

The Local and Global Commerce of Arabia before Islam Pacific Neighborhood Consortium

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At the AAG meeting in Los Angeles in March, in a paper on “Trading Places: The GIS of Arabian Markets,” we described a new project on Arabia at the time of the rise of Islam (ca. 500-800 CE). We described problems in mapping locations and itineraries in this semi-nomadic environment, and in the types of literary sources available. We also described a tradition on a cycle of markets throughout the peninsula, said to have taken place before Islam according to a set pattern every year. Here we devote special attention to this cycle, which shows minimal interest in Mecca and its sanctuary and trade, thus raising historical and historiographical issues of some consequence. Using GIS techniques, we answer the following questions. (1) Where precisely were the markets of this tradition? (2) What routes were used in traveling among them? (3) What goods were traded at these sites and transported along these routes? (4) What was the relation of all this to other routes, both peninsular and international? Precise information on Arabian trade routes for this period is scarce. In addition to the “markets of the Arabs” tradition, we rely on topographical information culled from ancient Arabic poetry; on historical and geographical accounts from the medieval Islamic period; and on modern travelers’ accounts and on archaeological findings where available. In this way, we arrive at a detailed evaluation of the “markets of the Arabs” tradition, its historicity, and its implications for our view of the rise of Islam. At the same time, we gain a more precise idea of Arabia’s role in world commerce, by land and by sea.

The narrative tradition of “the markets of the Arabs before Islam”, often called the “discourse of the markets” appears in several medieval Arabic works. It describes a circuit of markets, which the Arabs followed in each succeeding year. The circuit – or more accurately, spiral – began in north central Arabia at Dumat al-Jandal, moved east toward the Gulf coast and down to the ports of `Uman. Then it moved to Yemen, both the seaport of Aden and the highland capital of San’a’. Then the movement went north in a series of closely-packed markets, chief of which was the great market or fair of `Ukaz. This cluster of markets was connected with the annual pilgrimage. The series ended in a

variety of different possible places. In many ways, the discourse of the markets presents a view of Arabia, which is different from other Arabic texts of the time.

Historical work on Arabia just before Islam has focused largely on Islam's first homeland, the Hijaz. For this we have a scarcity of documentary and archaeological evidence, together with an unusually full body of literary evidence. Since the 1970's this literary evidence has undergone a process of deconstruction at the hands of scholars who are sometimes (against their wishes) referred to as the "revisionist school". These have cast doubt on the reigning notions that Mecca was an entrepot of peninsular and international trade, and that the Quraysh (Muhammad's tribe) were the entrepreneurs controlling that trade. Polemics have gone on between an older view, whereby history emerges as a residue of the "right" texts, and the "revisionists," according to whom the defectiveness of the textual tradition makes history unrecoverable, or nearly so. The result has been, historiographically speaking, an impasse.

The aim of "Mapping Arabia" is to reconstruct aspects of the political economy of late antique and early Islamic Arabia, through mapping and visualization. The project's first focus is on the movements of trade and pilgrimage. To the extent possible, we seek to avoid the assumptions which have governed the historical arguments—regarding sanctuaries, pilgrimage and trade—of both the traditional historians and the revisionists, as just outlined. (Of course this is easier said than done.)

We have developed, over the course of this project, a methodology for mapping locations of interest. The methodology essentially involves two parts. First, modern maps and gazetteers are used to identify whether or not the site is still in modern usage. Second, triangulations are made based upon our sources' references to other locations.

Several different sources have been used to compare historical geographies with modern geographies. The first of these have been digital resources such as VMAP coverages, the Getty Thesaurus of Geographic Names and the NIMA Geospatial Engine. These sources are consulted first, due to their ease of use, ability to search over national boundaries, and return of solid geographic coordinates. This is followed by non-digital gazetteers, such as the U.S. Board of Geographic Names Gazetteer Series. While these also provide specific geographic coordinates, the search must be narrowed within a national boundary before using the gazetteers. This becomes problematic in areas where

several nations share borders near the area of interest and multiple national gazetteers may be consulted before locating the site in question. Finally, cartographic surveys are used in places where textual sources fail. Highly detailed maps of the Arabian Peninsula are available, via the U.S. Government, originally used in the 1950's while surveying for oil. These maps are much more difficult to work with, since one needs a limited area of possible site location before they can be approached. Searching based upon site names is nearly impossible and it is difficult to return geographic coordinates with the accuracy available from digital and printed gazetteers.

Most references supplied by our sources provide some kind of relational information to other sites. Once we have located a good number of sites using the techniques mentioned above, essentially creating a grid of known locations across the peninsula, we may begin to use this relational information to map other sites. Distances are given from one or more locations to the referenced site. Buffers are created based upon this information and then the site is located within the overlap of the buffers. This works best in areas of high population density, since these usually provide us with stronger sets of triangulations; for example, we may have relational distances from three or four different related sites. In the case of itinerary routes, we usually only have relational information from two other sites, the one proceeding and the one following the site in question. While this gives us enough information to properly space out our sites, it does not help us determine with one hundred percent accuracy the direction of the route.

The most problematic of sites occur when multiple sources lead us to multiple locations. The market of `Ukaz is a good example of such a situation. While `Ukaz is one of the most famous and important markets of pre-Islamic Arabia, its location has remained relatively unknown. A detailed study of this particular market left us with five separate locations for 'Ukaz, three within a reasonable location and two that were completely off the mark. By carefully selecting textual sources, we were able to select a location which was most likely the site of pre-Islamic `Ukaz and identified the remainders as later phenomena with a shared name.

After the location of individual markets, the reconstruction of the routes, which connected them, comes into play. The primary source for mapping routes throughout this project is the itinerary. Itineraries are a common theme throughout

Arabic geographical work and have been best exemplified by the governmental and administrative branches of the literature, specifically in connection with the needs of the imperial postal and intelligence systems. Because of this administrative focus though, the most accessible itineraries are those involved in administrative workings and tend to link important political centers, for example the Darb Zubayda which links Baghdad with Makka. These itineraries rarely mention the eastern part of the peninsula and are not directly involved in linking the markets of the aswaq al-Arab tradition together, at least not in the order they were reportedly traveled. Incomplete itineraries are found, outside of the traditon, which link Dumat al-Jandal to Khaybar, but in the tradition of the aswaq al-Arab, the cycle begins with Dumat al-Jandal and Khaybar is the penultimate stop. Sticking to the tradition, there is no direct connection between the two.

We used to ask whether land or water routes were common between these markets. Some lengths of the journey obviously imply land, for example, from Dumat al-Jandal to al-Mushaqqar which lay in the western and eastern portions of the northern peninsula respectively and would require a trip around the entire peninsula if traveled by sea. Others obviously imply water, for example, from Daba to al-Shihr who are almost 1,500 km apart, using the most direct route, and separated by the impassible terrain of Arabia's southern coast. Some markets are noted as being attached to ports and certain goods certainly entered the cycle via the water. Persian goods came to al-Mushaqqar from across the Gulf. Daba was a port that served merchants from India, Sind, China and other eastern locations. Some evidence shows mixed methods of transport, but only in the areas between al-Mushaqqar and al-Shihr (the eastern portion of the cycle). Al-Marzuqi mentions that the merchants of the sea did not travel beyond al-Shihr unless they were unable to sell all of their merchandise; in that case they traveled on to `Adan with the land-going merchants. Prior to al-Mushaqqar, there is no reasonable method by which sea travel could have played a role. Beyond `Adan, the markets turn inland and there seems to have been little travel, for this purpose, along the Red Sea.

However, we should not make too many assumptions about modes of travel between different locations. Early on in this project, discovering a route running between Syria and Yemen was a key interest, especially the way the route connected with Makka and the Hijaz in general. Some routes were located along the Red Sea coast, but nothing

that truly implicated any kind of north-south exchange similar to what we were hoping to find. Instead, the nature of oases and wells dictated that such travel occur further inland. Travel from Syria to al-Medina was channeled through Dumat al-Jandal and then Khaybar, using a route littered with isolated watering holes. Looking at a rough sketch of this route leads one to believe that this was a very inconvenient method of travel, taking travelers hundreds of kilometers out of their way, but the realities of the environment and availability of water made trade more feasible along this route than a more direct route.

18th and 19th century travel literature may prove to be one method of recreate these lost, non-governmentally crucial routes. Many modern travelers have crossed the Arabian Peninsula and have left detailed accounts of their travels, including such notable authors as Alois Musie and Charles Doughty. An argument can be made that without a major advancement in means of travel and without a major change in the topography of a region, the route used to travel between one location to another will not change drastically over the years. We have yet to explore the possibilities such travel literature may provide us, but are planning on doing so in the near future.

Beyond questions of where these markets occurred and how people and goods traveled between them, we have the questions of what was actually happening at these markets. First of all, these weren't strictly commercial affairs. These markets were involved in various forms of entertainment along with trading and for this reason the term fair is sometimes used instead of market. In order to understand how these markets worked, it may be useful to look at them individually.

Dumat al-Jandal was the first market of the cycle and sat along a trade route between Syria and the Hijaz. Still, the rulers of Dumat al-Jandal, which switched between representatives of the `Ibadis and the Ghassanids based upon a challenge of either physical or mental prowess, would refuse merchants from Syria and Iraq the right to trade at the market until the local authorities had sold all of their goods. The tribe of Kalb would sell slaves and female slaves would be forced into prostitution during the fair. Commerce was conducted by the manner of casting stones as a merchant offered up individual items for sale. Dumat al-Jandal was also an important point of pilgrimage, as it was home to the idol of Wadd.

Al-Mushqar fell under Persian authority and the Persians would appoint a governor over the market. At this point, Persian goods would enter the cycle of markets, carried across the gulf. Aromatics were another good associated with al-Mushaqar, though they were produced in South Arabia and their presence was the result of a crossing of the aswaq al-Arab tradition and specific aromatic trade routes. Commerce was conducted through the touching of hands, murmuring, and movements of the head, no speaking was allowed until a deal was made to prevent the making of false oaths.

Suhar was a point of entry for many merchants who did not attend the markets of Dumat al-Jandal or al-Mushaqar. Fabrics were a noted ware and commerce was conducted by the casting of stones. Copper from near by mines was also traded.

Daba was a market at which goods from India, Sind, China and other points east would enter the cycle. A great deal of exchange occurred here between Arab and foreign merchants. Commerce was conducted through bargaining/haggling.

The market of al-Shihr was the first of the markets in the cycle that did not fall under the rule of a king, and was therefore not subject to tithes. It was also a pilgrimage point near the grave of the prophet Hud. Here merchants sold tanned hides and fabrics and purchased frankincense, myrrh, incense, and other aromatics. Commerce was conducted through the casting of stones.

At `Adan, merchants purchased manufactured perfumes and goods were divided up among those heading for Persia and Byzantium.

Imports at San'a' included cotton, saffron, and dyestuffs while exports included fabrics and iron.

`Ukaz was the greatest of the markets and featured such spectacles as boasting and charity contests. Selling was limited to the last night, making this half-month event more of a fair than traditional market.

Dhu l-Majaz figured prominently in the pilgrimage cycle and many would come to this market as part of the pilgrimage.

For some of these markets, archaeological evidence may help us better understand the nature of goods traded and the methods by which they were traded. Previous explorations of archaeological sources have provided us with mixed results. Many of these markets were temporary establishments and left little lasting remains,

except for those associated with ports which have left the majority of related archaeological remains. In the case of `Ukaz, an Umayyad era village had been discovered with the name of `Ukaz, but it appears to have had nothing to do with the market.

The entire pattern of the aswaq al-Arab holds a strong political element as well. During the pre-Islamic era, Arabia found itself wedged between the Byzantines and the Persians, but with little unified leadership of its own. Markets, for the most part, were controlled by local tribal interests. In many of these markets, various tribes contended for control of the market on an annual basis, these contests are described as being a part of the market festivities in some sources. Exceptions to this include the eastern Gulf markets that were under Persian dominance, such as al-Mushaqqar, and the Yemeni markets, which also showed some Persian influence. There is some discussion, but little evidence, of Arabian markets acting as a means of trade between the warring empires of Byzantium and Persia, though the cyclical nature of the aswaq al-Arab and the connections these markets held to the two empires, such as Byzantium at Dumat al-Jandal and Persia at al-Mushaqqar, shows that goods could have changed hands between the them in this manner.

With the limited knowledge we have of these markets, the question will always remain, how “real” were the aswaq al-Arab? Our sources tell us that these markets existed and that they occurred in a particular temporal order. Dumat al-Jandal happened first and then shortly after its closure, al-Mushaqqar began, but we are not sure how they interacted with each other. There is some evidence that merchants moved from one market to the next along this cycle, but it is not clear how and why this occurs. Were these markets organized to facilitate this cyclical movement, or was this purely coincidental? The sources also indicate that few merchants began at Dumat al-Jandal and traveled throughout the entire cycle. People and goods entered and left the cycle at different stages, mostly depending on point of origin and when their goods had all been sold. Authors have linked these markets together into one tradition, but we may never know how this tradition originated and what were its intentions.

As far as the aswaq al-Arab tradition’s connection to outside trade patterns is concerned, it appears that any connection was purely coincidental. Both Dumat al-Jandal

and Khaybar were along a trade route linking Syria to the Hijaz, but this trade route cut through the aswaq route instead of supporting or enhancing it. Eastern goods were found at markets along the aswaq tradition, but this was more likely a result of the aswaq tradition integrating the largest and most important ports along the eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula instead of eastern merchants being a part of the tradition itself. Of course, as Syrian goods came to Dumat al-Jandal and Khaybar and Indian and Chinese goods came into Daba, there is a chance that merchants participating in the aswaq tradition did carry these goods along the tradition. The prominence of aromatics at al-Mushaqqar in the tradition is an example of such a pattern. Aromatics came to al-Mushaqqar as they were transported along a north-south trade route between Southern Arabia and Iraq and Iran, but the aromatic merchants still sold a portion of their goods in al-Mushaqqar in connection with the aswaq tradition. Still, this kind of international trade was not an emphasis of the aswaq tradition, whereas domestic trade amongst the people of the Arabian Peninsula was the primary motivation.