

The Muslim Conquest of Byzantine Palestina - Monstrous Invasion or Peaceful Occupation?

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Textual evidence regarding the impact of the Persian and Muslim invasions on Byzantine Palestina is varied and contradictory. It is nevertheless widely believed by historians that the new Muslim rulers showed tolerance to the Jews and Christians of Byzantine Palestina. This article will use reliable archaeological dating of Byzantine sites in Palestina to better understand the impact of the Persian and Muslim invasions of Palestina. The evidence will show that many Jewish and Christian settlements dwindled after the occupation, indicating either abandonment or destruction in the wake of the invasions.

A brief review of historical events will be beneficial in assessing the impact of the invasions. In AD 614 Jerusalem fell to the Persian invaders and this was accompanied by destruction and looting of Christian churches and monuments. From AD 612 onward, the entire province was under Persian rule for almost a decade.¹ In AD 630 Heraclius re-conquered Palestina and restored the relics that the Persians had removed from Jerusalem.² However, this Byzantine victory was short lived, as the Muslim conquest of Palestina began in AD 634, culminating in the fall of Caesarea in AD 640.³ Despite the widespread belief in the tolerance of the new Muslim rulers, the destructive results of these invasions appear to be 'taken for granted' by many archaeologists. Many excavators state that the occupation of their site continued until the end of the Byzantine period, but few provide any evidence in support of such a statement.

¹ Herrin J. 1987 *The Formation of Christendom* Oxford, 203-204

² Kaegi W.E. 1992 *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests* Cambridge, 28-31

³ Schick R. 1998 'Palestine in the Early Islamic Period – Luxuriant Legacy' *Near Eastern Archaeology* 61:2, 74-108

The analysis in this paper is based on data from the Catalogue of Excavated Sites in Byzantine Palestina⁴ as well as the more newly published Tamra church.⁵ Unfortunately, complete reliance on the excavator's dating in Byzantine Palestina is seldom possible. Only in those cases where sealed finds are reported and the site is dated using them, or where scientific methods such as radiocarbon dating are employed, is it possible to rely upon the excavators' conclusions. However, in many cases excavators say only that they base their dating on 'stratigraphical analysis' without giving more details, even in what are apparently intended to be 'final reports' of excavations. It is difficult to treat these sites without suspicion if nothing more is known about this alleged analysis and it cannot be examined and commented on by other scholars.

The dating for the disuse of sites, which is necessary for an assessment of the impact of the invasions, is even worse than the evidence for construction dates. Reliable dating for the end of religious structures is truly scarce and for churches there is none at all. For synagogues, we have a few cases with *Terminus Post Quem* (TPQ thereafter) dating. One synagogue has a TPQ of the fifth-century, three have sixth-century TPQ dates, one has a seventh-century TPQ and one has an eighth-century TPQ. Yet one more is dated to the end of the Byzantine period and another one could be dated to the twelfth-century, although this dating is not wholly convincing. The picture emerging from these data is not entirely clear, but if they are taken at face value it seems that from the fifth-century onward synagogues began to be abandoned in Byzantine Palestina. In this respect, it is interesting to note that the fifth-century also sees the peak in the construction of synagogues.

⁴ Ribak E 2007 *Religious Communities in Byzantine Palestina – The Relationship between Judaism, Christianity and Islam, AD 400-700* (BAR International Series 1646) 115-234

⁵ Di Segni L and Tepper Y 2004 "A Greek Inscription Dated By The Era Of Hegira In An Umayyad Church At Tamra In Eastern Galilee", *LA* 54 343-350

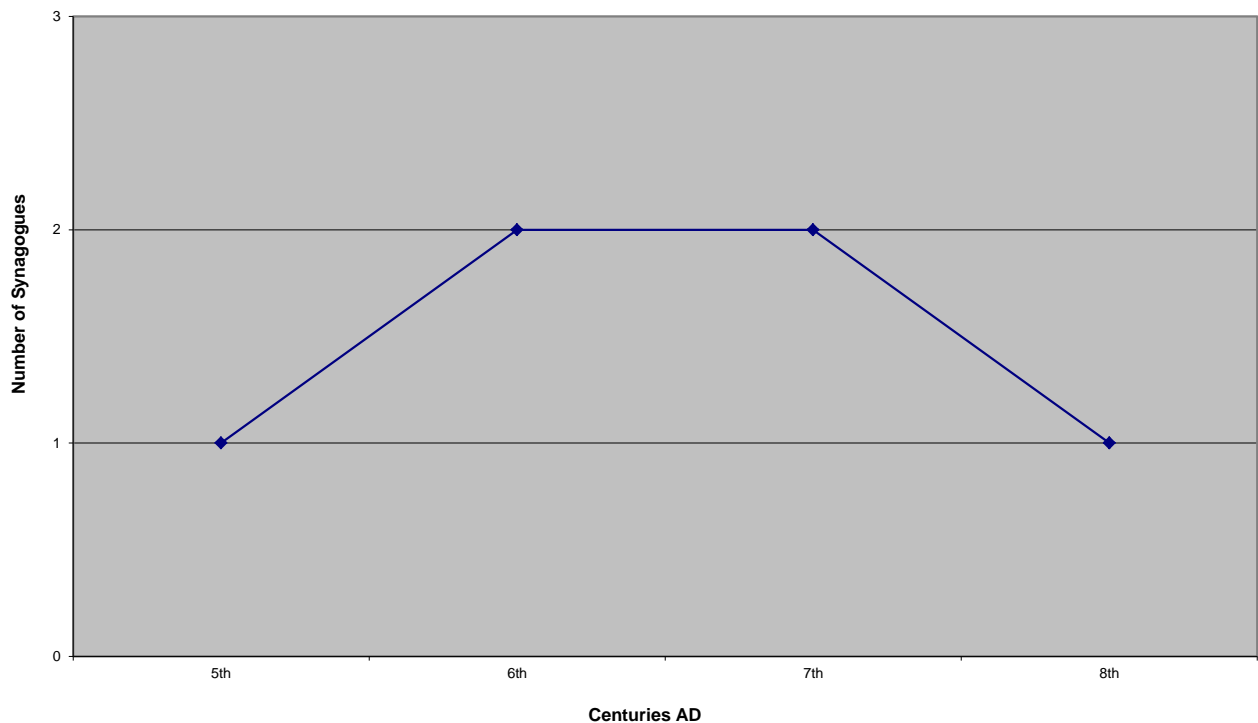


Chart Three: TPQs for the End of Synagogues

The final phase of secular structures complements the picture derived from religious structures. Again, dating is mostly in form of *TPQs*, although other reliable evidence such as the existence of Arabic inscriptions is also taken into account. I have divided the secular structures into military and civilian structures and the spread of end dates is, not surprisingly, different in these two categories. Military sites appear to have *TPQs* in the seventh-century in two cases and the eighth-century in one case. This suggests that some military communities remained in place after the Arab conquest, presumably as civilian villages.

In the case of civilian sites, two have a sixth-century *TPQ*, two in the seventh-century, one in the eighth-century and one in the ninth-century. Another one is said by the excavator to have been abandoned at the end of the Byzantine period. When the figures for military and civilian sites are combined, the seventh-century emerges as the

peak time (in terms of *TPQs*) for the end of the sites. This is unsurprising in view of the political history of Palestina. These patterns may support the validity of those noted above, despite the scanty database of well-dated sites and our reliance on *TPQ* dating. However, it is, of course, important to bear in mind that the number of sites used in all these graphs is necessarily small and *TPQ* dates need not coincide closely with either dates of foundation or disuse.

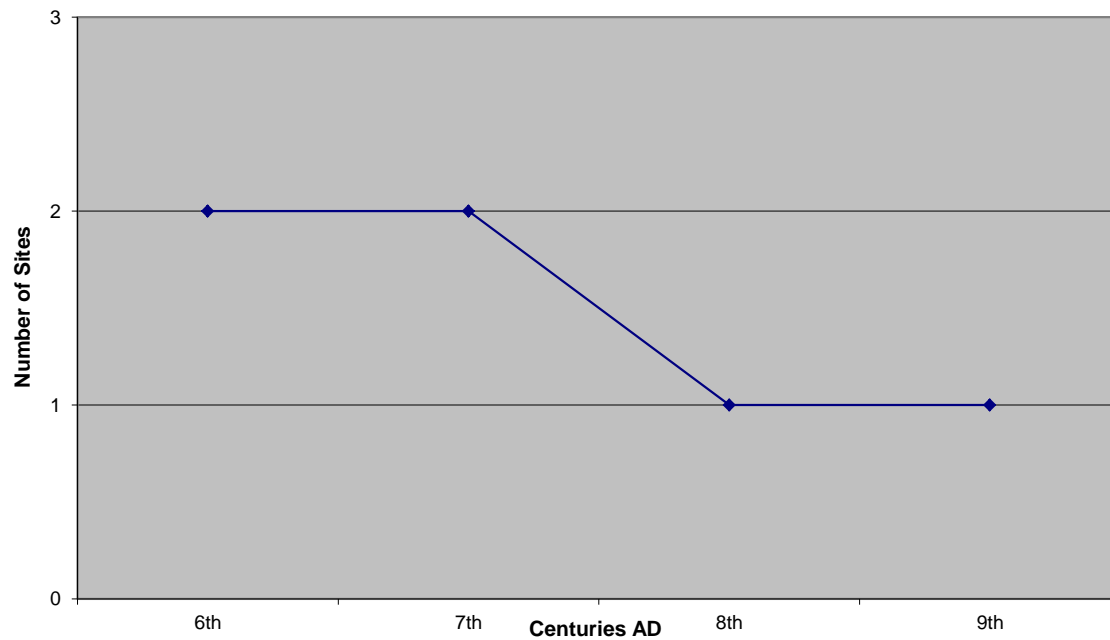


Chart Four: *TPQ* for the End of Civilian Sites

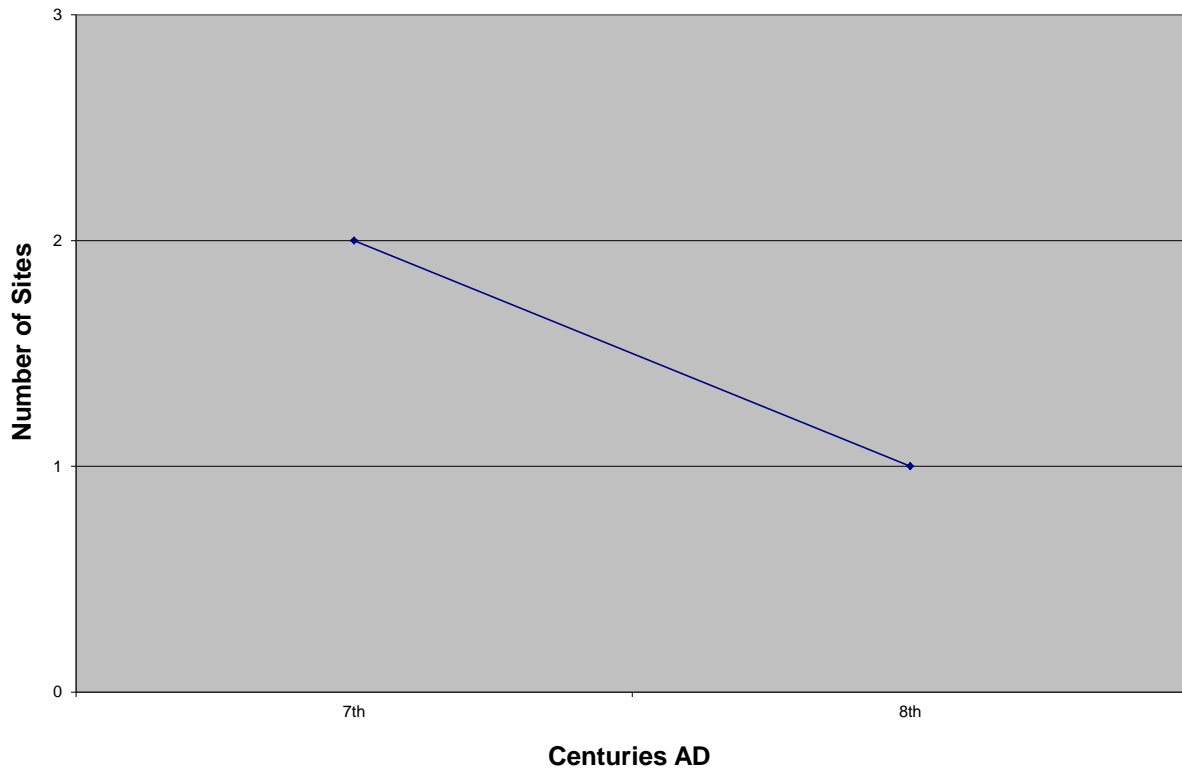


Chart Five: *TPQ* for the End of Military Sites

If this represents seventh-century reality, it appears that not only religious structures suffered in the Arab invasion but secular structures as well. The abandonment of military sites after the seventh and eighth centuries is of course easily explainable, as the Muslims may have destroyed any military threat to their occupation and dominance. Yet the data are not so easily explained, as the defence in the last century of Palestina's Byzantine frontiers, according to historical sources, was no longer through the *limes* but rather through a confederation of Bedouin tribesmen loyal to the empire and organized by the Ghassanides.⁶ It may be necessary to treat these (former?) military sites as ordinary secular sites, or perhaps they were destroyed and abandoned as a symbolic act or warning.

⁶ Kennedy H. 1989 'Change and continuity in Syria and Palestine at the time of the Moslem conquest' *ARAM* 1-2, 258-267

What is even more interesting is the abandonment of secular civilian sites beginning in the sixth-century, continuing in the seventh-century and falling off only well into the Muslim period in the eighth- and ninth-century. Sixth-century abandonment is not easy to explain, but could be related to the Persian invasion⁷, worsening economic conditions or the Justinianic plague in the mid-sixth-century⁸.

Secular sites were probably being abandoned just before, during and after the Muslim invasion. There may be several reasons for this. Fear and the resulting immigration of Byzantine citizens cannot be discounted, although deliberate destruction of civilian property is also likely. As this process had already begun in the sixth-century, then this could suggest that the population of Palestina was already diminishing before the arrival of the Persians or Arabs.

Combining the figures from both religious and secular sites we find a similar picture: a steady growth in the number of sites deserted through the fifth to seventh centuries with declining numbers in the eighth and ninth centuries. Of course, all of these dates are *TPQs* and so do not provide absolute dating for desertion.

⁷ See: Schick R. 1995 *The Christian Communities of Palestine from Byzantine to Islamic Rule* Princeton, 20-47

⁸ See: Stathakopoulos D.C. 2004 *Famine and Pestilence in the Late Roman and Early Byzantine Empire* Aldershot, 110-154

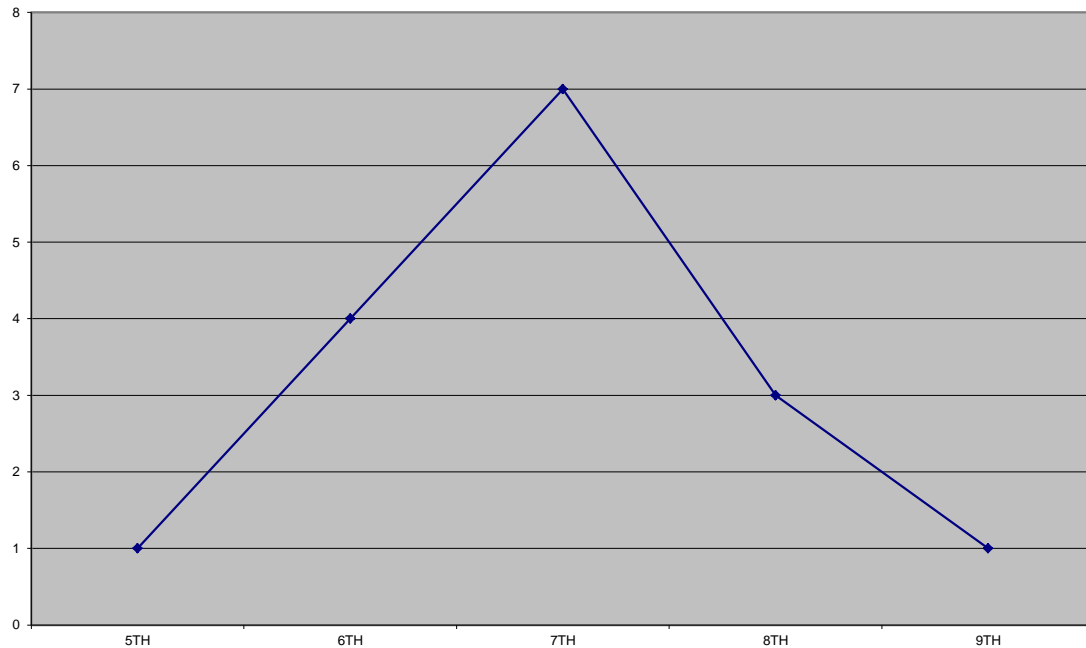


Chart Six: *TPQ* for the End Dates for All Sites

Chart six appears to show more clearly what happened to these sites at the end of the Byzantine period. The steady increase in abandoned sites in the sixth-century, reaching a peak in the seventh-century and falling off again in the eighth and ninth centuries, bears witness to the effect, for whatever reason, of the Persian and Muslim invasions on the settlements in Byzantine Palestina. The number peaks in the seventh-century, the time of the Persian and Muslim invasions, after beginning to rise in the sixth-century, when the Empire was suffering from a range of demographic, military and economic problems. It may also be relevant that the numbers of abandoned settlements fall off rapidly after the period of the Persian and Muslim invasions. Stability appears only to have been reached by the ninth-century under new Muslim rulers.

Claudine Dauphin, in her seminal work on the Byzantine population of Palestina, reaches much the same conclusions as regards population decline in Byzantine Palestina after the Arab conquest. She uses architectural evidence to note that some churches become self-contained monasteries, that Byzantine secular structures were used until they collapsed and that large urban centres, such as Beth Shean,

deteriorated and were abandoned. In her opinion also, Christians became, once again, a minority in the area after the Arab conquest. If so, this suggests a radical decline in the population during and after the sixth-century. This could best be explained by disease, emigration, or large-scale casualties as a result of warfare. Textual and epigraphic sources suggest that conversion to Islam was not a significant feature of social change among Jews or Christians in either Palestina and Syria in the seventh-century.⁹

In order to place the preceding tables and figures in context, it may be useful to refer to the tables and figures compiled by Klaus Randsborg. Interestingly, he cites surveys from Israel and Jordan that indicate AD 500 as the peak of construction for both settlements and churches and states that in areas other than northern Jordan and the Negev, the Muslim conquest marks a major decline in settlement – even occasionally its complete collapse.¹⁰ This, of course, compares very closely with the results produced from the analysis here.

Surveys from Syria show a very similar picture, with the number and extent of settlements peaking in the sixth-century, accompanied by massive construction efforts. Yet the seventh-century, just as in Palestina, marks the collapse of the majority of settlements, with extensive zones becoming thinly populated. Surveys from Mesopotamia paint a similar picture, with the peak of settlement numbers reached around AD 500 and the Islamic conquest causing a decline.¹¹

⁹ Dauphin C. 1998 *La Palestine Byzantine, Peuplement et Populations* 2 (BAR International Series 726); Foss C. 1997 'Syria in transition A.D.550-750: An archaeological approach', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 51, 189-269; Tate G. 1992 *Les campagnes de la Syrie du Nord 1* (IFAPO 133); Kaegi W.E. 1992 *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests* Cambridge; Kennedy H. 1985 'From Polis to Madina: urban change in late antique and early Islamic Syria' *Past and Present* 106, 3-27; Kennedy H. 1986 'The Last Century of Byzantine Syria: a reinterpretation' *Byzantinische Forschungen* 10, 141-183; Trombley F. 1997 'War and Society in rural Syria c. 502-613 AD: Observations on the epigraphy' *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 21, 154-209

¹⁰ Randsborg K. 1991 *The First Millennium AD in Europe and the Mediterranean* Cambridge

¹¹ Ibid

More detailed information from the cities and countryside of Syria and Jordan expand Randsburg's picture of decline after the fifth-century. Clive Foss discusses the decline of Antioch, Apamea, Epiphania/Hama and Bostra in Syria. He notes that the deterioration of Antioch as an urban centre took place only after the sixth-century and economic stagnation in the countryside only after the Arab conquest. Apamea presents a similar picture, with reoccupation after the Arab conquest on a smaller and poorer scale. The inscriptions in Epiphania/Hama hint at stagnation after the sixth-century and by the eighth-century a mosque was built to symbolise the transformation from a Christian to Muslim city. Bostra and its countryside show less of a decline and this may indicate co-existence after the Arab conquest, but in general a decline in the economy and the number and size of settlements, concludes Foss, came to Syria as a whole after the sixth-century.¹²

Less work has been done in Jordan, but current evidence shows a similar pattern. In the city of Umm el-Jimal in North Jordan, Byzantine urban development came to a climax in the sixth-century. The Umayyad city shows continued occupation, yet its inhabitants appear to be reusing existing structures rather than expanding and rebuilding the city.¹³ In the sanctuary of Mount Nebo-Siyagha, we see, again, the height of development from the middle of the sixth-century to the first part of the seventh. At this time, the sanctuary underwent complete reconstruction. A new three aisled basilica was built with an atrium and two additional chapels.¹⁴

Randsborg's figures serve, therefore, to support the pattern seen in Palestina, with Syria especially showing a sequence of growth and decline in church and settlement

¹² Foss C. 1997 'Syria in Transition, A.D. 550-750: An Archaeological Approach' *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 51, 189-269

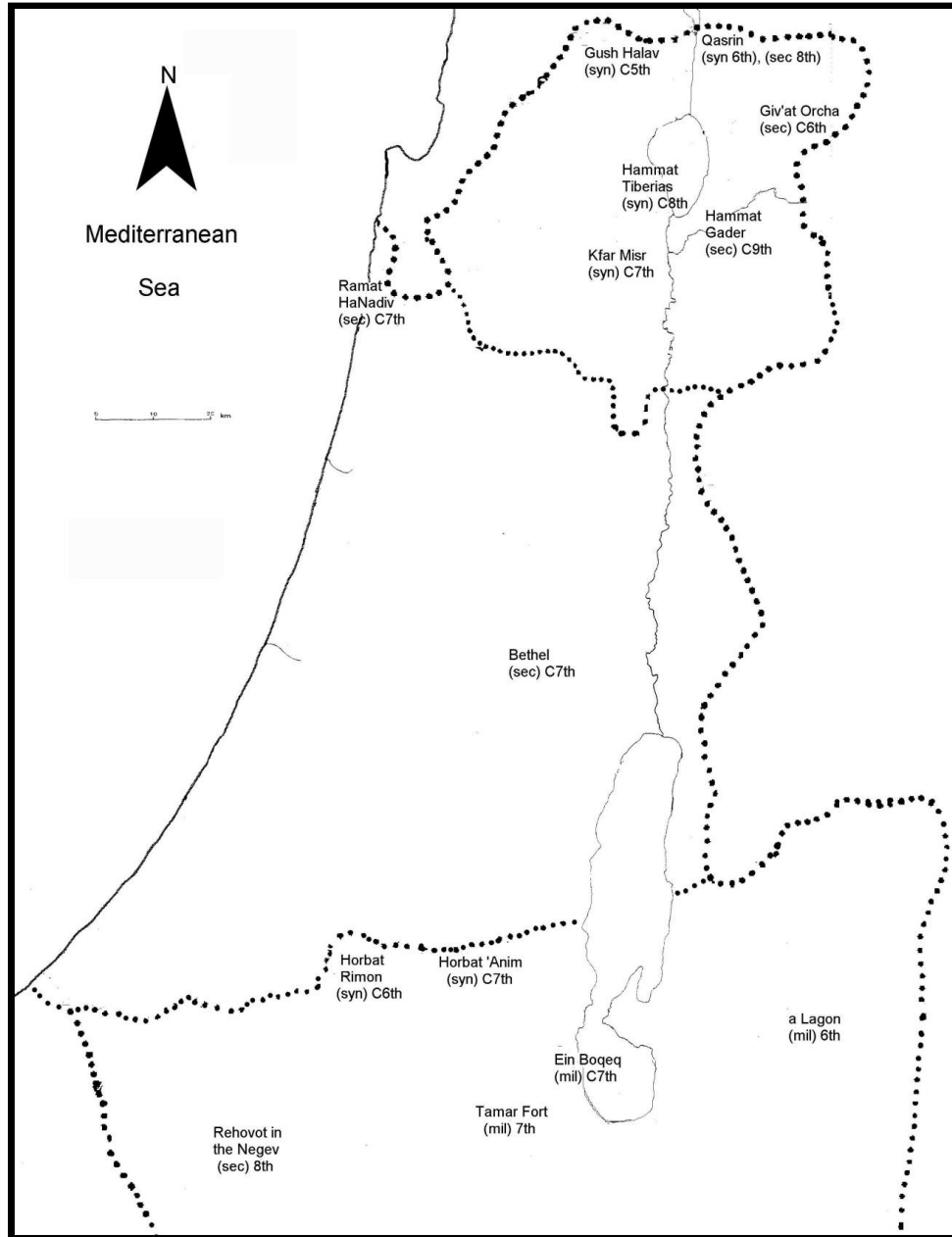
¹³ de Varies B. 1985 'Urbanization in the Basalt Region of North Jordan in Late Antiquity: the case of Umm el-Jimal' *SHAJ* 2, 249-261

¹⁴ Piccirillo M. 1982 'Forty years of archaeological work at Nebo-Siyagha in Late Roman Byzantine Jordan' *SHAJ* 1, 291-300

numbers akin to those found in modern Israel. Comparable data from Lebanon are unavailable, so on present evidence this could be claimed to be a regional pattern.

Map One shows the distribution of sites with *TPQ* end dates. One might expect that the resulting pattern would show the impact of the Persian and/or Arab invasions on Palestina. However, no such pattern is visible. If this is a reflection of seventh-century reality and not just of the biases of our data, this may indicate that the Muslim invasion did not in fact cause immediate destruction and damage. Such an interpretation would support the view that settlement-, church- and synagogue-abandonment were the result of longer lasting phenomena from the sixth-century through to the ninth-century.

Map One: Distribution of Sites with *TPQ* End Dates



syn – synagogues, sec – secular site, mil – military site, All given dates are *TPQ*.

Another perspective on the impact of the Persian and Arab occupation of Palestina may be found by considering the specific reasons that particular sites were disused.

Table one: Reasons given by excavators for site abandonment/continuation on reliably dated sites

Status at End of Byzantine Period	Secular Sites	Churches/Monasteries	Synagogues
Continued Occupation	1	2	-
Abandonment	-	1 (?)	1
Destruction	1	1 + 1 (?)	-
Fire	-	1	1
Earthquake	1	1	1
New Muslim Construction	-	1	1

Only one secular site and two churches show signs of continued occupation into the Muslim period. Further signs of occupation are seen with new Muslim construction, yet since one was a new mosque and the other a new house, these appear to have catered to the new Muslim population, rather than the pre-existing Jewish and Christian communities. This may indicate the replacement of Jewish and Christian communities by Muslims, which is attested by Magness.¹⁵ It is interesting that the archaeological evidence is not confirmed by textual sources, which claim that Muslim warriors avoided settlements in Palestine because of the plagues, lack of space and the protective policy of the Muslim rulers towards the population.¹⁶

There are several possible reasons for the destruction of these sites. These include accidental fires, natural events (such as earthquakes), destruction by communities abandoning them and religious intolerance leading to destruction or demolition. Donald Whitcomb suggests that natural disasters explain the apparent destruction at the time of the invasions. However, assigning such destruction to these causes has been shown to be fraught with problems.¹⁷ Whitcomb also argues that many churches and

¹⁵ Magness J. 2003 *The Archaeology of the Early Islamic Settlement in Palestine* Winona Lake, 216

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סון י' תשמ"ד 'התפרסות שבטי הערבים בארץ-ישראל במאה הראשונה להג'רה' קתדרה 32, 60-65

¹⁷ Whitcomb D. 1995 'Islam and the socio-cultural transition of Palestine - early Islamic period (638-1099 CE)' in

Levy T.E. *The Archaeology of Society in the Holy Land*, 488-501

synagogues show continued use into the Muslim period¹⁸ but, as shown here, this was largely not the case. Our evidence for natural destruction isn't very strong. Table one shows it can only account for five sites out of 15 reliably dated sites. Conversely, there is evidence to support a growing atmosphere of tension after the Arab conquest. Several Byzantine churches became fortified monasteries in the Muslim period. For example, the Shepherds' Field church became the focus of a monastery, enclosed by a wall with four watchtowers. An atmosphere of tension might imply that deliberate destruction, either by departing communities or by aggressors, may be possible.

The Arab conquest soon became the subject of propaganda from all sides in the political and religious controversies of the seventh and later centuries. Some texts paint a picture of violence and bloodshed. For example, Theophanes mentions the flight of monks from Palestina and Syria to Cyprus in AD 812-3, apparently fleeing from Arabs and informs the reader that those people who did not flee were martyred.¹⁹ Another text tells of Byzantine refugees fleeing to Cyprus in the seventh-century.²⁰ Other sources indicate conversions by Muslims, or of the complicity of Jews and non-Orthodox Christians (such as Monophysites) against Orthodox Christian populations.²¹

The destruction and abandonment of churches is represented in the archaeological record, as we have seen, but it is possible that forced conversions described by the Byzantine texts are – at most – exaggerations. Few churches or synagogues were changed into mosques. While some sources lament the moral laxity of the Christians easily converted to Islam and ascribe the Muslim victories to the weakness of the Christians²², this is likely to be rhetorical. Such individual cases may be cited because

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Mango C. and Scott R. (ed. and trans.) 1997 *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor. Byzantine and Near Eastern History, AD 284-813* Oxford

²⁰ Kaegi W. 2003 *Heraclius. Emperor of Byzantium* Cambridge, 278

²¹ Constantelos D.J. 1975 'The Moslem conquests of the Near East as revealed in the Greek Sources of the Seventh to Eighth centuries' *Byzantion* 42.2, 325-357

²² Constantelos D.J. 1975 'The Moslem conquests of the Near East as revealed in the Greek Sources of the Seventh to Eighth centuries' *Byzantion* 42 pasc. 2, 325-357

this may not have been the general rule. Similar accusations were repeatedly presented some centuries before, when Christian clerics wanted to berate their flock for their moral laxity when the Western Empire collapsed.²³

Similarly, although according to some texts,²⁴ Jews welcomed the Persian or Muslim invaders and opened the gates of towns for them, at least some of these accusations are likely to be yet another example of rhetoric aimed at presenting the invasions in the most melodramatic way.²⁵ In this case, the strong evidence for peaceful co-existence shown by the archaeological record (footnote) tends to negate the possibility that many Jews assisted the invaders against their Christian neighbours because of inter-religious hatred.

The exodus of Christians and Jews from Palestina as a result of the conquest is another subject of controversy. Although some historians have argued that only a small number of high-status Byzantines fled the provinces, Anthea Harris has suggested that refugees from the conquest may have been found in the West, specifically in the towns of Narbonne and Orleans, let alone the surviving Eastern provinces and Constantinople. However, these sources refer to Jews rather than immigrants from Palestina and their numbers remain unknown.²⁶ It is striking that Byzantine Christians and Jews seem more apparent in the West from the mid-sixth-century onward, as we see, for example, in the work of Gregory of Tours, who refers to Jewish populations in Frankia. Of course, this could simply reflect the quality of textual sources for the sixth-century in Frankia, as opposed to the fifth-century.

Information on the Muslim poll tax from both Jewish and Samaritan sources indicates the harsh living conditions after the Arab invasion and economic difficulties for everyone

²³ Olster D.M. 1994 *Roman Defeat, Christian Response and the Literary Construction of the Jew* Philadelphia, 107

²⁴ Holum K.G. 1991 'Palestine' Kahzdan A.P. (ed.) *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* Oxford and New York, 1563-1564

²⁵ Herrin J. 1987 *The Formation of Christendom* Oxford, 212

²⁶ Harris A. 2003 *Byzantium, Britain and the West: The Archaeology of Cultural Identity AD 400-650* Stroud, 61

who was not Muslim. This was true for Jews and Samaritans, let alone Christians, who might be more directly associated with the 'enemy' Byzantine state. Milka Levy-Rubin argues that the poll tax was the reason for the conversion of many Samaritans to Islam, although this could also reflect their longstanding enmity toward both Jews and (especially) Christians.²⁷

Neither wholesale violence nor mass conversion to Islam is indicated by archaeological evidence. Although a few churches and synagogues may have become mosques, this was definitely not usual. Instead, typically synagogues and churches were either abandoned or destroyed and very little construction took place even in secular settlements. Where such construction took place and is datable to the seventh- or eighth-century, the quality of work and materials was lower.²⁸ This appears to suggest that the Muslim invasion brought difficulties to the Jewish, Christian and Samaritan communities of Palestina. Nevertheless, we have three examples of continuous occupation, two of which of churches indicating continuous worship in the Muslim period. The picture we get from the evidence, therefore, is very mixed. It is evident that different communities in diverse locations were differently affected by the Persian and Muslim invasions.

Despite the many problems with the chronology of Byzantine sites in Palestina, it has been possible to assemble a very small number of sites for which the dating evidence is relatively good. These data, few and limited as they are, permit the following conclusions: the Persian and/or Muslim invasions of Byzantine Palestina in the seventh-century appear to have led to the abandonment and destruction of churches and synagogues as well as secular settlements, although the latter appear to have been

²⁷ See for example Levy-Rubin M. 2000 'New evidence relating to the process of Islamization in Palestine in the early Muslim period - the case of Samaria' *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 43, 257 and Goistein S.D. 1963 'Evidence on the Muslim Poll Tax from Non-Muslim Sources' *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 6, 278-295

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דן י' תש"ן 'החיים הכלכליים בארץ ישראל בתקופה הביזנטית (המאות החמישית-השביעית)' בקדר ב"ז דותן ט' ספראי ש' (עורכים) פרקים

בתולדות המסחר בארץ ישראל ירושלים 181-194

less affected. This probably did not happen in its entirety during or immediately after the invasions. There is some evidence for a gradual process of abandonment of religious and even secular sites. There is also evidence for the replacement of Jewish and Christian communities by Muslim populations, but the exact circumstances leading up to this are unclear.

Support for these conclusions, despite their reliance on the small number of sites, can be found in Jodi Magness's book on the early Islamic settlement in Palestine. Magness uses both excavations and survey data and yet reaches broadly the same conclusions:

Palestine and Syria experienced a tremendous growth in population and prosperity between the mid-sixth and mid-seventh centuries... During the eighth and ninth centuries some of the towns, villages and farms in southern Palestine... were abandoned. Occupation at others continued, sometimes on a reduced scale and some new settlements were established.... Although occupation continued at some sites with evidence for Christian presence during the Byzantine period, there is no evidence for continued Christian presence at these or other sites in southern Palestine after the end of the seventh century... Many if not most of the towns, villages and farms discussed in this volume appear to have been abandoned some time between the late eighth to ninth century... This suggests that the settled areas shrank and the frontier contracted...²⁹

It appears, therefore, that the small number of sites that were deemed reliable have allowed the formation of conclusions that are supported by data from other sources. I agree with Magness in her hope that future surveys, excavations and the refinement of ceramic typologies will shed more light on this complex period.

²⁹ Magness J. 2003 *The Archaeology of the Early Islamic Settlement in Palestine* Winona Lake, 215-216