, Syria, and

⁷² For destruction caused by invading Arab tribes in the second century see A. Negev, "Nabataean Inscriptions from 'Avdat (Oboda)," *Israel Exploration Journal* 13 (1963) 123-24.

⁷³ For Mavia, see Socrates, *HE* 4.36; Sozomenus, *HE* 6.38; Theodoretus, *HE* 4.23; Rufinus, *HE* 2.6; Cassiodorus, *Hist. trip.* 9; Theopanes (above, note 4) 1.65-66. The story of Mavia is a favorite among church historians and later chroniclers mainly, of course, because of her conversion to Christianity. For Zokomos, see Socrates, *HE* 4.36.

⁷⁴ Mavia sent an army to help repel the attack of the Goths on Constantinople (Theopanes [above, note 4] 1.65), while Zokomos' tribe was used against the Persians (Sozomenus, *HE* 6.38). How many of these Bedouins were incorporated into the military units to guard the eastern borders is unknown, but Sozomenus (*ibid.*) tells us that Zokomos' men were also used against the Saracens. The *Notitia dignitatum* (above, note 43) 59, 68 lists one Saracen unit on the Egyptian border and two in Phoenicia. Note also the large number of Arabic names in the onomasticon of the Nessana papyri (Kraemer [above, note 19] 333-41, 352-55).

Phoenicia as well.⁷⁵ As a defense against these raids, the imperial government strung a line of defensive installations across the northern Negeb: Menois, Birsama, Birosaba, and Moleatha (Malaatha). This line was flanked on either side by military detachments protecting the main lines of communications: *i.e.* the *via maris* to the west and the *via nova Traiana* to the east of the Wadi 'Araba.⁷⁶ Between the east and west legs of this *pi*-shaped figure was a kind of no-man's land that was left largely to the Bedouins and the towns that managed to maintain themselves without the help of military forces.

This was the situation at the beginning of the fifth century, as we learn from the *Notitia dignitatum*; but as urbanization spread throughout the Negeb—unquestionably spurred by the revival of old trade routes as the wars between Byzantium and Persia created dislocations along the Mesopotamian routes—there was a corresponding increase in imperial interest and military activity south of the earlier *limes*. At least two, possibly three, defensive installations were added at strategic points south of the existing line. At Nessana, the crossroads of the way from Aila to Rhinocoroura and the north-south road from the Negeb into Sinai and Egypt, a fort was built and a camel corps was organized shortly after the first quarter of the fifth century.⁷⁷ At Eboda, on the

⁷⁵ For the years 373–410, see sources cited by Vasiliev (above, note 38) 307–9 and K. Heussi, "Untersuchungen zu Nilus dem Asketen," *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur* 42(2) (Leipzig 1917) 147. For the fifth and sixth centuries, Vasiliev (*ibid.*) 309–15. See also Priscus Panites in *Fragmenta historicorum Graecorum* 4, ed. K. Müller (Paris 1885) 76; Evagrius Scholasticus in *Patrologia Graeca* (J.-P. Migne) 86(2).2846; Choricus Gazeus, *Opera*, ed. R. Foerster and E. Richtsteig (Leipzig 1929) 75. If the church historians give us a fairly accurate picture of conditions in the diocese of the East, Arab raiders could roam and plunder rather freely throughout the countryside, while the cities were safe from their depredations. In all the source material prior to the reign of Heraclius, we have only one mention made of a city, Arbela, in Persian territory, that was taken and looted by Bedouins (Vasiliev [*ibid.*] 309). Such phrases as "all the regions of the east at that time were ravaged by the Saracens" and "a sudden attack of the barbarians runs through the limits of Egypt, Palestine, Phoenicia, and Syria" must be taken with a grain of salt.

⁷⁶ Abel (above, note 42) 180–84, map 10; *Notitia dignitatum* (above, note 43) 59, 73–74. With the exception of Malaatha (Moleatha), outposts in the Negeb were manned by cavalry units which could act swiftly against raiding Bedouins. The fairly level loessial terrain on the coastal plain and around the Beersheba plateau was ideal for the use of horses. Note also that while a cohort was stationed at Malaatha, it was backed up by a cavalry unit at Cherumula (Kh. Khermel) to the northeast. To the east of Malaatha and Chermula, the terrain becomes very rough until the steep scarps of the Dead Sea watershed are reached.

⁷⁷ Kraemer (above, note 19) 16.

main road from Aila to Gaza at the point not far from where the road emerges from the steep scarps of the Ramon cirque onto the hill region of the Central Negeb, a fort was constructed at the beginning of the sixth century.⁷⁸ Similarly at Mampsis, if Woolley and Lawrence are correct in their description of the site as a fortified town, the place was chosen as a defensive point that commanded the junction of roads leading across the northern Negeb and northwards to Hebron and Jerusalem at the point where, as at Eboda, the road emerged from the Dead Sea–Wadi ‘Araba region.⁷⁹ Like most other Byzantine sites in the Negeb, Nessana, Eboda, and Mampsis had been occupied in earlier periods, particularly during the time of the Nabataean monarchy, undoubtedly for the same strategic reasons.

The Sinai peninsula, however, lying as it did to the south of the commercial routes from Syria and the Hedjaz to the Mediterranean, remained unchanged. Apart from continued interest of eremites and pilgrims in sacred sites, particularly in the region around Mount Sinai, there is no evidence of an increase in urbanization on a scale comparable with that of the Negeb. The sole community worthy of the name was Pharan, one day’s journey from Mount Sinai. For the rest, there were occasional hamlets in the wilderness, as for example the small aggregation of houses in and near the Wadi Qudeirat, that managed to survive without military assistance or defensive installations.^{79a} As the Roman *oecúmenê* pressed further south in the Negeb during the fifth and sixth centuries, the home of the Bedouins was more and more restricted to the unsettled wilderness of the Sinai peninsula.

During two centuries before the occupation of Palestine by the Persians, the sources indicate that the Bedouins of Southern Palestine and Sinai posed no serious threat to the security of the region. From descriptions of their behavior, they acted more like petty thieves than enemies of the state, at times themselves needing protection against attacks by other Bedouin tribes. We hear

⁷⁸ M. Avi-Yonah and A. Negev, “A City of the Negeb: Excavations in Nabataean, Roman and Byzantine Eboda,” *Illustrated London News* (Nov. 26, 1960) 944; A. Negev, “Avdat: A Caravan Halt in the Negev,” *Archaeology* 14 (1961) 125–26; personal conversations with A. Negev. See also Mayerson (above, note 25) 166–67.

⁷⁹ L. Woolley and T. E. Lawrence, *The Wilderness of Zin* (London and New York 1936) 137–39; Abel (above, note 42) 177; Y. Aharoni, “Tamar and the Roads to Elath,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 13 (1963) 36–38.

^{79a} Mayerson (above, note 25) 165.

nothing of Bedouin activities during the fifth century, though we can assume that their behavior was no different from what it was in the succeeding century. During Justinian's reign, Choricus of Gaza eulogizes the governor of Palestine, Stephen, for his forthright action in checking the incursions from Egypt of some Saracens who disturbed the peace and committed injustices against the border cities: "For gathering a sufficient force, you chastised the evil of these people who were deprived in every way of your forgiveness."⁸⁰ However, the Bedouins themselves were in need of help when they were attacked by tribes unfriendly to them, as Choricus tells us in his eulogy of Summus:

The enemy had fallen on those in Egypt who spend their lives in tents, as you know, and when you learned of this, you were enraged and you advanced full of anger; many of those who faced you became your captives and many, formerly prisoners of their compatriots [*homophylôn*], ceased through your efforts to merit the name of slaves.⁸¹

These disturbances apparently caused no alarm in Gaza, the richest city in the region, since the city wall had been allowed to deteriorate to such an extent that, according to Choricus, it was a wall in name only, for most of it lay open to those approaching or leaving the city. It was PHEME, the civil head of Gaza, who "declared war even though the enemy was at peace" and saw to it that the inhabitants rebuilt the wall and provided it with a defensive trench.⁸²

On the peninsula itself, the monks of Mount Sinai, hearing of Justinian's interest in building monasteries and churches, complained to him that the Ishmaelite Arabs (Bedouins) were plundering their food stores, creating general havoc, entering their cells, and pillaging them of whatever they contained, and, breaking into churches, gulping down the Eucharist. Justinian ordered a fortified monastery to be built for their protection, the now famous monastery of St. Catherine; and in a fortified community nearby, he settled a number of slaves, together with their

⁸⁰ Choricus, (above, note 75), *Laud. Arat. et Steph.* 57-58, dated 535-536. Note that the method of meeting such an attack was to gather forces, presumably from among the *limitanei* closest to the source of the disturbance, just as Theodorus the Vicarius met the threat at Mu'ta (above, pages 157, 165).

⁸¹ Choricus, (above, note 75), *Laud. Summi* 75, written before 535-540.

⁸² Choricus, (above, note 75), *Laud. Marc.* 32, dated 535-548: ... πολέμους ἐκήρυττε πολεμίω ἡσυχάζόντων.

wives and children, whose duty it was to protect the monastery. Provisions for these and the monks of the monastery were to be supplied by Egypt.⁸³

The plea of the monks for protection against the Bedouins—even if we were to discount nothing in their plea as overstatement—contains a description of malfeasances and misdemeanors rather than felonies and homicides. Had there been a massacre on a scale even smaller than the one at the end of the fourth century,⁸⁴ the martyrdom of these solitaries would certainly have been a major issue in their indictment of the actions of the Bedouins.⁸⁵

At Pharan, the civil center of Sinai and seat of the bishop, conditions were about the same. Antoninus Placentius, who visited Mount Sinai and Pharan shortly after Justinian's death, tells us that Pharan—he makes no statement concerning the defensive arrangement at Mount Sinai beyond the fact that the monastery was surrounded by walls—was protected by a wall and had a police unit of 80 publicly domiciled men (*condomae*) who, along with their families, received a food and clothing allowance from Egypt. Each man had a Saracen mare, also fed at public expense, with which he patrolled the desert, protecting the monasteries and hermits against Saracen treachery. But in spite of the police, the Bedouins, says Antoninus,

were unafraid for when the people go out of the city, they bolt their doors and take their keys with them. And those who remain within, do likewise [*i.e.* lock their doors] because of Saracen

⁸³ The most reliable account of the circumstances surrounding the building of the monastery is found in Eutychius' *Annales* (*Patrologia Graeca* [J.-P. Migne] 140.1071–72). Eutychius also mentions that Justinian built monasteries at Clyisma (Suez) and at Raithou, but that the best fortified was the one at Mount Sinai. Procopius, *Aed.* 5.8, mentions the same incident; but his account differs substantially from that of Eutychius and, in my opinion, is filled with discrepancies which deserve to be treated more fully. Note, however, that Procopius says that the monks enjoyed “without fear the solitude which is very precious to them” and that “the emperor built a very strong fortress and established there a considerable garrison of troops in order that the barbarian Saracens might not be able from that region, which, as I have said, is uninhabited, to make inroads without complete secrecy into the lands of Palestine proper.” (Loeb trans.) Both statements have no foundation in fact.

⁸⁴ See Mayerson (above, note 25) 161–62.

⁸⁵ A similar case was laid before Emperor Anastasius (491–518) by St. Sabas on behalf of his lavra on the Kedron in the Judaean desert. He asked the emperor for a fort to be built near his monasteries for protection against Saracen raids. The emperor acceded to the demand but, apparently, the imperial order was never carried out (see Vasiliev [above, note 38] 311).

treachery, since when they go out they have nowhere to go save sky and sand.⁸⁶

Antoninus also calls our attention to two *castella* in the wilderness: at Surandala,

there is a small fort . . . having nothing within it except a church and its priest and two hospices for travelers . . . and at a place where the sons of Israel crossed the [Red] Sea and pitched their camp, there too is a fort within which is a hospice.⁸⁷

Whether these two fortlets at one time housed troops, police units, or were simply fortified monasteries, we do not know; but what is clear is that, by Antoninus' time, small communities deep in the wilderness of Sinai and far removed from any source of military assistance were able to cope with whatever hostile forces may have been present in the region.

To the north, in the Negeb, the archaeological remains of those sites that have escaped the depredations of stone plunderers tell virtually the same story: the towns did not take any extraordinary precautions to protect themselves against an ordered assault; at most, they attempted to protect themselves against small bands of raiders. The towns of Sobata (Sbeita, Shivta), Elusa (Khalasa, Halutsa), Nessana (Auja, Nitsana), Saadi, and Raheiba had nothing that resembled a city wall; their protection seems to have been the continuous lines of houses and garden walls.⁸⁸ The town of Sobata had nine entrances, only three of

⁸⁶ Antoninus, (above, note 21) 184 for Mount Sinai: "monasterium circumdatum muris munitis"; 186 for Pharan: "In ipso loco civitas munita muris de lateribus . . . Octingentas condomas militantes in publico cum uxoribus suis, annonas et vestes de publico accipientes de Aegypto . . . praeter singulis diebus habentes singulas equas Saracenas, qui caput paleas et hordeum, de publico accipiant, discurrunt cum ipsis per heremum pro custodia monasteriorum et heremitarum propter insidias Saracenorum, ante quorum timorem non exagitantur Saraceni. Nam exeuntes de ipsa civitate a foris illi serant et claves tollent secum. Et illi, qui sunt ab intus, similiter faciunt propter insidias Saracenorum, quia nec habent, ubi exeant foris praeter caelum et harenam." Cf. A. Musil, *Palmyrena* (*American Geographical Society Explorations and Studies* No. 4 New York 1928) 36 for a modern analogy: "The settlement was full of Bedouins who entered the houses at will as if they were masters there . . . The five gendarmes stationed in the settlement for its protection were openly laughed at by them."

⁸⁷ Antoninus (above, note 21), 187: "in quo loco est castellum modicum qui vocatur Surandala, nihil habet intus praeter ecclesiam cum presbytero suo et duo xenodochia propter transeuntes . . . et illic similiter castellum modicum, infra se xenodochium."

⁸⁸ Woolley and Lawrence (above, note 79) 125, 91, 127, 129; H. D. Colt *et alii*, *Excavations at Nessana: Excavation Report 1* (London 1962) 5.

which were gateways; the remainder were simply the ends of streets that led into the open country.⁸⁹ At Eboda (°Abda, Avdat), Mampsis (Kurnub), and Mishrafa, a low wall surrounded the settlement, all around or only in part as in the case of Eboda.⁹⁰ Woolley and Lawrence, in describing the best of these town walls at Kurnub, call it

a poor affair, an obstacle rather than real wall of defense intended rather to resist mounted raiders than an ordered assault.⁹¹

All told, there is a remarkable concinnity between these unwallled or low-walled settlements and the inability of Bedouins, as Procopius and Ammianus Marcellinus tell us, to storm a wall or even to surmount a low barrier.⁹²

In the open country there are numerous farmsteads throughout the Central Negeb and its extension into northern Sinai.⁹³ The farmhouses associated with the remains of terrace walls and other agricultural installations are generally two, three, or four room constructions with no suggestion, even where these houses are situated in remote and isolated wadis, that they were fortified in any way so as to fend off any attackers.⁹⁴ In the terraced wadis closer to the town, one often finds small towers, originally two stories high and not unlike those that still can be seen throughout the Near East, sufficient to house the farmer as he guarded his crops from thieves before and after the harvest and to shelter him during the critical period of winter rains and floods. By way of contrast, we find nothing in the Negeb that resembles the fortified farmhouse, the "gusr," of Tripolitania; in comparison, the Negeb was open country, free from the danger of mass attack.⁹⁵

⁸⁹ Colt (above, note 88) 5.

⁹⁰ Woolley and Lawrence (above, note 79) 139, 108, 110.

⁹¹ Woolley and Lawrence (above, note 79) 139.

⁹² Procopius, *Hist.* 2.19.12, 2.9.3-4; Ammianus Marcellinus 25.6.8; for the greater adaptability of Saracens for raiding than for pitched battles, Ammianus Marcellinus 14.4.1-3; 23.3.8; 31.16.5. Cf. Woolley and Lawrence (above, note 79) 91: "... a blank dry-stone wall can stop a Beduin raid . . ."

⁹³ See P. Mayerson, "The Ancient Agricultural Regime of Nessana and the Central Negeb," in Colt (above, note 88) 213-15.

⁹⁴ Personal observation. See also Woolley and Lawrence (above, note 79) 50. For the description of farmhouses of the Israelite period in two isolated areas of the Negeb, see Y. Aharoni *et alii*, "The Ancient Desert Agriculture of the Negev," *Israel Exploration Journal* 10 (1960) 24-36; 8 (1958) 231-68.

⁹⁵ For Tripolitania, see e.g. J. B. Ward-Perkins, "Gasr es-Suk el-Oti," *Archaeology* 3 (1950) 25-30; further references in MacMullen (above, note 68) 19-22. J. Maspéro,

In a sense the forts at Nessana and Eboda cited above are an anomaly in that they are the only surviving remains of military fortifications originally designed to withstand a major assault. However, these were undoubtedly planned at Constantinople and constructed on order of the imperial government.⁹⁶ The town defenses, on the other hand, must have been erected by their inhabitants, who knew the habits and limitations of the local Bedouins. Significantly, the forts at Nessana and Eboda saw little or no military use. At Nessana, the archaeological finds contained no recognizable military weapons but rather spindle whorls, fragments of mirrors, quantities of glass, and other objects of household use.⁹⁷ Similarly, at Eboda there was no evidence that the fort had ever been put to the use for which it had been originally designed.⁹⁸

As for the Bedouins themselves, we are fortunate to have an eyewitness account of what they were like in the late sixth century, not long before the first Muslim attacks on Sinai and Southern Palestine. Antoninus Placentius traveled to Mount Sinai *via* the Negeb and the Tih desert. Setting out from Gaza, Antoninus and his companions went to Elusa, which is described as being "at the head of the desert that leads to Sinai."⁹⁹ Upon hearing the bishop of Elusa relate the tale of an unfortunate girl who had become an ascetic in the desert east of the Wadi 'Araba, the pilgrims decided to take a side trip to Segor (Zoara) near the Dead Sea where they found a convent of young girls. On returning to Elusa, Antoninus and his companions set out for Mount Sinai. Twenty miles from

Organization militaire de l'Égypte byzantine in Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études, Sciences historiques et philologiques fasc. 201 (Paris 1912) 13, makes this comment on Egypt which also holds good for Southern Palestine and Sinai: "Mais qu'étaient ces accidents médiocres et isolés, ces razzias de barbares, dirigées sans plan ni idée de conquête, exécutées par des poignées d'hommes, en comparaison de ce qui se passait sur les autres frontières de l'empire, en Mésopotamie, en Mésie, en Italie, en Afrique? En fait, aucun danger apparent ne menaçait, au VI^e siècle, la tranquillité de la vallée du Nil."

⁹⁶ Colt (above, note 88) 6. Cf. Woolley and Lawrence (above, note 79) 49: "The forts there are of Justinian's plan and most probably his work, but only a bureaucratic pedant could have imposed on a desert such incongruous defences, which seem intended rather to complete a theory than to meet a local need."

⁹⁷ Colt (above, note 88) 17.

⁹⁸ Personal conversations with the excavator, A. Negev. Mr. Negev believes that the fort with its many gateways was, in the first instance, poorly designed as a defensive installation.

⁹⁹ See above, note 25.

Elusa they came to a fort, which has been identified as the fort at Nessana, from which point they entered the "inner desert." A short distance south of Nessana, Antoninus observed a salt plain (*sebkha*) and a few bizarre Aethiopians (Negroes?) of the kind that he had seen in Jerusalem.¹⁰⁰

Up to this point, the narrative does not contain a single reference to Saracens or to any precaution, military or civil, to be taken against them. By Antoninus' time, the fort at Nessana had lost its military function and had been converted into a hospice (*xenodochium*) and a refuge for hermits.¹⁰¹ It is only when the travelers are well into the Tih desert that they have their first experience with Bedouins. Undoubtedly the pilgrims had hired a guide and an interpreter at Gaza, Elusa, or possibly at Nessana, the last important station on the central route to Sinai.¹⁰² The narrative that follows contains a description of the almost timeless conditions of Bedouin life in the Tih desert: poverty and beggary on the one hand, trading and banditry on the other. We are even provided with a demographic statistic—not to be taken any more seriously than any statistic tendered by a travel guide—that there were 12,600 Bedouins in the Tih desert. It should be noted, however, that the Bedouins knew of sources of water in this supposedly waterless desert,¹⁰³ that they were pagans, that for religious reasons trading and raiding were prohibited, and that at the end of their festival, the moratorium on raiding came to an end and the pilgrims were advised to take a safer route back to Jerusalem:

We went on foot through the desert for five or six days. Camels carried our water of which each of us received a pint in the morning and a pint at night. When the water in the skins turned bitter, we put sand in to sweeten it. Moreover, families of Saracens, or rather their women, came from the desert and sat by the wayside, half-clothed, crying and begging for food from travelers. Their husbands appeared and brought skins of cold water from the inner desert and offered [water to us] and received

¹⁰⁰ Mayerson (above, note 25) 170–71.

¹⁰¹ Mayerson (above, note 25) 170.

¹⁰² See *PColt* 72 and 73 in Kraemer (above, note 19) 205–8, orders from the Arab governor at Gaza to a certain George of Nessana to provide guides for travelers to Mount Sinai.

¹⁰³ For the technique of gathering water in the absence of wells and springs, see Mayerson (above, note 93) 246–49.

bread in return. They also brought bunches of roots, the sweet smell of which was beyond all perfumes. Nothing was sold because they were celebrating their holy days and they considered it anathema [to sell anything]. Now the people who go through this very great desert number 12,600.¹⁰⁴

And some days later, in the region of Mount Sinai, the pilgrims were privileged to witness the Bedouin ritual connected with their worship of the moon:

On a part of this mountain [Sinai or Choreb] the Saracens have placed their idol, marble and white as snow. There also lives their priest who is dressed in a dalmatic and a linen pallium. When the time of the festival is at hand, at the rising of the moon, the marble begins to change color <before the moon rises> on the day of their festival. Presently, the moon appeared, and when they began to pray, the marble turned black as pitch. At the end of their festival, it returned to its original color. We were all quite amazed at the event . . . And because the Saracen holidays were now drawing to a close, the announcement was made [at Mount Sinai] not to remain in or to return through the desert by which we had come; some, therefore, returned to the Holy City by way of Egypt, others by way of Arabia [*i.e. via Aila*].¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Antoninus (above, note 21) 183: Ambulantibus nobis per heremum dies V vel VI cameli nobis aquam portantes, sextarium mane et sextarium sero per hominem accipiebamus. Amascente aqua illa in utres in felle mittebamus in ea harenam et indulcabatur. Familia autem Saracenorum vel uxores eorum venientes de heremo, ad viam sedentes in lamentatione, et sareca missa ante se petiebant panem a transeuntibus et veniebant viri ipsarum, adducebant utres cum aqua frigida de interiore parte heremi et dabant, et accipiebant sibi panes et adducebant resticulas cum radices, quorum odor suavitatis super omnia aromata, nihil licentes; quia anathema habebant et dies festos suos celebrabant. Populus autem, qui per ipsum maiorem heremum ingrediebatur, numerus duodecim milia sexcenti."

¹⁰⁵ Antoninus (above, note 21) 184-85: "Et in ipso monte in parte montis habent idolum suum positum Saraceni marmoreum, candidum tam quam nix. In quo etiam permanet sacerdos ipsorum indutus dalmatica et pallium lineum. Quando etiam venit tempus festivitatis ipsorum recurrente luna, <antequam egrediatur luna,> ad diem festum ipsorum incipit colorem mutare marmor illa; mox luna introierit, quando coeperint adorare, fit nigra marmor illa tamquam pice. Completo tempore festivitatis revertitur in pristinum colorem, unde omnino mirati sumus . . . Et quia iam se complebant dies festi Saracenorum, praeco exivit: ut, quia non subsisteret per heremo reverti, per quo ingressi sumus, alii per Aegyptum, alii per Arabiam reverterentur in sanctam civitatem." Although the text is muddled at some points—I have bracketed one clause which seems repetitive and which is omitted in some manuscripts—the meaning is clear enough. For routes from Sinai to Palestine, see above, pages 162-63.

To this we may add the evidence of the Nessana papyri. *PColt* 89, a sixth-seventh century document, lists the purchases and expenditures made by a small company of traders on its way to and from Mount Sinai. Apparently traveling by the same route taken by Antoninus and his companions, the traders paid a Bedouin the substantial sum of three *solidi* to guide them and, presumably, to provide safe passage through the Tih desert to the Holy Mountain. The absence of any mention of a similar fee in the rest of the account makes it appear likely that on their return to Palestine they took one of the western roads. Since they were not traveling under safe conduct, Bedouins stole one of their camels for the return of which the traders had to pay a sum of money. The document also contains the name of the tribe responsible for the theft, the bani al-Udayyid, perhaps the same tribe that led the Muslims "to the district of Gaza, the entrance to the desert extending to Sinai."¹⁰⁶

If, then, the Bedouins of Southern Palestine were not a serious threat to the security of the empire, it is not at all remarkable, nor reprehensible as Procopius would have it, that Justinian decided to abandon the system of border fortifications and *limitanei*.¹⁰⁷ The move (*ca.* 545) undoubtedly accompanied the changeover in defensive arrangements along the eastern frontiers, particularly along the Syro-Mesopotamian border where the Persians were successfully employing Lakhmid Arabs to raid Roman territory. As a counterpoise to Alamoundaras (Mundhir), the client-king of the Persians, Justinian placed the Ghassanid Arethas "who ruled over the Saracens of Arabia as phylarch . . . in command of as many tribes as possible," and bestowed on him the title of king and patrician.¹⁰⁸ Extending this defensive system to the southern border between Syria and the Arabian peninsula, Justinian appointed another Ghassanid, Abochorabus (Abu-Karib), as phylarch, after having received the Palm Groves (Tabuk?) as a

¹⁰⁶ Kraemer (above, note 19) 251-60; Mayerson (above, note 25) 165-66. If the editor of *PColt* 89 is correct in thinking that Emazen may be a clipped form of Sykomazen, then it is virtually certain that the traders took one of the western roads back to Palestine.

¹⁰⁷ Procopius, *Anecdota* 24.12-14. J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire* 2 (London 1923) 358, note 4, places the move after 545 and states that it applied only to the East.

¹⁰⁸ Procopius, *Hist.* 1.17.47-48; Bury (above, note 107) 91.

gift, and the Kindite Kais (Qays), who had given up his patrimony (in the Nejd?) in order to become a phylarch.¹⁰⁹

The system of employing Arabs to fight Arabs was for Justinian a practical solution to the problem of combating an elusive and slippery foe both within and beyond the borders of the empire. The phylarchate also lent itself to considerable economies, for it was far cheaper to pay relatively small sums of money, in kind or in gifts, to Arab sheikhs to guard or guarantee peace on the borders than to support a static system of forts and a border militia that lacked the mobility of the Bedouins and that over the years had lost its effectiveness as a fighting force.

Justinian's move to disband the border militia is dated to the middle of the sixth century; but we learn from the Nessana documents that the military organization persisted in some form until the end of the century, although it is difficult to say to what degree the men who still carried the name of "most loyal soldier" functioned as a military unit. In any event, the editor of the papyri believes that by 600 A.D. imperial troops were no longer at Nessana.¹¹⁰ In my opinion, however, the *formal* abandonment of the military organization should be dated somewhat earlier, since by Antoninus' time (*ca.* 570) the fort had already been converted into a hospice for travelers and a refuge for local hermits; and the two *castella* in Sinai, if not merely fortified churches, had also lost their military complement.¹¹¹

In place of the border militia some form of the phylarchate seems to have been adopted for the unsettled areas of Southern Palestine and Sinai. *PColt* 160, a fragment of an undated letter, has a tantalizing reference to the "new (or newly appointed)

¹⁰⁹ Bury (above, note 107) 325–26. See also Kavar (above, note 37) 79–87 for a comprehensive view of the phylarchate under Justinian. Kavar argues (85–87) that Qays was the phylarch over all *Palestina Tertia*, but it can hardly be likely that he controlled any part of Southern Palestine or Sinai. Kavar rightly ascribes to Arethas the job of dealing with the raids of the Lakhmids against Roman territory, and to Abu-Karib the assignment of protecting the southern segment of the Roman frontier with Arabia against raids from the peninsula. However, I would limit the sphere of action of these phylarchs to the regions of the empire outside the *oecuménē*, i.e. beyond the settled areas. If I am correct in this view, it is less than accurate to say, as Becker (above, note 1) 339 and others claim, that the Arabs controlled the termini of east-west trade or of the spice routes, although they unquestionably exercised a degree of control over caravans as they passed through their sphere of influence.

¹¹⁰ Kraemer (above, note 19) 24.

¹¹¹ See above, page 186; Mayerson (above, note 25) 169–70.

phylarch," to various foodstuffs, and to the requisition of straw and barley,¹¹² all of which is reminiscent of the *condomae* stationed at Pharan, who received from Egypt an allowance of food (*annonas*) for their families and straw and barley (*paleas et hordeum*) for their horses.¹¹³ Such agreements between the government and local sheikhs, of course, were not guarantees of absolute safety for individual travelers through the desert, but rather were designed for the protection of communities against raids by tribes under the control of the phylarch.¹¹⁴

However scanty the evidence may be for the defensive realignments in Southern Palestine following the abandonment of the limitanean system, the results in the years shortly after the event are more evident. In Nessana, a small town on the border of the Tih desert, there is a burst of building activity between the years 601 and 605, which must attest not only to the prosperity but also to a high degree of stability and security in the region. The epigraphical evidence shows that at least three buildings went up in that time in addition to the remodeling of existing ecclesiastical structures.¹¹⁵ The excavator of the site rightly states:

There can be no doubt that the churches and their appendages were the focal point of this activity but the fact that we have no inscriptional evidence from any secular building should not divert us from considering the possibility of a similar constructional boom taking place in the lower town.¹¹⁶

We can reasonably assume that the other towns in the Negeb were equally affluent and confident in the security of the region.

All this changed within a decade. The waves of Persian conquest under Chosroes II that engulfed Antioch in 611, Jerusalem in 614 and Gaza and Egypt in 618/619, had a devastating effect on the diocese of the Orient. And while it may be idle to speculate upon the psychological consequences of the Persian successes, there

¹¹² Kraemer (above, note 19) 323. Kraemer's comments on the meaning of the word phylarch should be disregarded.

¹¹³ See above, note 86.

¹¹⁴ For the violation of an agreement between a sheikh and the community of Pharan in the late fourth century, see Mayerson (above, note 25) 162-63. See also Musil (above, note 86) 182, who records the personal experience of having been attacked and robbed of his possessions by raiding Bedouins under the control of a sheikh to whom the Turkish government paid a monthly salary for suppressing robberies.

¹¹⁵ For a summary of the evidence, see Kraemer (above, note 19) 28-29.

¹¹⁶ Colt (above, note 88) 21.

can be no doubt that the pillaging of the most holy city of Jerusalem, the desecration of its sanctuaries, and the massacre of thousands of its inhabitants, was the single most telling blow to the security of Christian communities throughout Palestine and to their faith in the imperial government. To the Bedouins, on the other hand, the general consternation caused by the invasions was an open invitation to cast aside their fear of Roman authority and to indulge their appetite for raiding. It was just one week before the capture of Jerusalem that the Saracens launched a surprise attack against the Great Lavra on the Kedron—the same monastery on whose behalf St. Sabas had applied to Emperor Anastasius (491–518) for the construction of a fort to protect the monks against Bedouin attacks—and massacred the monks who had not managed to escape by fleeing beyond the Jordan.¹¹⁷

In 619, Sophronius, undeterred by Persian occupation of Palestine, brought the body of John Moschus from Rome for burial at Mount Sinai; but when he reached Ascalon, he found the road to the Holy Mountain blocked “because of the tyrannical incursions of those who are called Agareni.”¹¹⁸ Presumably, Sophronius planned on making his way to Mount Sinai by the route common to most travelers, the *via maris*; but in Ascalon he obviously could not secure guides or find a caravan willing to assume the risks of a journey along roads made unsafe by Bedouin raids.

In the narrative (*diégésis*) of the Sinaitic monk Anastasius (*ca.* 650), mention is made of a time past when “the road to Palestine was in the hands of the barbarians, causing a serious shortage of oil at the Holy Mountain.”¹¹⁹ The editor of the text would attribute the cause to either the Persian or Muslim invasions,¹²⁰ but we need not attribute the disruption to major military movements; a more likely cause was the general chaos that Bedouins of Southern Palestine and Sinai created in the region following, or just prior to, Persian occupation of Palestine.

¹¹⁷ See above, note 85. A. A. Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire* (Madison 1954) 195, calls the Persian conquest of Palestine and the pillaging of Jerusalem a turning point in the history of the province.

¹¹⁸ *Eulogium* in *Patrologia Latina* (J.-P. Migne) 74.121: Cum autem ille [Sophronius] Ascalonem appulisset et fieri non posse didicisset ut ad sanctum montem Sina perveniret, propter tyrannicas incursiones eorum qui vocantur Agareni . . .”

¹¹⁹ Nau, *Récits* (above, note 21) 16–17; *Texte* (*ibid.*) 65.

¹²⁰ *Récits* (above, note 21) 17, note 1. The dates that Nau assigns to both events—614 for the Persian invasion, 624 for the Muslim—should be disregarded.

By the time Heraclius recovered the city of Jerusalem in 628, the communities of Southern Palestine and Sinai had been left to their own devices for almost half a generation. In the absence of imperial authority in the region—there is no evidence that the Persians filled the vacuum created by the withdrawal of the Byzantines—the towns no doubt returned to the well-tried *modus vivendi* of paying tribute to local Bedouin tribes in return for guarantees against raids. The agreement between Muhammad and the cities of Aila and Adhruh was a sign of the times: town by town, not by collective negotiation by an agent of the imperial government, communities came to terms with those forces that threatened their security.¹²¹

In the Negeb and Sinai, it seems that it was not so much a matter of simple survival or the fear of mass attack, since defensive installations of the towns were neither changed nor bolstered. With one exception, possibly two, the towns passed peacefully, at least in a physical sense, through the period of Persian occupation to the time of organized government under the Arab caliphs later in the seventh century.¹²² The roads, however, were no longer protected by the military, or by the fear of it, nor could agreements between individual communities and Bedouin tribes have any force beyond town limits. It is along the roads that we hear of Bedouin raids and brigandage; we hear nothing of massacres among the religious communities or of the capture of towns.

If my interpretation of Theophanes' evidence is correct, Heraclius, upon recovering Palestine, paid the tribes in Southern Palestine to keep the peace along the roads leading to Mount Sinai; and when payments were discontinued, the Bedouins not only went back to raiding but also appealed to their compatriots

¹²¹ See above, page 172. The silence of the Nessana papyri during this period is ominous (cf. Kraemer [above, note 19] 30). It is only toward the end of the seventh century, after the Arab caliphate had restored law and order in Southern Palestine, that the papyri begin to speak again, not only of taxes and requisitions of supplies, but also of personal matters. Most importantly, two documents dealing with the disposition of Arab troops (*ca.* 685) indicate that soldiers were stationed at this cross-road leading into the heart of the Sinai desert (Kraemer [*ibid.*] 290–304). The requisitions of the Arab governor at Gaza for Nessanites to provide the services of a guide for individuals traveling to Mount Sinai (above, note 102) further illustrate the return to law and order in this region.

¹²² C. Baly, "S'baita," *Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly Statement* (October 1935) 172–73.

in the Hedjaz for additional support. Theophanes makes it very clear that the nearest military post from which help could be obtained was Caesarea, *over 80 miles from Gaza*, and much further from such towns of the Negeb as Elusa, Sobata, Mampsis, Nessana and Eboda. In contrast with Heraclius' defensive arrangements east of the Wadi 'Araba—where a line was set up just south of the Dead Sea and, when Bedouin forces threatened, Theodorus the Vicarius "gathered all the garrisons of the desert" and repelled the attack—the region west of the 'Araba was completely devoid of any military posts from which a commander could "gather a sufficient force of men" as the governor of Palestine had been able to do a century earlier.¹²³ When an attack developed in the region of Gaza, a message had to go far north to Caesarea before troops could be sent to assist the beleaguered towns in the south. It would be remarkable if Sergius and his three hundred men (trained for desert warfare?) had reached the district of Gaza within three to four days after news of the Bedouin attacks became known in Gaza. It is quite apparent, therefore, that Heraclius had either abandoned any concern for Southern Palestine or, more likely, that he thought that no serious threat to the security of Palestine could develop from that quarter. What he probably did not know was that Aila had come to terms with the Muslims and that Muslim forces, using Aila as a *stomion*, swelled the number of militant Bedouins in Sinai, thereby setting the stage for the kind of attacks rarely experienced by the communities in the region.

The one clear exception to this relatively peaceful transition from Byzantine to Arab rule is Eboda. This prominent town on the trans-Negeb road from Aila to Gaza is situated on a high ridge, the crown or "acropolis" of which is occupied largely by a fortress on the eastern portion of the hill and by church buildings to the west. The eight-towered fortress had two main entrances in the north and south walls, and three secondary entrances on the east and west walls. The town itself extended in a series of terraces down a spur of the western slope. Excavations on the acropolis have revealed a heavy layer of ashes in the towers of the fort and in the adjoining ecclesiastical buildings. The gates of the fort facing south and west were blocked with building stones, column

¹²³ Above, page 181.

drums, and other material, indicating to the excavator that a desperate attempt had been made on the part of the inhabitants to defend themselves from attack. Destruction was limited to the area of the acropolis; the town below was untouched. A small chapel situated in the northeast corner of the fort bore no traces of the conflagrations, and hence is assumed to have been built after the firing of the fort and church complex. The destruction is attributed to the Persians in 619–620.¹²⁴

In response to my request for more detailed information supporting the date of destruction of the buildings on the acropolis, Mr. Avram Negev, the excavator, kindly responded and gave his permission to cite his letter. Mr. Negev gives two possibilities: (a) between 614 and the reconquest of Jerusalem by Heraclius, (b) after 636. Mr. Negev maintains that the latter date is untenable since it does not fit well into the general archaeological evidence of the Negev. The evidence from excavations at Sobata and Nessana shows that the towns continued to flourish during the whole of the seventh and eighth centuries, but that at Eboda there was no evidence to indicate the existence of a settlement at a date later than the middle of the seventh century. “I can see no reason,” he writes, “why Avdat [Eboda] should have been destroyed by the same Arabs who tolerated the existence of other cities in the Negev.”

As to dating the destruction of the buildings on the acropolis to the years between 614 and 629, Mr. Negev states:

If the Arab conquest was not the reason for the destruction of Avdat, we must perforce come to the other date, that of the Persian invasions. I must admit that I have found no positive evidence proving the presence of Persians at Avdat. No coins, no typical pottery—nothing. This might, perhaps, indicate that the blow was sudden, quick and not long lasting. The Persians planned the conquest of Egypt but it could not be accomplished by sea because the Byzantine fleet dominated the Mediterranean. The only other way was by land routes, one of which passed near Avdat. Subeita and Auja [Nessana] were then off the main road. It is my belief that the Persian attack must have occurred after 618 [the last dated inscription found at Eboda is 618 when the abbot of the monastery was buried in the

¹²⁴ Avi-Yonah and Negev (above, note 78) 947; Negev (above, note 78) 129–30. Personal conversations and correspondence with A. Negev. See also Woolley and Lawrence (above, note 79) 109–22.

atrium of the South Church on the acropolis]. After the Persian withdrawal from the Negev, the inhabitants remaining at Avdat built the chapel in the fort to replace the churches which were burnt during the Persian invasion. Other reconstructed buildings were observed here and there. It seems that the bulk of the inhabitants left the city before 636. When the Arabs conquered Avdat, it must already have been a dead city.

I cannot concur, however, with Mr. Negev's *a priori* conclusion that the Persians, on their way to Egypt through the Negeb in 619–620, destroyed the buildings on the acropolis of Eboda. There simply is no evidence that the Persians used any route in their march to Egypt other than the one traversed by most armies, even the Arab army in 640, namely the *via maris*.¹²⁵ Nor did the Persians have to resort to any other route since control of the coastal region gave them a stranglehold on the interior. Even if they had marched from the interior of the Negeb to the coast—a most unlikely possibility—or from the coastal plain inland, the inhabitants of Eboda, long without a military force, would have undoubtedly capitulated without a struggle in the face of an approaching Persian army.

In one respect I agree with the excavator: the attack must have been sudden and unexpected. But in my view, the destruction at Eboda cannot be attributed to the Persians or to the post-Yarmuk (636) successes of the Muslims. I would, rather, set the date at 634 or shortly before, say ten or fifteen years, and place the responsibility either on local Bedouin tribes or on one of Abu-Bakr's raiding parties operating in Southern Palestine in 634 in concert with local Bedouins. The latter possibility seems to be the more probable one since in this region Bedouins appear never to have been successful in mounting a mass attack on any of the communities until Abu-Bakr sent a considerable force of men into Southern Palestine.¹²⁶ Further, the fact that Eboda was attacked

¹²⁵ See N. H. Baynes, "The Successors of Justinian," *Cambridge Mediaeval History* 2 (New York 1923) 291: "It was probably in the spring of 619 that the next step was taken in the Persian plan of conquest, when Shahrbarāz invaded Egypt. He advanced by the coast road, capturing Pelusium and spreading havoc among its numerous churches and monasteries."

¹²⁶ According to al-Baladhuri (above, note 49) 167, Abu-Bakr placed 3000 men under the command of 'Amr ibn al-'As and kept sending reinforcements until he had 7500 men. While these figures are unquestionably exaggerated, there can be little doubt that Abu-Bakr poured more fighting men into Southern Palestine and Sinai than had ever been seen there before.

while towns such as Nessana and Sobata escaped is additional support for my belief that raiding parties were at work. Eboda—prosperous, ungarrisoned, and furthest removed from Caesarea—made an excellent target of opportunity for Abu-Bakr's raiders on their way to or from the district of Gaza. And if there is any substance to the Arab tradition that ʿAmr ibn al-ʿAs and his forces withdrew to Ghamr in the Wadi ʿAraba after his initial contact with the Byzantines coming from Caesarea,¹²⁷ it would seem more than likely that the Muslims had attacked Eboda after their incursions into Sinai and the district of Gaza. Ghamr, two stages from Aila and just off the Wadi ʿAraba road, is easily approached by the northern leg of the road leading from Eboda down the escarpments of the Ramon cirque to the ʿAraba.¹²⁸

Very closely related to the situation at Eboda is the second, but not as clear, exception to the relatively peaceful transition from Byzantine to Arab rule. As stated above,¹²⁹ I believe that the Heran, Eran, or Ran of Theophanes is Pharan and that this town was the first to fall before the attacks of Abu-Bakr's raiders in 634. Curiously enough, Pharan, the largest community in the Sinai wilderness and one which had close contact with the monastic settlements in and around Mount Sinai, drops completely from the historical scene at about this time. While an argument *ex silentio* may not be entirely persuasive, it is compelling enough to give us pause.

In the narrative of the Sinaitic monk, Anastasius, written after 650, mention is made of a number of sites virtually unknown in the Sinai peninsula, and even of Aila; but not one mention is made of the city of Pharan.¹³⁰ This omission cannot merely be fortuitous since we know that Pharan contained at least two churches and was the seat of the bishop.¹³¹ Weill, in his citation of the evidence for Pharan, comments:

¹²⁷ De Goeje (above, note 1) 35–36. Cf. Musil (above, note 46) 321.

¹²⁸ Caetani (above, note 1) 1124, note 1; 1131. For a description of the road from Eboda to the Wadi ʿAraba, see Aharoni (above, note 26) 13; Harel (above, note 42) 177–78. Although logic would have it that the Muslims attacked Eboda on their way from Gaza, it is also quite possible that the town fell before the Muslims as they headed toward Gaza.

¹²⁹ Above, page 161.

¹³⁰ See Nau, *Récits and Texte* (above, note 21).

¹³¹ See art. "Sinai" in *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie* 15, ed. F. Gabrol (Paris 1950) 1469.

On entend encore parler, au vii^e siècle, d'un évêque de Pharan, le célèbre hérésiarque Théodorus, après quoi la ville de Pharan tombe en oubli et, bien vivante encore aux temps d'Antonin Martyr, périt obscurément sous l'assaut des Saracènes; ce n'est qu'au x^e siècle que nous entendrons prononcer à nouveau son nom et qu'on nous décrira ses ruines.¹³²

In reality, our last notice of Pharan as a city is given by Antoninus at the end of the sixth century (*ca.* 575).¹³³ The mention of Theodorus, who was condemned by the Council of Latran (649) and the sixth oecumenical council of Constantinople (680), as bishop of Pharan need not have any reference to the town of Pharan since the name was used—like the bishop of Sinai, the church of Pharan, or the church of Sinai—in a geographical sense and was the title of the prelate overseeing all Christian affairs on the peninsula.¹³⁴ By the time of the anonymous account of the conversion of the Christian Bedouins at Mount Sinai, written by a contemporary of the event,¹³⁵ the name Pharan was no longer associated with the town in the Wadi Feiran, but with a “fort” (*tou kastrou Pharan*) very close to the monastery of St. Catharine. This fort was probably the *monasterium servorum* (Dir ol Abid) built by Justinian for the slaves who were “to guard and protect the monastery [of St. Catharine].”¹³⁶ After the forcible conversion of the descendants of these slaves to Islam in the time of Marwan I (684–685), the monks of Mount Sinai destroyed their homes.¹³⁷

V. CONCLUSION

We may now venture a reconstruction of the events leading to the year 634 and the first Muslim attacks on Sinai and Palestine. The success of the Persians in Syria and their capture of Jerusalem was the signal for the outbreak of hostilities by Bedouin tribes in *Palaestina Tertia*. So far as we know, these hostilities were restricted to lines of communication; the towns themselves survived, probably by paying tribute to local tribes. When Heraclius

¹³² Weill (above, note 21) 261.

¹³³ See above, page 182.

¹³⁴ See Weill (above, note 21) 222; above, note 20.

¹³⁵ Nau, *Récits* (above, note 21) 7.

¹³⁶ Eutychiüs (above, note 83) 1071.

¹³⁷ Eutychiüs 1072. Nau, *Récits* (above, note 21) 129–30.

recovered Palestine and Syria in 628, he organized a system of defenses in Syria just south of the Dead Sea in the region of Moucheôn and Mu'ta; the limitanean system in the Negeb and along the north-south axis of the Wadi 'Araba, obsolete and abandoned since the time of Justinian, was not renewed, nor, apparently, deemed vital to the defense of the southern border of the empire. After the defeat of Muhammad's forces at Mu'ta in 629, the imperial government must have felt even more convinced that no serious threat could arise from the Arabian peninsula, let alone from Palestine or Sinai.

In 630, Muhammad's activities, radiating from Tabuk close to the unprotected borders of the empire, brought Aila, the gateway to Southern Palestine and Sinai, under his control. The significance of this move has long been underestimated, but there can be little doubt that the pressure Muhammad exerted on strategically located Aila was part of his design to find an outlet for his forces into Palestine and Syria. By the terms of the agreement between the prophet and the people of Aila, the Muslims gained passage through the narrow passes surrounding the town whose defense by even a small force of men could easily have prevented Muhammad's use of this ingress into Palestine. In addition, Aila provided the necessary food, water, and a resting place for troops before a military operation through the desert. To the people of Aila, on their own for many years and without knowledge of, or regard for, the consequences of the agreement, it was a simple and inexpensive solution to the problem of surviving in an area surrounded by hostile Bedouins.

The death of Muhammad in 632 and the wars of apostasy delayed any serious consideration of an attack against the Byzantines. However, an opportunity arose in 633 when the pagan Bedouins of Southern Palestine and Sinai, angered at the refusal of the imperial government to pay them their money allowance, turned to their Muslim kinsmen in the Hedjaz and offered to show them "the way to the district of Gaza, the entrance of the desert extending towards Sinai." Abu-Bakr, who had been privy to Muhammad's plans, saw the chance to execute one phase of the prophet's strategy and hence declared a holy war against the Byzantines. He ordered a large force of men—Arab tradition gives the number as 3000, later augmented to 7500—under 'Amr ibn al-'As to take the coast road to Aila. The

direction of the attack on Palestine was not along the well-known and well-marked road from Aila to Gaza; but with the help of Bedouins who knew their way over the lesser-known routes and where to find supplies of water, the attack was to go deep into Sinai and thence northward to the district of Gaza. The advantage of this plan was a surprise maneuver from an unexpected quarter against communities little prepared for, and certainly not expecting, a mass attack.

The most attractive prize for a raiding party in Sinai was Pharan, the largest community in the wilderness. The small monastic communities in the peninsula offered little in the way of booty and seem not to have been molested. The monastery at Mount Sinai, another possible target, was, by virtue of the great walls built by Justinian, impregnable to attacks by raiders.

After an attack on the unsuspecting town of Pharan, or site *x* in Sinai, if I am incorrect in my identification, the raiders worked their way north, probably not by the slow sand-dune covered *via maris* but by an interior route, such as the ancient Shur road, into the district of Gaza.¹³⁸ Near Gaza they met their first real opposition from the Byzantines. Intelligence of the *razzias* must have reached Gaza, and word was sent to Caesarea, the nearest military post, 80 miles distant, for help. The military commander at Caesarea, apparently not greatly concerned and thinking that he had to deal with the usual kind of raiding band, sent down to the Negeb a small force of 300 men under the command of a certain Sergius. Sergius and his men were easily routed by 'Amr's superior force. The Muslims then withdrew to Ghamr to await reinforcements from Medina. On the line of withdrawal lay Eboda, another rich prize and ripe for the taking. When the word was spread of an approaching attack, the inhabitants hastily fortified the citadel, but it was to no avail since the town was not in a position to defend itself against a mass attack. The acropolis was put to the torch by the Muslims, who then continued their way on the main road from Eboda down escarpments to the Wadi 'Araba to the rendezvous point at Ghamr.

¹³⁸ Cf. the route taken by Sultan Baybars in the thirteenth century (Woolley and Lawrence [above, note 79] 56-57).