

Palestine: Ancient History and Modern Politics*

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In the southeastern corner of the Mediterranean there was a province of the ancient Roman Empire that was known simply as Arabia. The Romans had taken over the territory from a race of gifted Arab traders whose kingdom provided the boundaries for the province. For at least three hundred years under these Arabs and for another two hundred or so under the Romans, this part of the Middle East constituted an administrative and cultural unity. In today's perspective it is almost inconceivable that Roman Arabia could have survived the uprisings, civil wars, and invasions of the Hellenistic and Roman periods. But it did.

The region had an odd shape, at least to modern eyes, although natural contours and lines of communication provided coherence. In terms of modern geography this Arabia encompassed the whole of the Sinai peninsula, the Negev desert, all of the modern kingdom of Jordan, the southern part of the present republic of Syria, and the so-called Hejaz in the northwest part of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. To look at the territory in another way, it stretched from Suez across the southern part of the Holy Land and included everything on the eastern bank of the Jordan that lay opposite the present state of Israel. Access to the eastern side of the Jordan

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valley could be gained either by sea at Aqaba or by land through the Saudi Arabian Hejaz. Commerce with Damascus had connections therefore with both the sea and the inland trade routes of the Arabian peninsula. This north-south link was simultaneously and peacefully connected with an east-west link across the Araba depression south of the Dead Sea to the Mediterranean at Gaza or farther southwest across the northern part of the Sinai peninsula. For more than five hundred years a geopolitical entity of major importance in the Middle East of classical times was thus spread across land that is now divided up among no less than five nations. These are Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Syria.

Some fifteen years ago it occurred to me that there was need for a systematic historical study of this area in Roman antiquity, and from then until now, in such time as I could find, I devoted myself to writing that history. Since the work, *Roman Arabia*, has at last appeared, this may be an appropriate moment to reflect on the interrelationship of past and present in the Middle East. Any historian knows that the past can be exploited politically in contemporary conflicts, but nowhere is this so obvious as in the Middle East.

In visiting the region, I found myself inevitably passing back and forth from one country to another, often with considerable inconvenience. Much of Roman Arabia became part of the larger area known in the Byzantine age as Palestine. The use of the term Palestine, which means literally the land of the Philistines, can serve as a salutary reminder of the ancient unity of the two sides of the Jordan valley. That grand old man of Greek history, Herodotus, had already used the expression Syria Palestine for the whole coastal region from Lebanon to Egypt, and it was taken over by the Roman emperors as a new name for Judea in the second century. Two centuries later, Palestine became an even more comprehensive designation. The Byzantine rulers had three Palestines, of which the Second was the northernmost, occupying the territory south of Lebanon around Haifa. The region around Jerusalem was named First Palestine, while Third Palestine incorporated a large piece of old Arabia—the Sinai, Negev, and the eastern bank of contemporary Jordan south of Amman. The term Palestine accordingly evokes an ancient geographical and administrative coherence, and for later antiquity it represents an even more unified pattern than the province of Arabia. In other words, to the old Arab kingdom on both sides of the Jordan was ultimately added the whole of Judea to make up the ancient concept of Palestine, divided into three numbered segments.

It was not an accident that historians had so long neglected the history of this region in Roman times. Many distinguished explorers and travelers had collected an immense quantity of material, often at great personal risk. But a coherent history of the region somehow seemed not to be anywhere available. By the end of the first decade of this century the results of exploration in Syria and Trans-Jordan were already so abundant that an enterprising historian could easily have written a substantial work at that time. Expeditions from France, Germany and America had been so frequent and thorough that in many cases there was extensive duplication in the reports. But for seventy years the material remained in a raw and undigested state, and naturally in the interim there were further revelations.

The long delay in taking seriously the history of the Middle East under the Roman and early Byzantine emperors can be explained in several ways. Through the efforts of Western travelers and archaeologists, Biblical archaeology acquired a stranglehold on the study of the ancient Middle East. Until recently the majority of Western specialists in the excavation of the region thought that history ended with Alexander the Great and that even he was a deplorably late and decadent figure. On the Eastern side the indigenous populations showed little inclination to pursue the study of foreign domination in their own homeland. Furthermore, among Arabs the time before the prophet Mohammed had been traditionally considered an age of ignorance, and even now it is designated by the Arabic word *jahiliyya*, which means precisely that. To be sure, the prehistoric epochs of the *jahiliyya* proved somewhat more palatable because they included the achievements of an indigenous ancestral population.

But perhaps more important than anything else in subtly deflecting historical research was a reluctance to confront the fact of an Arabian state and subsequently an even more extensive Palestinian state in the Middle East. These states were part of the international community of Rome and Byzantium but without the sacrifice of their cultural and economic independence. Since the establishment of modern Israel, research in this area has become trickier still. A decade ago an Israeli scholar reminded me of the basic truth that archaeology is politics in that country, and therefore I suppose it is scarcely surprising to find that in all of Israel there is only one archaeologist who is concerned with pre-Islamic Arab culture, and he is someone who has been made to feel very much alone.

And so the difficulties of comprehending the underlying unity of the ancient province, whether in the form of Arabia or of greater Palestine, were made almost insurmountable by the conditions of today. In antiquity

traders passed regularly from the great city of Petra across the Araba depression through the Negev and on to Gaza or points farther west. Only the reckless would attempt that journey in either direction now. I have made the journey from the old Roman city of Philadelphia, which is the modern Jordanian capital of Amman, across the new Allenby Bridge to Jerusalem, but only with my papers in good order. There is no more instructive experience for a student of the Middle East, in any period of its history, than this journey from the Jordanian plateau down into the tropical vegetation of the valley and ultimately into the dry seascape at which one makes the passage over to Jericho. On the whole everyone puts a good face on the problems of travel in the area, but for an ancient historian each barrier is a constant reminder that there was nothing comparable in former times.

The politics of archaeology are everywhere. The late Yigael Yadin was both an eminent archaeologist and a political figure. The intermingling of his two careers is nicely exemplified by the care with which he brought to public attention his discovery of authentic letters of the Jewish rebel Bar Kokhba. These letters survive from the time of the Jewish revolt against Roman rule in the reign of Hadrian. To a dispassionate eye they scarcely show the famous figure as an inspiring leader (I once called him a pious thug), but nonetheless Yadin was pleased to introduce him to the Israeli public as nothing less than the first president of Israel. This was a disingenuous rendering of the title *nasi*, or prince, which the rebel took for himself.

Meanwhile, although the Bar Kokhba letters had been given prompt and broad publicity, another important discovery made by Yadin and his fellow archaeologists has remained unpublished for nearly twenty-five years. At the beginning of the 1960s in a cave in the Judean desert, Yadin recovered a set of thirty-five personal documents concerning a Jewish woman by the name of Babatha who had fled into the wilderness for security during the disturbances launched by Bar Kokhba. As we can tell from the few tantalizing excerpts and summaries that have been published, these documents concern the legal affairs of this woman over a period of some forty years. She and her family not only observed the transition from Arab kingdom to Roman province in the territory known as Arabia: she and her family actually lived there at one time. It is clear that the relation between Jews and Arabs in the territory south of the Dead Sea was a harmonious one. It is amply apparent that in the archive of Babatha we have precious documentation for a social coherence in Palestine that mirrored the

administrative and geographical unity. It scarcely matters whether it is by accident or design that neither Yadin nor any other Israeli scholar has seen fit to publish this extraordinary material. In a society in which archaeological discoveries are often extensively reported, the fact that it remains unpublished to this day is eloquent enough.

If archaeology is politics, so inevitably is history. Once again the treatment of Bar Kokhba's revolt is indicative. Apologists have often written that the terrible punishment visited by Hadrian upon the Jews at the end of the revolt was the erection of a pagan temple upon the very site of the Jewish temple that had been destroyed in the days of Vespasian. And yet eyewitness observers in antiquity tell us plainly that no such temple stood on that site in late antiquity. All that was there was a statue of the emperor, whereas the pagan temple in question was located at a considerable distance. Since the truth is not politically helpful, it has been quietly suppressed.

Another good example of the politics of history can be seen in the modern treatment of traditional accounts of the Phoenicians. From the time of Herodotus until the Roman emperors it was believed in both the Phoenician cities of the Mediterranean coast and the cities of the Arabian Gulf that the original Phoenicians had actually come from the Gulf. This tradition has seemed so surprising to Western historians that they have preferred either to forget it or to reverse it and send the Phoenicians as colonists to the Gulf. Yet the Phoenicians themselves accepted the tradition. In this persistent refusal to take seriously the ancient story of Phoenician origins, we are confronted once again with a manipulation of the past.

One constantly stumbles over the obstacles thrown up by the deliberate fragmentation of a fundamentally unified region. If Palestine, together with Syria to the north, constituted between them a cohesive and relatively stable area in Roman and Byzantine times, this was not, as some would undoubtedly suspect, because the Romans imposed the structure. They inherited it from the indigenous populations. In taking over Syria well before the Romans annexed Arabia, the Seleucid monarchs did relatively little to alter the cultural and administrative patterns they inherited. And when both Syria and Palestine were firmly within the sphere of Roman and Byzantine influence, the concept of a combined Syria-Palestine as an overall geographical and cultural unity became a reasonable one. In fact, the only real threat to this conjunction came from the dynasty of Zenobia at Palmyra. It was clearly her design to replace the influence of Rome with

that of Palmyra, but not to question or disrupt the essential unity of the region.

The fragmentation of recent times has precipitated endless tragedy. Diplomats and negotiators keep hoping that problems can be resolved by carving up pieces to satisfy the various interested parties. But at least to a historian of the Middle East in the Roman period, such a procedure seems, to borrow Alcibiades' expression for Greek democracy, acknowledged folly. In historical perspective the convulsions of the region in the last decade represent a frantic and bloody effort to recapture some of the lost coherence, to restore the natural balance. The Syrian presence in Lebanon, the Israeli invasion of the same nation, not to mention the Israeli seizures of land from Jordan and Syria, all point to a primordial effort to eliminate, from one side or the other, the unstable and unwise fragmentation of the area. But unfortunately the decision made more than thirty years ago to introduce an entirely new population into a part of the coastal territory of Palestine has wiped out the possibility of ever restoring a coherence or natural balance. Whatever balance is to be achieved in the immediate future will necessarily be unnatural.

Under these circumstances it is reassuring to find that in many countries of the Middle East there is an increasing interest in the long-forgotten history of the Roman and Byzantine ages. Those were times in which the indigenous cultures found ways to flourish in the shadow of large international powers. The old Western emphasis on Biblical archaeology and Biblical history has been far less edifying for the natives of the region. The persistent use of the term Holy Land marked the predisposition of Westerners involved in the Middle East for more than a century. In other words, the turning away from Biblical history to that of Rome and Byzantium represents not merely a shift in scholarly interests but an important accommodation of historical research to the demands of the present.

The new directions of pre-Islamic studies in several Arab nations can be seen in their projects and publications. The Department of Antiquities in Saudi Arabia has already undertaken a vigorous program of excavation and research, and plans are under way for a major expansion of museum facilities throughout the kingdom. A conference on the pre-Islamic history of Saudi Arabia took place in Riyadh seven years ago, and publication of the papers is imminent. A spectacular excavation by the professor of archaeology in the University of Riyadh has opened up a major site of Hellenistic-Roman

times in the center of the Arabian peninsula. This is at a place known as Qaryat al-Faw.

The Department of Antiquities in the Kingdom of Jordan has also provided enlightened support for research and excavation in pre-Islamic fields, with particular attention to the culture of the Nabataeans, who were the Arabs that preceded the Romans in the region. The Jordanians have organized several international conferences on the history of the country, and the Department of Antiquities publishes an excellent periodical with annual reports on new discoveries. Similarly in Syria today there is strong encouragement of research in non-Biblical history. An excellent archaeological journal, together with support from the Antiquities Department, has prepared the way for a major publication on the history of Syria. This work, in many volumes, will contain contributions from scholars in the West as well as in the Middle East, and it will be disseminated in French and Arabic.

All of this means that the history of the Middle East between the end of the Biblical period and the coming of the Prophet has now become, after centuries of neglect, an important area of research. This development is clearly linked to an effort on the part of the various nations to reassess their traditional role in the area by restoring a forgotten element to the tradition. In view of more sensational events in the contemporary Middle East, it has been easy to forget that this awakening of interest in Rome and Palestine has proceeded through a close and cordial relationship between historians and archaeologists of both East and West.

The situation in Israel is different. For obvious reasons Biblical archaeology still dominates, and the quality of work in the Roman and Byzantine fields does not match the level of Biblical studies. The problem arises from the isolation in which Romano-Byzantine specialists are obliged to work. Archaeology is a big business in Israel, but very little support goes to the study of Nabataean Arabs or the cult of Roman emperors. As we have already seen, one substantial discovery that illuminates both Rome and the Arabs has been allowed to remain unpublished for a quarter of a century. Even those who have devoted their careers to the study of the Roman East have acquired strange perspectives on the situation. One Israeli archaeologist has postulated a curious defense system in the northern extremity of the Negev desert, even though most foreign archaeologists seem unable to discern the evidence for this system. More remarkable still is that scholar's notion that there should have been a linear defense inside an individual Roman province. Such a thing belongs on a frontier. It is as if one were to have a major barrier of fortresses running through central New York State.

But this scholar has seen fit to make his proposal because he assumed there would be threats to the Jewish population from the Arabs of the desert. That is to perpetuate an old fallacy by failing to recognize the unity of the Roman Middle East. Arabs and Jews at that time were not in conflict.

It is sad to find political pressures causing distortions of this kind in written history, especially when a cooler appreciation of the facts would be salutary. The earliest Israeli scholars, who were already mature when the nation was founded, did not suffer from this myopia and set a standard to which one can only hope the Israelis will return. I think particularly of Michael Avi-Yonah, whose treatment of the history of Palestine in a standard German encyclopedia remains invaluable. It is accurate, thorough and dispassionate. The other extreme is represented by an American scholar with strong ties to Israel, who published not long ago a brief article discussing the history of the region around Jerusalem. It had been inhabited at one time by Edomites. Since that scholar is aware that Edomites and Israelites were traditional enemies in the Biblical period and afterward, he automatically assumed that the Edomites must have been Arabs. Inasmuch as the Biblical tradition makes the Edomites closely related to the Israelites and traces their hostility to sibling rivalry, one can only assume that such a scholar operates on the general assumption that any enemy of Israel is an Arab. That is clearly a pernicious notion.

Tampering with history in the interests of the present is just as reprehensible as any other kind of misrepresentation. Honest mistakes can be expected anywhere and at any time, but the tendentious falsification of the past is another matter. I have the impression that just as the study of Roman Arabia and Roman Palestine has become more attractive to scholars in the Arab world, it has appeared increasingly threatening to those in Israel. There are a few scholars there who soldier on without the recognition they deserve, and once in a while, as in a recent issue of the journal *Cathedra*, there is an extensive review of problems concerning Roman Palestine. But even in that publication one cannot help noticing that the main preoccupation is with the defenses of the area and not with the cultural, social or economic life that bound it together.

The manipulation of ancient history for present purposes is an unusually bold deception. Most of the evidence is in the public domain, and the conclusions that are promulgated are therefore always subject to scrutiny and control by others. If one finds a willingness to tamper with the facts where the facts are publicly known, then it becomes difficult to have confidence in conclusions that are presented on the basis of evidence that

is kept secret. This is the problem that confronts an ancient historian who reads the reports that come out of Israel about the massacres in Lebanon or the treatment of the Arabs on the West Bank. The recent report of an international commission to inquire into violations of international law by Israel during the invasion of Lebanon has regrettably done little to allay one's fears.[†] The Israeli authorities refused to collaborate with this international commission, and, in view of its composition, their concern was certainly understandable. But silence is not an adequate response.

The past is at the same time, therefore, the present in the modern Middle East, as it is in most countries with a long historical tradition. America is most unusual in its lack of feeling for the contemporaneity of ancient history, but the reason is evident: America has no ancient history. It is easy for many observers to miss the contemporary significance of what is going on in areas that might seem exclusively scholarly. Archaeology and history are indeed politics. They are part of the fabric of the modern world. If there were any interest in Israel today in the social world of Babatha and her family among the Arabs of the second century A.D., the thirty-five documents she left behind would have been published long ago. After fifteen years of studying Babatha's world, I have become persuaded that to neglect her testimony is to suppress it.

Until recently the archive of Babatha was the single most important piece of new evidence on the relation between Jews and Arabs in post-Biblical times. A few years ago another remarkable discovery was made in the Negev desert. A stone turned up with writing in the script of the Nabataean Arabs. The text, although in a single script, appears to have been written in two distinct languages, one Nabataean and the other Arabic. The finder of this inscription is inclined to date it to the middle of the second century A.D., and it would therefore constitute by far the earliest example of the Arabic language. It is obviously significant that the inscription was lying in the Negev desert. The stone is weathered and brittle. Its significance for pre-Islamic scholarship could be enormous. In any other country with a serious interest in archaeology this object would have been removed to a protected place for safekeeping. More than that, one might have expected some publicity for so important a discovery. But there has been no publication of the inscription, and it still lies today under the desert sun.

[†]*Israel in Lebanon: The Report of the International Commission*, Ithaca Press (London), 1983.