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Yehuda D. Nevo – A Comprehensive Skeptical Theory on the Genesis of Islam¹

Abstract

At the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first century, the field of Arabic and Islamic studies became enriched by a number of multi-faceted scholarly theories challenging the traditional account on the early centuries of Islam. An author of one of them was the Israeli scholar Yehuda D. Nevo (1932–1992), working in archaeology, epigraphy and historiography. He devoted much of his career to the studying of Arabic rock inscriptions in the Negev desert, as well as to investigating literary and numismatic evidence of nascent Islam. In his theory, the gradual development of the Islamic faith, inspired by Abrahamism with an admixture of Judeo-Christianity, went through a stage of “indeterminate monotheism”. Not earlier than since the end of the second century A.H. one can speak of the formation of the dogmatic pillars of Islam, similar to those we know today. This paper is an attempt to sum up Nevo’s insightful input into the field of modern Islamic & Quranic studies today. Although controversial and unorthodox, many later researchers repeatedly referred to Nevo’s plenty of inspiring theses in their quest for facts on Islamic genesis lost in the maze of time and shifting memory of generations.

Keywords: Genesis of Islam, early Islam, archeology on Islam, Quranic studies, Syro-Palestine, Negev, Middle East in 7th century CE

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*If one has no sources of knowledge of the 7th century except texts written in the 9th century or later, one cannot know anything about the 7th century: one can only know what people in the 9th century or later believed about the 7th.*²

Yehuda D. Nevo (1932–1992), an undoubtedly original figure in Israeli archeology, is widely known to scholars of the early Islamic period. His name became enrolled in the annals of contemporary history with a theory as groundbreaking as controversial, drawing a completely unorthodox vision of the origins and developments of the Muslim religion. It was founded on many years of his archaeological research, including studies of epigraphic and numismatic monuments, as well as literary sources of Islamic historiography.

The following article strives to present and briefly comment on the main theses of Nevo's multifaceted approach to early Islamic history as he sees it, providing the reader wherever needed with the necessary historical, religious or philological background helping to understand the whereabouts and determinants of Nevo's reasoning. The Israeli researcher, being part of the skeptical current of modern Islamic and Qur'anic scholarship, deserves attention from this perspective as one of prominent intellectual contributors to modern research. Another aim of this paper is to create ground for an overall assessment of Nevo's original input into the development of this scholarly field, and whether it can further contribute to studies nowadays.

Yehuda Nevo devoted much of his career to analyzing archaeological sites, Arab coins and rock inscriptions discovered in the Negev Desert in Israel³. It is this desert region that occupies the central axis of his unconventional historical theory⁴. The results of his work in a scope far outreaching the geographical boundaries of the Negev itself are presented in his rather few publications, primarily in the book *Crossroads to Islam. The Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State*⁵ which remains practically the only comprehensive source of his vast and spectacular scientific theory. For academics of the skeptical Islamic scholarship this publication is a value in itself.

Out of a multitude of intertwining religious currents in the Late Antiquity Middle East, the Israeli archaeologist seeks to track down those which might have been of a doctrinal contribution to the rise of Islam. Nevo was convinced that it is impossible to

² Yehuda D. Nevo, Judith Koren, *Crossroads to Islam: the Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State*, Prometheus Books, Amherst New York 2003, p. 9.

³ Nevo's archeological qualifications (B.A. in archeology only, gained at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, afterwards not working for many years in this discipline till surpassing the age of 40) are sometimes questioned by critics of his work.

⁴ A comprehensive description of the Negev archaeological finds and a study devoted to them can be found in: Yehuda D. Nevo, *Pagans and Herders. A re-examination of the Negev runoff cultivation systems in the Byzantine and Early Arab periods*, Achva Press, Jerusalem 1991.

⁵ The book's co-author Judith Koren collaborated with Nevo for many years on the historical synthesis of his theory, and after Nevo's death of cancer had a big commitment in editing it and giving it a shape of a full-fledged scholarly book.

study the origins of Islam without taking into account of a broader historical and religious context of the Levant, including the geopolitical situation, starting as far as from the 4th/5th CE⁶. He made use of source criticism⁷, and was influenced by the methodology of J. Wansbrough and P. Crone⁸, who published their works on early Islam several years earlier. Maybe, as some claim, an even greater influence on Nevo can be attributed to Shlomo Pines, “whose belief in the survival and influence of heterodox Judaeo-Christian movements shapes Nevo/Koren thesis”⁹.

Yehuda Nevo came to the conviction that the gradual evolution of the Muslim faith must have been a process going on smoothly for many hundreds of years, beginning with the stage of Abrahamism and a strong influence of Judeo-Christianity, through the phase of the so-called ‘*indeterminate monotheism*’¹⁰, to Islam in a more modern sense of this word. It is not before the end of the 2nd century AH (early 9th century CE) that one may speak of the formulation of dogmatic pillars of the Islamic religion, similar to those that we know today. The Israeli archaeologist claims that “The development of Islam from a primitive Arab monotheistic creed with Judeo-Christian attributes may be traced in the Arabic monotheistic inscriptions; and especially, in some detail and apparent chronological order, in those discovered over the past decades in the central Negev”¹¹. Nevo shares the conclusions of other skeptical scholars suggesting that sources of Islamic tradition stand in conflict with results of archaeological research as well as are contradictory to non-Muslim source documents. The today’s widely accepted account of the history of Islam (derived, inter alia, from classical Islamic sources) is to be the result of a retrospective projection of history done by certain political and religious milieus in the 8th, 9th and 10th centuries CE, rather than reporting on the actual course of historical events. Nevo devoted his work to looking for hard archeological evidence that could be used for reconstructing the story of the genesis of Islam, objective facts which are preferred over subjective written sources, fruits of a late, religious tradition. This skeptical approach was well summarized by Stephen Humphreys: “If our goal is to comprehend the way in which Muslims of the late 2nd/8th and 3rd/9th centuries understood the origins of their society, then we are very well off indeed. But if our aim is to find out ‘what really happened’ – i.e., to develop reliably documented answers to modern questions about the earliest decades of Islamic societies – then we are in trouble”¹².

⁶ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, pp. 11–12.

⁷ Judith Koren, *Methodological Approaches to Islamic Studies*, “Der Islam”, vol. 68, issue 1 (1991), pp. 87–107; reprinted in: Ibn Warraq (ed.), *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad*, Prometheus, Amherst New York 2000, pp. 420–443.

⁸ John Wansbrough, *Res Ipsa Loquitur: History and Mimesis*, Seventh Einstein Memorial Lecture, Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Jerusalem 1987.

⁹ Gabriel S. Reynolds, review of: *Crossroads to Islam Crossroads to Islam: The Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State*, “Journal of the American Oriental Society” 2005, 125, 3, p. 453.

¹⁰ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, pp. 186–190, 195–196, 243–244.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

¹² Stephen R. Humphreys, *Islamic History. A Framework for Inquiry*, Princeton University Press, London–New York 1988, pp. 69–70.

Abrahamism at the root of Islam

However, we shall start with a description of the origins of Islam as in Nevo's unorthodox vision step by step. According to his theory, the prehistory of Islam lies hidden in a religious current called Abrahamism¹³. Abrahamism was – as understood by the Israeli archaeologist – a local belief spread among the Arabs of the Negev desert in the early centuries of the Christian era, and became later incorporated into Islam constituting a fundamental part of its dogmatics. However, Abrahamism is not a scientifically defined term today. By some it is identified as pre-Mosaism of the Hebrews. In Nevo's view, it is about an unspecified form of monotheism with elements of heathen cults glorifying Abraham as founder of religion and example to follow, as recalled by some Christian and Jewish sources, including Tertullian (c. 160–230), Salminius Hermias Sozomenus (400–450), Isidore of Alexandria (c. 450–520) and the apocryphal Book of Jubilees. The Israeli researcher seeks evidence for the existence of Abrahamism in texts of papyri and epigraphs from the Negev desert of the 6th century CE written in Greek, in which the proper name Abraham occurs with an unprecedented frequency (as 'Abraamos', 'Abraamios')¹⁴.

A very interesting and well-known description of Abrahamism can be found in the 5th century's *Ecclesiastical History* by Sozomenus coming from the Gaza region, who states that the Ishmaelite religion (which was notably before Islam one of the denotations for non-Christian Arabs or Arabs in general) was a form of monotheism that underwent modifications under the influence of a long neighboring with the heathens, and then back again drifted into the direction of especially Judaism, and even further towards Christianity¹⁵. Sozomenus (and two centuries later the Armenian chronicler Sebeos) account

¹³ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, pp. 10, 186–190.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 187, 189. More on this topic: Yehuda D. Nevo, Judith Koren, *The Origins of the Muslim Descriptions of the Jāhili Meccan Sanctuary*, "Journal of Near Eastern Studies" January 1990, 49, 1, pp. 41–42.

¹⁵ "This is the tribe which took its origin and had its name from Ishmael, the son of Abraham; and the ancients called them Ishmaelites after their progenitor. As their mother Hagar was a slave, they afterwards, to conceal the opprobrium of their origin, assumed the name of Saracens, as if they were descended from Sara, the wife of Abraham. Such being their origin, they practice circumcision like the Jews, refrain from the use of pork, and observe many other Jewish rites and customs. If, indeed, they deviate in any respect from the observances of that nation, it must be ascribed to the lapse of time, and to their intercourse with the neighboring nations. Moses, who lived many centuries after Abraham, only legislated for those whom he led out of Egypt. The inhabitants of the neighboring countries, being strongly addicted to superstition, probably soon corrupted the laws imposed upon them by their forefather Ishmael. The ancient Hebrews had their community life under this law only, using therefore unwritten customs, before the Mosaic legislation. These people certainly served the same gods as the neighboring nations, honoring and naming them similarly, so that by this likeness with their forefathers in religion, there is evidenced their departure from the laws of their forefathers. As is usual, in the lapse of time, their ancient customs fell into oblivion, and other practices gradually got the precedence among them. Some of their tribe afterwards happening to come in contact with the Jews, gathered from them the facts of their true origin, returned to their kinsmen, and inclined to the Hebrew customs and laws. From that time on, until now, many of them regulate their lives according to the Jewish precepts. Some of the Saracens were converted to Christianity not long before the present reign. They shared in the faith of Christ by intercourse with the priests and monks who dwelt near them, and

that Arabs learned about their Abrahamic descent (from the line of Ishmael) from Jews; as a result some of them took over practices of Judaism¹⁶. The Qurʾān ascribes a higher rank to Abraham than Ishmael, calling Abraham a *ḥanīf* (which shall mean according to Nevo a member of “a class of pre-Islamic believers in one God, who are neither Jewish nor Christian”)¹⁷. According to Nevo, by becoming aware of their ethnic origin described in the Book of Genesis, Arabs became particularly attracted by this very form of monotheism which was unequivocally emphasizing their descent in a direct line from Abraham: “Thus the Negev Arabs in particular seem to have been drawn to Abrahamism as a form of Monotheism that specifically expressed their own ethnic identity: an especially Arab creed. The new Arab religion that arose in the 7th century borrowed from Abrahamism, and built upon it in a successful attempt to embody an Arab identity and thereby claim Arab allegiance”¹⁸.

The old-Arabian cult focused around the person of Abraham was supposedly developing in the Negev with a high intensity starting from the 5th century CE, especially in the vicinity of Elusa and Nessana¹⁹, clinging there till approximately 152 AH / 770 CE. Around 50 cultic sites were unearthed in the desert. They were peacefully abandoned by the end of the 8th century CE (the largest of them dated to the 8th and century – Sede Boqer – was examined and interpreted by Nevo²⁰). This would mean that Abrahamism or one of its forms correlated with pagan beliefs, could have been coexisting in this region with Islam for some 150 years, longer than in other areas of Syro-Palestine²¹. For Nevo,

practiced philosophy in the neighboring deserts, and who were distinguished by the excellence of their life, and by their miraculous works”. Chester D. Hartranft (transl. from Greek), *The Ecclesiastical History of Sozomen, Comprising a History of the Church from A.D. 323 to A.D. 425* (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers series, 2/2), Christian Literature Publishing Company, New York 1890, pp. 614–615.

¹⁶ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, p. 195.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 189–190.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 195; Nevo, Koren, *The Origins of the Muslim Descriptions of the Jāhīlī Meccan Sanctuary*, p. 42.

²⁰ Koren, *Methodological Approaches to Islamic Studies*, pp. 102–103; Yehuda D. Nevo, Zemira Cohen, Dalia Heftman (ed.), *Ancient Arabic inscriptions from the Negev*, IPS, Negev 1993, p. 4.

²¹ Nevo suggests that such a profound cult could not have been functioning at that time in the middle of the desert with the knowledge and permission of the (Muslim) authorities. He argues that desert populations are usually not self-sufficient, but economically dependent on contacts with the ecumene. And so, had the authorities at that time been against the pagan worship, they could have easily curbed it down, even without using force, by banning commercial contacts. But apparently that did not happen. Moreover, according to what the Israeli archaeologist claims on the basis of his findings, in some sites of worship evidence was found that these centers were used within a short time span firstly by heathens and secondly by monotheists who immigrated into that region from outside the Negev. Nevo suggests that Sede Boqer could have played the role of a sanctuary (Arabic: *ḥaram*) being worshiped by both of the above mentioned parties. Nevo postulates further that during the formation of the foundations of Islam and its promulgation lasting approximately 170 years (with particular intensity during the reign of the Umayyad caliphs starting from Hišām 724–743 CE), authorities did not want to eliminate the pagan worship. It was not until several decades after the advent of the Abbasid dynasty (probably by the time of caliph Al-Mahdi 775–785 CE), that a new policy was adopted in which there was no more place for Old-Arabic cults (pagan shrines were liquidated in a hurry within a few years only from introducing Islam to the Negev desert by the Abbasids). The Abbasid Islamization of the central Negev was however encountering some opposition. Shortly

the characteristic features of these Arabic worship centers very highly correlate with the descriptions of pagan sanctuaries from the Ġāhiliyya period in the Muslim sources²². The Israeli scholar postulates quite arbitrarily that “[...] according to the evidence now available, the time and place in which these pagan cult existed was not the pre-Islamic Hijāz, but the central Negev of the 2nd/8th century”²³.

The influence of Judeo-Christianity, 'undetermined monotheism' and the birth of Islam

Besides Abrahamism, which according to Nevo's epigraphic findings was rather of a local range restricted geographically to the Negev itself²⁴, a direct dogmatic contribution to the spirituality of early Islam should be owed to Judeo-Christianity. There were dozens of Judeo-Christian communities existing at that time in the Middle East and paying worship to a greater or lesser degree to the patriarch Abraham (probably the most known of them are the Ebionites, Nazarenes, Judaizers, Elkazites and Essenes). Nevo is generally convinced that the modern scholarship underestimates the impact of Judeo-Christianity on the genesis of Islam²⁵. As the main parallels between Judeo-Christianity and the dogma of early Islam he lists the following features: worshipping Jesus as a prophet subordinate to God; emphasizing the importance of acquiring knowledge; recognizing Abraham as the first 'man of knowledge'; praying towards Jerusalem; denial of Jesus' crucifixion; sacredness of the language in which the prophetic message was conveyed; belief that Pauline Christianity had corrupted or distorted God's message; insistence on the observance of the Mosaic law, circumcision and Sabbath observance; acceptance of the Pentateuchal prophets alone (feature shared by Samaritans) and Jesus²⁶.

The added value in Nevo's theory is that Judeo-Christianity is regarded in this case an external element that was supposedly imposed on Abrahamism preexisting in the Negev. Prior to the Arabs taking over political power (perhaps as early as at the turn of the 6th and 7th century CE), the Negev desert (and possibly other southern areas of the Middle Eastern ecumene) were object to Judeo-Christian immigration which from then

after the construction of the Sede Boqer mosque, someone tried to demolish it by tearing out stones from the walls. Perhaps it was the local reluctance to Islam that has left the building still unused for many following years. There are also no Islamic inscriptions in this area until the end of the 3rd century AH (c. 912 CE). After this date, such inscriptions appear in the north-western part of the central Negev (Nessana region). It is possible that Islam finally settled on the desolate Negev in general later than in other civilized parts of the Arab-Muslim caliphate. Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, pp. 183–184, 201–203, 205; Nevo, *Pagans and Herders*, pp. 134–135; Nevo, Koren, *The Origins of the Muslim Descriptions of the Jāhili Meccan Sanctuary*, p. 43.

²² Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, pp. 179, 182, 185.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 179. And thus, for example, in Nevo's theory, Al-Ka'ba was a pagan sanctuary that became incorporated into the new religion through a tradition linking Al-Ka'ba with Abraham. *Ibid.*, p. 190.

²⁴ Nevo, Koren, *The Origins of the Muslim Descriptions of the Jāhili Meccan Sanctuary*, p. 42.

²⁵ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, p. 190.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 193–194.

on exerted a strong influence on the local Arab Abrahamists²⁷. Judeo-Christians probably came from Mesopotamia (or possibly northern Syria), a region where last remnants of the largest Judeo-Christian communities could have lived, neighboring with Nestorian and Samaritan communities, and remaining in contact with both autochthonic Arabs and Arab nomads²⁸. Unfortunately, Nevo does not present an explanation for the reasons of such a long-distance migration from the fertile north to an inhospitable desert; there seems so far no evidence to support this claim. Perhaps the cause could have been persecutions. The land between the Euphrates and Tigris could have probably been the largest center of Judeo-Christianism in the sixth century, if any center of that kind still existed at that time, and perhaps this is why Nevo is pointing quite arbitrarily in that direction.

Under the influence of Judeo-Christianity and the political changes at the beginning of the 7th century, Abrahamism – considered the indigenous belief of Arab desert dwellers – was to evolve far beyond the borders of the Negev. The Israeli archaeologist does not rule out that one of the impulses for this suggested religious expansion could have been a contribution by a local Arab prophet (or prophets). According to archaeological and epigraphic indications in Nevo's interpretation, the Arab faith was supposed to gradually transform into the hypothetical religious movement called 'undetermined monotheism'. In the sense of this neologism, it was to be a very simple, rigid faith in one God. In this form of monotheism there is no longer place for such a sublime worship for Abraham as in Abrahamism. Instead it is compensated by a number of elements borrowed from Judeo-Christian beliefs that are absent in Christianity or Judaism.

In order to trace the origin and spirituality of this mysterious monotheistic faction, Yehuda Nevo took on examining archaeological sites and epigraphs from the Negev. Only in the 80s of the twentieth century a few hundred inscriptions were found there on rock, of which Nevo described and co-published about four hundred²⁹. He reached the conclusion that pagan inscriptions in the epigraphic languages of the Arabian Peninsula (Thamudic, Safaitic or Nabatean) start to disappear in the Middle East by the 5th / 6th century. From the mid-7th century onwards (c. 660 CE), inscriptions in the same desert regions (Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Negev and the Arabian Peninsula) are already monotheistic, and appear in this form until the early 8th century CE³⁰. Unlike pagan epigraphs, these are written in the classical Arab Kūfī script (Kufic)³¹. Nevo postulates that they cannot be classified as Christian or Judaistic (although they contain elements common with them), and also according to the scholar's findings they initially exhibit not a trace of what later became called

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 195, 203.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 203.

²⁹ Ibid., p. vii. Nevo, Cohen and Heftman published these inscriptions in the aforementioned *Ancient Arabic inscriptions from the Negev*.

³⁰ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, pp. 195–196, 247, 273. Yehuda D. Nevo, *Towards a Prehistory of Islam*, Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam, vol. 17 (1994), p. 109. An example is the inscription from the Ṭā'if dam (probably Mu'āwiya's) from 678 CE.

³¹ Koren, *Methodological Approaches to Islamic Studies*, pp. 104–105.

Islam³². The oldest of these inscriptions, dating back to the mid- and late seventh century, express “a very strict, simple monotheism, which then developed over a period of time into something recognizably Islamic”³³. The language of the ‘undetermined monotheism’ inscriptions is poorly elaborated, with unsophisticated theological contents. It contains no mention of Muḥammad (or any other Arab prophet) or the *tawḥīd* concept³⁴, it does not engage in theological polemics; it emphasizes strongly on many occasions that every man is a sinner and should ask God for forgiveness. The only deity is ‘*Allāh/’Allāhumma*, also termed as *rabb/rabbī*³⁵. God is defined only by reference to the prophets – Moses, Jesus, Aaron and Abraham (eg. “the Lord of Moses and Jesus”)³⁶, what may suggest Judeo-Christian influence. The inscriptions do not speak about resurrection of the faithful nor about hell. Writings are not accompanied by signs of the cross, and do not contain references to (the hypostases of) the Trinity – God-Father, Son or the Holy Spirit; they do not mention anything about Jesus’ divinity, but refer to him as a prophet. Inscriptions also lack traces of rabbinic Judaism³⁷.

The faith on the inscriptions evolves gradually. According to Nevo’s findings, after 730 CE first references to a prophet named *Muḥammad* begin to appear on them. The prophet is capable of sinning as any other man (there are epigraphs requesting pardon for him). There is still no trace of the Muslim tenet of the Prophet’s infallibility (*‘iṣma*). For the first time there appear such concepts as *ṣirāṭ mustaqīm* (the Right Way), *hudā* (God’s guidance) and *ḡahd* (exertion on God’s behalf)³⁸. In the 70s and 80s of the eighth century, inscriptions start to include previously unattested Islamic notions of hell and paradise, resurrection of the faithful, and indications to the necessity for a profession of faith (*ṣahāda*)³⁹.

Nevo postulates that in the 2nd half of the seventh century ‘undetermined monotheism’ gradually became the official religion of the Arab state in which the Negev was only a small part, however a representative one, because of its indigenous Arab character. This process gained momentum when governance was taken over by ‘Abd al-Malik (685)⁴⁰. Several decades later, this faith developed into Islam. The evolutionary process of the Arab religion, as read out of the desert epigraphs and other sources by the Israeli archaeologist, took about 150 years⁴¹ counting from the interweaving between Abrahamism and Judeo-Christianity, through the stage of ‘undetermined monotheism’ and developing

³² Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, p. 196.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Tawḥīd* – Islamic concept of God’s indivisible oneness. More on *tawḥīd* in the context of Nevo’s theory: Nevo, *Towards a Prehistory of Islam*, pp. 111, 121–122.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, p. 197.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

⁴¹ Nevo, *Towards a Prehistory of Islam*, p. 108.

the idea of an Arab prophet by the time of ‘Abd al-Malik, and ending with the formation of the Islamic religion in the outlines similar to the contemporary ones.

The Negev was one of many desert areas located on the border of two Middle Eastern worlds – the domain of the sedentary, civilized and diversified population of the North and the indigenously Arabic area of the South. The latter one remained for centuries a reference to the rulers of the Arab-Muslim caliphate as an embodiment of Arabness and the source of spiritual and religious inspiration.

Influx of Arabs from the south and the fiction of Muslim conquests

According to the common academic version of history, the fact of the Muslim conquest of Syro-Palestine (629-638), then Mesopotamia, Egypt and the other Byzantine and Persian provinces, is undisputable and not subject to scholarly disputes. The Arab expansion was violent and brutal. It was on the one hand motivated by the aspirations of Muḥammad’s successors to spread the new religion (as taught by the Muslim tradition) and, on the other, the conquests were fueled by economic factors – the desire for profits and spoils of war – practices which have been for centuries part of the functioning of Arab buffer states at the Byzantine *limes*. This latter argument is supported by a large part of western Islamic scholars who postulate that most of the invaders could not have known Islam at that early stage as only by name. And so it is argued that Arab-Muslim conquests were launched long before writing down the full official version of the Qur’ān and other early Muslim writings, as well as before the message announcing a new religion reached all Arab tribes taking part in the campaign against the Byzantines, also before the doctrinal crystallization of the new faith, and even before the spread of a wider knowledge about the life and deeds of the Arab prophet. This would explain, among other things, the puzzling paucity of references in the Byzantine sources (Greek, Syrian as well as the Egyptian ones) to the religious affiliation of the aggressors, but only mentioning their ethnic connotations (and this often in a quite allusive, indirect way, not infrequently in apocalyptic tones). Since the Islamization awareness of at least part of the Arab tribes themselves was limited, the more the conquered population of the Byzantine provinces could not have realized that they bear witness to the birth of a new non-Christian religion. Nor could that population know the revolutionary processes taking place in the distant interior of the Arabian Peninsula, what, hence, implied the perception of Arab newcomers by a part of Christian writers as hordes of plunderers – a painful affliction of the heavens for sins and unbelief⁴². Moreover, in the Middle East, and especially in Syro-Palestine, there were many religious movements (especially Christian, Judaistic and Judeo-Christian) of which some corresponded doctrinally with Islam to a certain extent (e.g. Muslims felt

⁴² Arabs were perceived in this sense by, among others, the Melkite patriarch of Jerusalem Sophronius (1st half of the 7th century), the Egyptian Monophysite bishop John of Nikiu (1st half of the 7th century), the Armenian chronicler Sebeos (mid-7th century), the Greek theologian Maximus the Confessor (1st half of the 7th century) and by authors of hagiographic and apocalyptic texts.

closer to Persian Nestorians and to Syro-Palestinian Monophysites than to the Hellenized Melkites)⁴³. This does not explain, however, the apparent lack of resistance in the sources from the major part of the population in the regions invaded by Arab forces entering and taking over the reins of power (of course, this does not apply to the small part of the pro-Byzantine population who simply fled their lands; on the other hand, we cannot say that invaders were welcomed enthusiastically). In the academic discourse, this interpretational ambiguity is often explained firstly by the hope of the local population for an improvement of its fiscal situation under the Arabs, and secondly by hope for putting an end to religious oppression suffered by the unorthodox Monophysite majority (and by quite few Nestorian communities living in Syro-Palestine). In particular the Monophysites and Nestorians could have reasons to feel under the Muslim rule in a slightly more favorable position, because – contrary to the imperial supremacy – they were favored by the new rulers in comparison to the followers of pro-Byzantine orthodoxy. However, in the general sense, and in the face of regular wars and conflicts that systematically afflicted Middle Eastern peoples, the Arab invasion may not have initially been seen as a landmark event or in some other unique sense, as it is often pictured in a simplified and largely generalized way. Also, Islam itself was perceived till the mid-8th century by the vast majority of Middle Eastern authors as a Christian heresy propagated by Arab rulers (who were referred to in non-Arab sources as Hagarenes, Ishmaelites or Saracens). Only after this time there emerges the image of Muslims as followers of a religion competitive to Christianity and founded apparently on the principle of religious syncretism drawing on Judaic-Christian sources and Arab tribal beliefs.

Yehuda Nevo combines the lack of explicit references in the source texts to the religion of the Arabs with the issue of the conquests. However he does not focus here on source literature but on archeology. Trying to reconstruct the course of events in the 7th century on the basis of archaeological finds (mostly from the Negev desert), Nevo claims that the generally accepted historical fact of the Muslim conquest of Syro-Palestine (629–638 CE) did not actually take place, because prior to that time Byzantium itself had apparently already withdrawn voluntarily from its eastern provinces⁴⁴. In his theory, subsequent Byzantine emperors of the late antiquity (starting even with their Roman predecessor Diocletian, 284–305 CE) were consistently implementing the policy of a systematic retreat from exercising direct political and military power over eastern regions of the empire, moving instead smoothly towards a form of rule that may be called indirect subordination. On the fringes of the empire (i.e. the so-called *limes*), in

⁴³ Positive comments on the Arabs were expressed (usually fragmentarily in texts) by, among others, the Nestorian catholicos Isho'yahb III (mid-7th century referring to the Arabs even as custodians of Christian faith), the Nestorian catholicos Timotheus I (turn of the 7th and 8th century), the Nestorian monk John bar Penkaye (2nd half of the 7th century), an anonymous author of the Jewish treaty *Secrets of Rabbi Simon ben Yoḥay* (7th century).

⁴⁴ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, pp. 10, 48–50: This context of the Muslim conquests is also discussed in: Christoph Luxenberg, *Keine Schlacht von Badr. Zu syrischen Buchstaben in frühen Koranmanuskripten*, [in:] Markus Groß, Karl-Heinz Ohlig (ed.), *Vom Koran zum Islam. Schriften zur frühen Islamgeschichte und zum Koran*, Verlag Hans Schiler, Berlin 2009, pp. 642–676.

the *Pars Orientis*, Constantinople began to gradually establish buffer forces in the form of indigenous Arab tribes as temporary clients of Byzantium (*foederati*)⁴⁵. The most known of them was the kingdom or the chief phylarchate of the Ghassanids appointed by the Byzantine Empire in the years 530–531 in the northern *limes* of the *Syria* province and along the frontiers of the province *Arabia*⁴⁶. The Ghassanids (Arabic: *Banū Ḡāssān*) ran a parallel administration to the Byzantine one, at least in the north of province *Arabia*, at the capital city of Bosra⁴⁷. Less expensive and more efficient in operation, the *foederati* ultimately became independent rulers of the borderlands, with their interests intersecting in many ways with the policy of their imperial superiors.

The policy of indirect subordination was primarily dictated by the need to reduce large, disproportionate costs of maintaining defense installations in those desert provinces that were gradually becoming of secondary importance to Constantinople⁴⁸. Since at least the 5th century CE Byzantium was no longer planning to defend its Middle Eastern lands south of Antioch from any serious enemy from the south⁴⁹. From the 4th to the 6th century, imperial troops stationed at the frontier were systematically reduced in terms of numbers and defensive capabilities and then withdrawn towards the north, so that at the end of the 5th century most of the forts were not occupied (some of them were transformed in the 5th and 6th century into Monastic complexes)⁵⁰. Imperial garrisons were replaced by local troops and by Byzantine units composed of Arabs, and eventually succumbed to spontaneous demobilization in the mid-sixth century⁵¹. In their place, in many cases, no new Byzantine replacement forces were established; those few troops that remained, had a lowered combat value and were spaced far apart; along the eastern *limes* forts and fortifications were being abandoned. Procopius of Caesarea reports that during Justinian's reign (527–565) which is considered the apogee of the empire's greatness, the borderland *limitanei* forces were eventually dissolved because of high cost of their

⁴⁵ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, pp. 72, 76. More on this topic in the above mentioned book: Nevo, *Pagans and Herders. A re-examination of the Negev runoff cultivation systems in the Byzantine and Early Arab periods* (in the chapter devoted to chosen political and historical aspects of the Negev); see also: Irfan Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington 1989, pp. 121, 125–129.

⁴⁶ S. Thomas Parker, *Retrospective on the Arabian Frontier after a Decade of Research*, [in:] Philip Freeman, David Kennedy (ed.), *The Defence of the Roman and Byzantine East*, Oxbows, Oxford 1986, pp. 633–660. Apart from the Ghassanids, other Arabian allies of Byzantium were active in different periods of history. The Salihids (Arabic: *Banū Ṣāliḥ*), the Tanukhids (Arabic: *Banū Tanūḥ*) or – more to the south – the Kindites (Arabic: *Banū Kinda*).

⁴⁷ See also: Hugh N. Kennedy, *The Last Century of Byzantine Syria: A Reinterpretation*, “Byzantinische Forschungen” 1985, 10, pp. 141–183.

⁴⁸ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, p. 80.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 17.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 40, 87.

⁵¹ See also: Henry Innes MacAdam, *Some Notes on the Umayyad Occupation of North-East Jordan*, [in:] *The Defence of the Roman Byzantine East*, Philip Freeman, David Kennedy (ed.), Oxbows, Oxford 1986, pp. 531–548 (in particular p. 540). As claims Henry MacAdam, from the Hauran region (Auranitis, today's south-west Syria and north-west Jordan) there is barely any epigraphic evidence of Byzantine military activity at the beginning of the 6th century.

maintenance⁵². From that time on, the imperial army officially ceased responsibility for border security. By the end of Justinian's reign, Byzantium did not invest militarily nor administratively in supporting its eastern provinces⁵³. The defense task was increasingly entrusted to Arab tribes merged in federations and confederations of Byzantine allies. The discreet military evacuation preceded the cessation of the imperial funding for the civil administration of the region at the end of the sixth century⁵⁴. At the same time, Constantinople was gradually settling in its border provinces new, numerous Arab peoples, bringing nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes from the east and south (including some of the Arabs previously allied with Persia)⁵⁵. Some of these tribes remained nomadic and made alliances with the Byzantines. New allies were receiving imperial subsidies, in return for which they assumed responsibility for tasks and functions of the withdrawing Byzantine forces. Under the reign of Heraclius (610–641), the militarized defense system of *limes arabicus* no longer existed in practice, and the estimated number of troops subordinate to *magister militum per Orientem* with proper defense capabilities could fluctuate between 20–30 thousand soldiers⁵⁶. Nevo postulates that, as a consequence of this imperial policy, at the beginning of the 7th century, both before and after the Persian war campaigns, the eastern extremes of the empire held only formal relations with Constantinople and “*existed in a military and political limbo*”⁵⁷. This limbo was to be used naturally by Arabs who made up a militarized majority in the local population, to formally take over the vacancy at the helm of power: “The Arabs took over the eastern provinces of the Byzantine Empire without a struggle, because Byzantium had already decided not to defend them, and had effectively withdrawn from the area long before the Arab takeover”⁵⁸.

Syro-Palestine before Islam

If the conquests did not happen, then how did Syro-Palestine of the 7th century, in the theory of the Israeli archaeologist, become dominantly Arabic? The Arab population was settling down in the ecumene of the Fertile Crescent (including the Hauran plateau, northern Sinai and central Mesopotamia) for centuries, long before the Roman conquest of the region has started (i.e. before the 1st century BC). Alike other ethnic and religious communities – Arameans, Jews, Samaritans, Armenians, Greeks and others – the Arabs

⁵² Procopios, *The Secret History: with Related Texts*, edited and translated by Anthony Kaldellis, Hackett Publishing, Indianapolis 2010, p. 106.

⁵³ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, p. 45.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁵⁶ Walter E. Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquest*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1992, pp. 39-41.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵⁸ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, p. 10, and also p. 87.

constituted there in late antiquity already a lasting element of the demographic mosaic. They mainly inhabited provinces of *Palaestina Tertia* (*Palaestina Salutaris*; today: central and southern Sinai and the southern tip of Jordan) and *Arabia* (today: central-western and northern Jordan). The Arab population was steadily increasing in number due to a slow but constant settlement of incoming Arabs from the south⁵⁹. In Syriac, Greek, Latin and Coptic sources (epigraphic and literary), ‘Arabs’ are, however, rarely mentioned by this ancient term attested already earlier in the Bible and Assyrian documents. The term disappears around the 3rd century CE, although it is occasionally used also in later centuries (e.g. in the sixth century by John of Ephesus to depict peoples of the Arabian Peninsula or by Theophanes the Confessor two hundred years later). Arabs were referred to, among others, as nomadic invaders from the desert, however, there are no Arabic names/proper names in the Greek-Aramaic inscriptions from these regions (it is not certain whether tribes of the Arabian Peninsula called or considered themselves ‘Arabic’)⁶⁰. The Syriac sources usually refer to the Arabs using the term ‘Tayyaye’ (*Tayyāyē*)⁶¹, while the Byzantine texts use interchangeably the words ‘Hagarenes’, ‘Ishmaelites’ or ‘Saracens’ (terms taken by Christian authors from biblical genealogy)⁶². It is however not clear whether and to what extent these particular notions could have been identical in meaning (and whether this meaning might have been shifting at different times). Among modern scholars, there is also no agreement as to the definition of the very term ‘Arabs’. It is difficult to say with certainty whether the basic distinction of Arabness was at that time the language (so far believed by a major part of scholars), the nomadic lifestyle or the fact of originating from geographical area called Arabia (Arabian Peninsula), or maybe even constant engaging in pillaging and plunder.

As mentioned above, from the fourth to the sixth century Byzantium was additionally settling Arabs within the buffer zone separating the Byzantine ecumene from the anecumene – mostly in desert areas between the province of *Syria Palaestina* (area of the province understood as from before the reform of 390 AD; today: a vast strip from the Sinai Peninsula to Antioch) and the Euphrates⁶³. Many of these tribes adopted Christianity (which often meant baptizing the chieftain only, who was given the title of *patrikos* – the king of the Arabs), what was probably from the 4th century on the Roman (and later Byzantine) condition for establishing the alliance⁶⁴.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 71.

⁶⁰ Within the frame of the discourse on the dilemma of ‘Arabness’ before Islam, the American historian and scholar of religions Francis E. Peters described Arabs as a ‘*nation of tribes*’. Arabs felt in union with their tribes, and each tribe might have been historically linked to other tribes through its ancestors. However the notion of (an Arab) nation in today’s sense might have been unknown to tribes of that time. Francis E. Peters (ed.), *The Arabs and Arabia on the Eve of Islam*, Ashgate, Brookfield 1999, pp. xii–xiv.

⁶¹ The problem is complicated by the fact that the term *Tayyāyē* is sometimes interpreted by certain historians as referring to Arabs Lakhmids.

⁶² Ishmaelites and Hagarenes were terms used to denominate Arabs by, among others, Sebeos and John of Damascus.

⁶³ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, pp. 72, 76. Nevo, *Pagans and Herders*, pp. 111–112.

⁶⁴ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, p. 73.

It should be remembered that the term ‘Arabs’ refers both to tribes of the Byzantine borderland and to the Arab population that was inhabiting the Eastern Roman provinces for a long time before. In the early seventh century, Arabs, both sedentary and nomads, were living in many Syro-Palestinian areas: southern Syria, central Syrian valleys (including Beqaa), parts of Palestine, numerous cities of northern Syria and the Euphrates valley such as H̱imṣ (Emesa), Harran and Edessa (where Arab dynasties were established), as well as the north-Syrian steppes. Archeological finds in Jordan indicate that during the Byzantine period the settled population was constantly growing, and the majority of it was Arabic. The free influx of peoples from outside the *limes arabicus* was not restrained by any major natural geographical barriers in the form of varied terrain as in other regions of the Middle East. Because of vast desert areas and monotonous landscape, the Byzantine boundaries can be seen in the military sense in a zonal dimension rather than linear. The eastern extremities of Syro-Palestine are usually regarded as the edge of the Syrian Desert, while in the south they reach the Red Sea coast – the Gulf of Aqaba (Eilat) and the Sinai Peninsula.

How did the religious map of Syro-Palestine look like at the dawn of Islam, and in particular areas inhabited by Arabs? In the mid-sixth century, Rome and New Rome considered themselves sister denominations, recognizing that they form a common church. In the Levant, the measure of orthodoxy defined by Constantinople was the Melkite (Melchite) church recognizing provisions of the two ecumenical councils which were crucial for the development of further events – Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451), regulating Christological dogmas. The Melkite Church, in minority in Syro-Palestine (mainly composing of Greeks and the Hellenized population), was promulgating Dyophysitism in forms that were in a given moment considered orthodox by the Byzantine Empire. At the same time, among the locally dominant denominations of Christianity there were: the West Syrian church (Jacobite church, representing Monophysitism, recognizing the council of Ephesus and rejecting the council of Chalcedon)⁶⁵, the East Syrian church (Nestorian church, rejecting provisions of the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon; Syro-Palestine, in contrast to Mesopotamia and Persia, was of secondary importance for Nestorians), the Coptic church and Armenian church. The latter two churches were also, in fact, local manifestations of Monophysitism (Miaphysitism)⁶⁶. The Arab population belonged to both the West and East Syrian churches, as well as to the Melkite one. The guardians of the Byzantine frontier zone – especially the Arab Ghassanids – were mostly members of the West Syrian church (a small part was Melkite), and their counterparts fighting on the Persian side of the front – the Lakhmids (Arabic: *Banū Lahm*) – followed Nestorianism. Also Syriac-speaking Arameans, at that already seen as settled indigenous people, belonged to both churches. The popularity of Monophysitism tended to increase

⁶⁵ Monophysitism is here the customary and working term (created in the 8th century by orthodox Melkites) which corresponds in scholarly publications more precisely with the term ‘Miaphysitism’. The difference is that early Monophysites denied the existence of the human nature of Jesus Christ, while the Miaphysites combined it together with Jesus’ divine (spiritual) nature.

⁶⁶ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, p. 52.

not only in Syro-Palestine, but it also grew in the seventh century in the neighboring northern regions of Mesopotamia, diminishing the ingrained influence of Nestorianism there. Thus, when Arabs were taking over control of Syro-Palestine, it was predominantly Monophysite, although there were also major Chalcedonian enclaves, including Caesarea and Jerusalem, despite their weakening through the Persian occupation⁶⁷. Already in the fifth and especially the sixth century, Monophysitism strengthened itself as the dominant religion of Syro-Palestine.

In Nevo's theory, the bulk of sedentary Arab population, as opposed to Arab nomads or semi-nomads, was identifying itself at least nominally with one of the many Christian denominations. At the turn of the 6th and 7th century, towns and villages in the Byzantine borderland (stretching from the edges of Upper Mesopotamia through Hauran (Auranitis – today's southwestern Syria and northwestern Jordan) and Transjordan down to the Negev, were mostly made up from Christianized Arab population⁶⁸. In addition to the most known Christian denominations, rabbinical Judaism, Samaritanism and residual forms of Judeo-Christianity, there were also in the region other local monotheistic beliefs, sometimes with long history of development. The more we look towards the south, the less is the percentage of Christians in proportion to pagans, followers of tribal religions and probably also rudimentary, archaic forms of monotheism. With the exception of a few locations (such as Hauran), paganism was considered in the 7th century to be almost completely extinct in the Byzantine Empire⁶⁹. But beyond the official borders of Byzantium, the numbers of pagan population could have been significantly higher.

For centuries there has been a gradual migration of Arab population from the south towards the north. Newcomers from the south were generally referred to collectively as pagans, although they certainly represented very different beliefs (it may be remembered that for more traditionalist authors deriving from Christian Chalcedonian circles such as those of the Alexandrian theological school, many of Nestorian teachings – including those about the Mother God *Theotokos* and the passion of the human nature of Jesus – was interpreted and referred to in literature just as pagan). In Nevo's theory, the situation was no different in the first half of the 7th century. New population from the south flew in and once again rose the percentage of the population perceived by inhabitants of the ecumene as pagan. This time however, some of the newly arrived Arabs brought with them from the south hypothetical beliefs called by Nevo 'undetermined monotheism'. It was precisely out of this monotheistic religious group, or under its influence, that emerged the Arab elite that began from the 30s of the seventh century to assume power in the region. Looking at the denominational mosaic, still throughout the whole seventh century Arabs felt the existence of a religious gap between the ordinary immigrated Arab population (often referred to in Syriac chronicles as pagan) and the ruling Arab elites adhering to 'undetermined monotheism' including a great many of Judeo-Christian elements (Syriac

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 58.

⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 79–90, 186, 205.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 173.

sources until the mid-8th century were still classifying this faith in the circle of Christian or Christian-like beliefs)⁷⁰. In addition to these two Arab factions, Syro-Palestine and Mesopotamia was also inhabited, of course, by the aforementioned numerous sedentary Arabs – mostly Monophysite Christians. Some of them, after the historic success of their Arab compatriots seizing power and in the light of Byzantine passivity, began to lean toward the ‘undetermined monotheism’ of the ruling elites.

The increase of Arab population must have inevitably had lead anyway, naturally and smoothly, to intensifying Arab aspirations for their independence from Constantinople, and then – sooner or later – to their attempt to take over. In the first decades of the seventh century, when the unarticulated intention of the Byzantines to ‘exit’ Syro-Palestine started to coincide with the local situation and interests of the Arab elites, these aspirations became reality.

Byzantine strategy in the east

What would be the purpose of, as Nevo wants it, a self-motivated Byzantine abandonment of its eastern lands?⁷¹ The answer to this question remains in the sphere of conjecture, as the Byzantine state archives of that period have not survived⁷², and archaeological remnants point rather to effects of political decisions than their causes. Verification of such a thesis would require an analysis of all processes and political and economic factors of that time, mainly internal determinants (including administrative and normative).

One possible reason might have been that Constantinople was drawing benefits from abandoning the direct rule over its eastern provinces⁷³. Empires relinquish power over their territories reluctantly and only when they are forced to do so. However, maintaining direct administrative authority over its Middle Eastern extremities could have been cumbersome and unprofitable for Constantinople. The growing division between Byzantine Chalcedonian Christianity and Monophysite eastern churches was bringing more losses than benefits, including the threat of riots and civil war. On the other hand, putting a sudden end to its administrative power and an overnight withdrawal from the region was also not an option, as it would surely aggravate the atmosphere of anxiety. “(...) it is impossible just

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 207.

⁷¹ Koren, *Methodological Approaches to Islamic Studies*, pp. 100–101.

⁷² Scholars of Byzantine history point to the acute lack of source data (including prosopographical) on the functioning of the provincial administration in Syro-Palestine in the period immediately preceding the Arab invasion (629–633) and during the invasion itself. Information on the functioning of the provincial administration in Syro-Palestine during the reign of emperor Heraclius (610–641) are extremely rare and difficult to interpret. Paradoxically, the 6th century (the epoch of emperor Justinian I – the last great reformer before the Arab invasion) is much better documented in this regard. Paweł Filipczak, *Administracja bizantyńska w Syro-Palestynie w przeddzień inwazji arabskiej. Miejsca, ludzie, idee*, [in:] Teresa Wolińska, Paweł Filipczak (ed.), *Bizancjum i Arabowie. Spotkanie cywilizacji VI–VIII wiek*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN SA, Warszawa 2015, pp. 91, 153, 156, 172.

⁷³ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, pp. 89–98.

to stop taking over responsibility for such societies without causing their physical and social disintegration.⁷⁴ Instead, as Nevo argues, subsequent Byzantine emperors were trying to demonstrate to inhabitants the limited usefulness of exercising direct military and administrative control over Syro-Palestine⁷⁵.

If we assumed that this was the intention of Constantinople, then the process of renouncing direct administrative authority over the ‘to-become-independent’ provinces had to be conceived in such a way that, in the eyes of their inhabitants, it proceeded in the most intrinsic, natural and seemingly unavoidable manner, without an official announcement or declaration from the Byzantine hegemon⁷⁶. Nevo suggests that Byzantium adopted a strategy of gradually showing its inability to control these areas: “(...) this method minimizes the risks of civil war within the mother state, it is the one most likely to be adopted”⁷⁷. It is a long-term, time-consuming and costly solution in the human sense, requiring long and comprehensive preparations, without which both the mother state and the unwanted provinces could fall into anarchy. The last act of their separation, often perceived by people as the only reason for such a turn of events, is an invasion of barbarians or a general revolt, but in retrospect they are in fact only the culmination of a long historical process going on behind the scenes. According to Nevo, Constantinople wanted the transfer of power to run as smoothly as possible. Byzantium saw in its Middle Eastern provinces an important future trade partner and political ally, because they were “(...) rich, quite densely populated. The cities were numerous and prosperous, economy in general and trade in particular were developed, and wealth was quite evenly spread”⁷⁸. This required skillful diplomacy, initiating certain processes, and minimizing randomness.

At the same time, an element of Byzantine strategy in the Middle Eastern provinces was, in Nevo’s theory, the transfer of power into the hands of civil and religious local elites⁷⁹. To achieve this, autonomous aspirations of local leaders were supported, including unofficial local variants of Christianity, defined by Constantinople itself as schismatic or heretical⁸⁰. For this purpose patrician (aristocratic) milieus and the structures of Monophysite eastern churches were used. The effect was of course a paradox: the Byzantine Empire – the official guardian of Dyophysite Christianity – was promoting in Syro-Palestine various forms of Monophysitism (competing with the Melkite church and among themselves). In this way, the process of abandoning responsibility for the fate of the provinces and the plans to leave the pro-Byzantine Melkite Christians at the mercy of new authorities was taking shape. Supporting the non-Chalcedonian churches also

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 21.

⁷⁵ Ibid., pp. 20–21.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 20.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 21, and also p. 20.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 21.

⁷⁹ For the context of religious authorities see also: Henry Innes MacAdam, *Studies in the history of the Roman Province of Arabia: The Northern Sector*, “B.A.R.”, Oxford 1986, p. 225.

⁸⁰ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, pp. 22, 89–98.

provided a good excuse for a future administrative separation, because the emperor did not have to – according to the philosophy of the then-promoted doctrine of the religious state – extend his protection to schismatics. It should be remembered that state affiliation was at that time determined by the professed faith. The intentional alienation of local communities by the emperor and his imperial administration was to undermine the sense of loyalty and increase common unwillingness towards Constantinople. Nevo goes even further by claiming that in order to achieve this the empire was promoting hostile attitudes towards itself. Byzantium would simply not have been able to leave lands dominated by faithful Dyophysites. Also in the controversial doctrine of Monoenergism (and then Monothelitism) introduced by emperor Heraclius in 622 or 624, the Israeli researcher discerns an attempt to deepen the religious split⁸¹. A stronger religious and political disintegration of the local community could also serve the empire to protect itself against a rapid rise of a cultural and political state-monolith that could later on threaten the mother state itself⁸². In this regard, as we know later from history, this imperial plan ended up with a complete fiasco.

⁸¹ The compromise idea of Monoenergism (and later Monothelitism) introduced by Byzantium was supposed to – according to the official position of Constantinople – appease the dispute between Dyophysites and Monophysites and to restore church unity, as well as to win political support for the potential military campaign against the Persians (the reconciliatory policy towards the Monophysites was also the domain of numerous earlier emperors – including Justin I and Justinian I – called the theologian-emperor). According to Nevo, such an understanding of the intention for introducing this doctrine stands however largely at odds with the previously adopted Byzantine policy towards its eastern provinces which rather indicate opposite intentions. In Nevo's theory, the idea of Monothelitism could have been used to provoke the final split between Byzantium and the eastern churches. It became a tool in the process of abandoning responsibility for Christians in the eastern provinces which Constantinople had decided not to defend anymore. It could have been about ousting from Syria the remnants of the population faithful to the Melkite church, by uniting them with Monophysites in a spirit of this middle-ground non-Chalcedonian doctrine (which Monothelitism was). And although in the provinces *Syria* and *Palaestina*, the Byzantine Empire was introducing the Monotheletic doctrine by methods of persuasion (and not by force as, for example, in Egypt), yet the local population still perceived it as a form of further reprisals from the part the Dyophysites and – consequently – did not protest against the seizure of power by the Arabs in the 30s of the 7th century. When the emperor Heraclius issued the *Ecthesis* in 638 – a letter declaring Monothelitism the official doctrine, Arabs were already ruling in Syro-Palestine. Still for another two or three generations, the Christian Dyophysites who were left behind under Arab rule might have cherished hope for the return of the Byzantine dominium. And so, Constantinople sustained Monothelitism still for several more years until it finally got condemned by the Third Council of Constantinople in 681 (in the meantime, the emperor Constans II issued in 648 the *Typos* – an edict superseding Heraclius' *Ecthesis* and prohibiting teaching of either the heretical Monothelitism or the Orthodox Dyothelitism). From that time on, no one had any more illusions that Byzantium was thinking of recapturing its eastern provinces. As the Soviet historian Alexander A. Vasiliev put it, the decision of the council confirmed to the inhabitants of Syria, Palestine and Egypt that Constantinople abandoned the idea to find the path to religious reconciliation with the provinces lost by the empire. In this sense, Monothelitism was the last measure sealing Byzantine separation from its eastern provinces. Its rejection and denouncement as heretical equaled with the final loss of protection of the eastern Christians, placing Monophysites in one line with followers of non-Christian religions. *Ibid.*, pp. 59–65 (see also: Alexander Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire, 314–1453*, University of Wisconsin Press, Wisconsin 1952, s. 224).

⁸² Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, p. 23.

It is a bold thesis and smacks of political Machiavellianism, especially as the late-antique Byzantine Empire is usually presented in the role of the defender of the orthodox faith in the Middle East (as evidenced even in the sixth century when Justinian I took attempts to reconcile between the Jacobites and the Melkites, although without results). It may not be excluded, however, that, in fact – for the sake of its own political interests – Constantinople was deliberately supporting those heretical communities that were in favor of liberating the region from the imperial yoke. Byzantine rulers could be intent on not reconciling the Melkite church with the non-Chalcedonian ones. Such a policy brings to mind the words of Zacharias of Mytilene who complained in the sixth century that under the pretext of suppressing Eutyches' heresy (i.e. Monophysitism of which Eutyches was the initiator) Chalcedon in fact strengthened influence of Nestorianism in the east, substituting one heresy for another, confusing the whole Christian world⁸³.

Another element of Constantinople's policy could have been to keep the frontiers 'on fire', i.e. to provoke continuous border conflicts with the Persians. In many cross-border struggles, the initiators of the dispute were Byzantine allies. In Nevo's theory, fostering cyclical unrest in the borderlands was aimed at focusing the local buffer states on continual balancing between raids and defense. This limited their possible development and expansion which – if happened – would further burden the emperor's treasury (especially in the second half of the sixth century Constantinople was very bothered by the growth of its Arab allies controlling vast tracts of the borderland). On the other hand, confrontations at the *limes* – especially during the shift of power – could have suited both the pro-Byzantine Ghassanids and the pro-Persian Lakhmids, because they provided an opportunity to negotiate more favorable terms for future alliances. Keeping constant tensions at the frontier was also meant to send out a clear signal that the empire was not able to effectively protect its border provinces. This is linked with the aforementioned element of the hypothetical strategy: populating borderlands with Arab nomads who were to be in the future the first line of defense against invasions of barbarians from the outside. Acculturation of nomadic tribes in the *limes* strip was intended to prepare the ground for granting them responsibility for the borders.

Such goals were usually achieved by the means of far-reaching diplomatic efforts and financial outlays, including through establishing formal alliances with needed partners (which was for ages the Byzantine trademark when dealing with Arabs, Huns, Berbers, Abyssinians, Lombards, Gepids or Avars). Thus, Byzantine emperors from at least the fourth century CE subsidized a number of allied *foederati* tribes, whereas in the period from Justinian to Heraclius Constantinople was paying the Ghassanid clan and nomadic tribes from the northern Arabian Peninsula⁸⁴. As long as this system was not abandoned, these forces were operational as defenders of the empire, not the invaders. However, they were to fulfill their most important role as security and stability guards during the withdrawal of Byzantine forces out of the border area.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 52.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 24.

The 30s of the seventh century – Arabs reach for power

According to the mainstream narrative of history, Arabs overpowered Byzantium, because the empire was financially impoverished, militarily exhausted and having a depleted population. On the one hand, the reason for pauperization were the costly Justinian's efforts to recover the western provinces (efforts exhausting for the state treasury albeit partially successful) and rebuilding the *Imperium Romanum*, and on the other hand there was the enfeebling Byzantine-Sassanid war (602–628) in the east, which took on a religious character (in addition to parallel struggles with the Slavs, Avars and the internal war for the throne between Heraclius and Phocas). Byzantine income at the beginning of the seventh century fell to an estimated quarter of the earnings from the age of glory a century earlier. Particularly difficult was the situation in Syria and Palestine which were most affected by the wars with the Persians and their twenty-year-long occupation. The local population, in addition to war losses and inhabitants taken captive out of the country, survived a few recurring outbreaks of epidemics starting with a pandemic during the reign of Justinian I, as well as recurrent waves of starvation⁸⁵. The Emperor Heraclius, a soldier with practice, who personally knew Syro-Palestine and was engaged in military confrontations, on the one hand defeated successfully the Persians conquering their capital Ctesiphon in 627, but on the other hand only a few years later was unable to stop the Arabs or maybe – as one may conclude from Nevo's theory – did not quite want to do that at that moment.

After the victorious campaign against Persia, the formally regaining of sovereignty over its eastern provinces and the return to Jerusalem with the relics of the Passion, including the True Cross (630), Byzantium, however, did not return permanently, militarily or administratively to its 'liberated lands' to the extent as in the sixth century⁸⁶. And as the Ghassanid buffer state had been dissolved a generation earlier, the control of the southeastern borders was now exercised by single, smaller *foederati* tribes still operating from residual imperial subsidies (the emperor Maurice, 582–602, dismembered the institution of the phylarchate which had been unified at the time of the Ghassanids, thus weakening the *limes* defense lines)⁸⁷. In the year 632 Constantinople removed the last remnant of its formal sovereignty – it stopped subsidizing Arab tribes from the Ma'ān

⁸⁵ During the campaign against the Persians, coins were minted from melted copper statues and even liturgical vessels of more valuable ore. Teresa Wolińska, *Bizancjum w przededniu ekspansji arabskiej. Wybrane aspekty funkcjonowania państwa za rządów Herakliusza (610–641)*, [in:] Teresa Wolińska, Paweł Filipczak (ed.), *Bizancjum i Arabowie. Spotkanie cywilizacji VI-VIII wiek*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN SA, Warszawa 2015, p. 294. In addition, till the 30s of the 7th century, the Syro-Palestinian region still did not recover urbanistically and demographically from major earthquakes that occurred several times in the sixth and early seventh century. As a result of them, especially cities of the Mediterranean (including Beirut) have declined considerably in development (despite Justinian's efforts to rebuild the Syrian infrastructure).

⁸⁶ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, pp. 48–49.

⁸⁷ *Phylarch*, a term of Greek origin (Greek: *φύλαρχος*), was a title given in the 4th–7th century to chiefs of Arab tribes or clans anointed by Byzantine alliances.

region (region of southern Jordan today). This meant an actual abandonment of the entire defense of *limes arabicus*.

The 30s of the 7th century in the Middle East are the beginning of Arab hegemony in the territories that were subject to the Byzantine Empire and the Persian Sassanid Empire for several previous centuries. According to the mainstream version of history based largely on Muslim literature, Arab troops conquering the region of Syro-Palestine achieved a rapid, unexpected military and political success, inspired by the fervor of spreading the new faith – Islam⁸⁸. Both Muslim sources and the modern scholarship, as well as Yehuda Nevo, agree on the fact that Arabs took control of the eastern Byzantine provinces in the fourth decade of the seventh century. But here the parallels end.

The historical reconstruction of the events of the 30s is drawn in Nevo's narrative as follows⁸⁹: the Arabs took control of the Syro-Palestinian region around year 638 thanks to the cooperation of former pro-Byzantine *foederati* forces from the *limes* area with other Arab tribes from *Palaestina Salutaris*. Many of the *ex-foederati* were at least nominally Christian, however Arabs coming from more distant regions were practicing tribal cults, archaic forms of monotheism or the aforementioned syncretic religious form – 'undetermined monotheism'. Also Arab sedentary population (cultivating both Christianity and other beliefs) joined this mass mobilization, perhaps sensing some favorable historical circumstances. The events could have initially been a bottom-up initiative, without clear leadership. It was not until about 640 that Mu'āwiya, controlling at least the northern part of Syro-Palestine, advanced to the forefront.

As mentioned before, in Nevo's theory, the Arab military conquest of Syro-Palestine did not actually take place, as it is allegedly not backed up by independent, non-Muslim evidence (archaeological, literary)⁹⁰: "(...) archaeological record shows us that this simply did not happen. No destruction or abandonment of villages, no reduction in the settled or farmed areas, no diminishing of the population, accompanied the changeover from Byzantine to Arab rule. Both the physical remains (housing, household utensils, etc.) and the literary descriptions of daily life, show that the modestly comfortable standard of living achieved under Byzantine rule continued unchanged into the Umayyad period: no change the worse, a little deterioration in public order, preceded the Arabs' ascendancy"⁹¹. On the contrary, in many regions the development continued: expansion of cities and towns went on in the northern part of the province *Arabia* demilitarized by the Byzantines (now northern Jordan) between Bosra and Ġabal ad-Durūz; in many places immediately after the conquest new churches were erected and ordained (e.g. around 635 in Riḥāb and Ḥirbat as-Samrā', in the *Palaestina* province: in 'Avdat, Bet Guvrin and Jerusalem)⁹². According

⁸⁸ See among others: Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, St. Martin's Press, London 1937; Bernard Lewis, *The Arabs in History*, Hutchinson & Co., London 1950; Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA: 1991.

⁸⁹ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, pp. 242–244.

⁹⁰ Koren, *Methodological Approaches to Islamic Studies*, p. 100.

⁹¹ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, pp. 91–92.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 92.

to Nevo, from the perspective of archeology it looks as if the Christian inhabitants of Syria “were unconcerned with the fact that they were being conquered”⁹³. “Archeologically it is ‘almost impossible to make a distinction between the periods before and after 636–640’⁹⁴ – writes the Israeli scholar.

In Nevo’s theory, no major battles took place during the Arab takeover. There were only minor clashes or skirmishes with local forces gathered by patricians⁹⁵. The Israeli archaeologist does not believe also in this regard in the account of Muslim traditional sources, primarily because they are not contemporary with the described events. In his widely cited and well known scholarly ‘credo’ he states that “‘Non-contemporary literary sources’ are, in our opinion, inadmissible as historical evidence. If one has no sources of knowledge of the 7th century except texts written in the 9th century or later, one cannot know anything about the 7th century: one can only know what people in the 9th century or later *believed about the 7th*”⁹⁶.

In Nevo’s perception, chaotic descriptions, internal contradictions of facts and ambiguities in the description of military details of the Syro-Palestinian campaign, embodied in the traditional Muslim narrative, stem from the very nature of this takeover of power: “It was ‘not’ a well-organized offensive, controlled from headquarters of Madīnah or anywhere else. There never was a planned invasion which could be described as a sequence of military events with the commission and dismissal of commanders by the Arab king-caliph. The stories of the invasion were originally just ‘ayyam’ traditions, i.e., stories of individual encounters told as independent events. The events behind such accounts, whether real or legendary, were not at the time perceived as parts of a wider ‘Historical Event’.⁹⁷” Nevo goes a step further claiming that the traditional Muslim narrative describing the period of the conquests (Arabic: *futūḥ*) may in fact contain stories and reminiscences of events distant from one another up to a hundred years (including, for example, events from the 6th century, the period of war against the Sassanids, or later decades of the seventh century)⁹⁸. “Perhaps there was indeed a great invasion, with battle after battle between tens of thousands of opposing soldiers, over the course of several years (629 to 636). But if there were, it would seem that, ‘at that time’, nobody noticed”⁹⁹ – the scholar claims.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 93; quoting: Robert Schick, *The Fate of Christians in Palestine During the Byzantine-Umayyad Transition, A.D. 600–750*, University of Chicago, Chicago 1987, p. 7.

⁹⁴ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, p. 93; quoting: Yoram Tsafrir, Gideon Foerster, *From Scythopolis to Baysan – Changing Concepts of Urbanism*, [in:] Geoffrey King (ed.), *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East II: Land Use and Settlement Patterns*, Darwin Press, Princeton 1994, pp. 95–115.

⁹⁵ Private militias maintained by local aristocracy for the protection of large estates, within the frames of the forced privatization of local governmental responsibilities by the Byzantine authorities, both in the military and civilian spheres (especially where such units were absent – in southern *Syria, Palestina and Arabia*). Filipczak, *Administracja bizantyńska*, pp. 164–165.

⁹⁶ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, p. 9.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 102.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 135.

However, Nevo does not reject the entire account of Muslim historiographers, as do some Western skeptics. In rare cases, as the Israeli researcher sees it, the Muslim account is overlapping with archaeological finds. This includes are, among others, reports on the Byzantine forces limiting their defensive activities to the northern areas of Syro-Palestine (even beyond the borders of Palestine). When describing the victorious campaign of the 30s of the 7th century, Muslim sources focus on those battles and clashes with the Byzantines which took place mostly in the north of Syro-Palestine, and not in the south. As for the south, reports describe single skirmishes, probably with local troops (e.g. the battle of Datin in the Gaza region). The main war activities against the Byzantine forces took place in the north (including the battle of Damascus, the battle of Hims, the battle of the Yarmūk). According to the narrative of the Muslim tradition, the Byzantine army fighting at Yarmūk in 636 was assembled from widely scattered areas and from other provinces¹⁰⁰, what Nevo also considers probable because of the already very residual military presence of Byzantium in that region.

Although not explicitly articulated, it may be concluded from the Israeli researcher's theory that the Byzantines were in fact feigning their defense against Arab usurpers of power, consciously sacrificing a certain number of their troops for this purpose. The revolt of Arab leaders and gaining formal independence from the empire was at that time suiting emperor Heraclius' plans. And so, it was rather about pretending defense in the eyes of the Dyophysite Christian population and pro-Byzantine loyalists who were thus left at their own. Neither was it a problem for Byzantium to leave behind in Arab hands the most sacred places of Christianity – the cradle of this religion in the Holy Land, just recovered from the hands of the Persians. It is because the majority of the Arab, local rulers taking over power were – in Nevo's theory – Christians, although belonging to another eastern denomination, and in Jerusalem itself there was a large Melkite population.

Overview of non-Arabic sources to the history of Islam

By rejecting the essence of the Islamic historiographical account, the Israeli archaeologist is looking for facts about these events in non-Arab sources written in the 7th century from areas that came under Arab domination. But, like most Western historians, he states that these sources contain only very few general references and comments to the events of the 30s¹⁰¹. According to Nevo's analysis, documents from the third and fourth decade of the 7th century do not report about an invasion of barbarians, but rather that local barbarians (i.e. Arabs), so far held in check and subordinate, start to rise and – being supported by a new wave of compatriots from the desert – intrusively reach for power. The synodal letter by Sophronius of Jerusalem (560–638), known for his merits to Orthodoxy, dating back to the 1st half of year 634, reports apparently not

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁰¹ Koren, *Methodological Approaches to Islamic Studies*, p. 99.

of an invasion or conquests, but of God's inevitable chastisement of weak and wavering Christians and punishment for sins which took the form of an incensed anger of the Saracens (the term 'Saracens' may be understood in Sophronius' sermon in the sense of 'pagans', as Nevo wants it) against authority, without religious references, nor mentioning Islam or a prophet¹⁰². The *Doctrina Jacobi nuper baptizati* treatise (commonly abbreviated to *Doctrina Jacobi*, c. 634–640) reports of a nameless false prophet coming with the Saracens, holding keys to Paradise and proclaiming the coming of 'God's anointed one'. The author of this treatise seeks to explain God's affliction in the Book of Daniel. However he is still identifying the appearance of the fourth beast with Rome, not with the Arabs¹⁰³. The Byzantine theologian Maximus the Confessor (580–662) in his letters (dated 634–640) writes about a barbaric people from the desert taking over lands in the belief that they belong to them. Nevo suggests that just in the face of the political vacuum after the Byzantines, the Arabs took over what they believed was theirs, not necessarily with a use of bigger force¹⁰⁴. The expression 'people of the desert' could have been at that time a common, biblical, euphemistic term for Arabs, both nomadic and settled.

Somewhat more specific, but still inconsistent and chaotic descriptions of battles (without dates and places) appear in the Armenian chronicle *A History of Heraclius* attributed to Sebeos (written in mid-7th century, probably about forty years after the Arab takeover) and are commonly identified with two battles at Yarmūk and Al-Qādisiyya. However, for Nevo, the descriptions offered by (Pseudo-) Sebeos refer for many reasons not to historical facts, but rather they are clearly intended to giving a biblical frame to the transfer of the land of Israel to the children of Abraham from Ishmael's line¹⁰⁵. (Pseudo-) Sebeos does not mention the word 'Islam', but writes about the 'Kingdom of Ishmael'¹⁰⁶, he neither uses the term 'Muslim', but 'Ishmaelites', 'Ishmael's sons' or 'sons of Abraham born of Hagar and Ketura'. Similarly, also the Syriac sources describe

¹⁰² In a similar vein, Arabs were described by the author of the hagiographic narrative about the martyrdom of sixty Christians of Gaza, pointing to Arab cruelty and savagery. It seems that in the seventh century, roughness, barbarity and perfidiousness were a typical example of a topos adhering to the Arabs within the literature and culture ever since antiquity (cf. e.g. Flavius). Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, pp. 114–121, 212–213. Another sermon of Sophronius, probably of 636 or 637, given at the Feast of the Epiphany, ending with a long list of explicit Saracen atrocities (e.g. Saracens troops attacking, destroying and overrunning cities, plundering, devastating fields, burning down villages, pulling down churches, setting churches on fire, overturning monasteries, wickedly blaspheming Christ, opposing the Byzantine armies) Nevo interprets as a later inserted interpolation not corroborating with archeological evidence. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, pp. 132, 208–210. In the classical, mainstream narrative of history, the Saracen prophet of *Doctrina Jacobi* is interpreted beyond doubt as the first reference to Muḥammad in Byzantine sources. Nevo argues from his part that the text itself is not explicit enough about the identity of the 'false prophet' and therefore he cannot be taken for Muḥammad, nor can be his message taken as Islamic. It could have been, as Nevo writes, any form of monotheism; for Nevo it accords much more with Jewish, Judeo-Christian, or even Christian belief than it does with Islam. "(...) the 'Doctrina Jacobi' provides no support for the identification of this prophet with Muḥammad". *Ibid.*, p. 209.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 125–127.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

the Arab ‘barbarians’ as ‘Tayyaye’ (Syriac: *Tayyāyē*), the Hagarenes (Syriac: *Mhaggārē*, *Mahgrayē* or *Mahrē* – depending on the vocalization) or Ishmaelites, while the first and the latter term were operative already before the 7th century, without reference to the origin from the Arabian Peninsula¹⁰⁷. The term *Tayyāyē* was commonly referred to in Syriac sources, according to Nevo, to all inhabitants of the desert in the Syro-Palestine buffer zone. “(...) [W]hile the non-Arab literary sources, those written by the inhabitants of those provinces, certainly reveal a transfer of power from Byzantine to Arab rule, it is difficult to conclude from them that their writers had been subjected to an organized invasion and conquest,”¹⁰⁸ – Nevo writes.

Later authors, slightly more separated in time from these events (e.g. a Nestorian monk John bar Penkaye who lived in the late 7th century, or the Dyophysite Anastasius of Sinai¹⁰⁹) mention only the loss of the Byzantine provinces as God’s punishment for heresy – depending on the writers’ religious affiliation – Chalcedonian, Monophysite, Nestorian or Monotheletic one, without mentioning specific battle names or descriptions of warfare¹¹⁰. The biggest of the tragedies described by them (as a consequence of Heaven’s punishment) is the very fact of taking over these provinces by Arab rulers. Nevo states that “No description of specific events of the conquest can be found in the region’s contemporary extra-Muslim literature until much later, when the Syriac and Greek authors began to borrow from the by-now-established Muslim historiography”¹¹¹ and that “Syriac sources down to the early 8th century do not describe the invasion itself; and later sources which do, such as the 12th-century chronicle of Michael the Syrian, the 13th-century chronicle of Bar Hebraeus, or those parts of the lost 9th-century chronicle of Dionysius of Tellmahre which were incorporated into Bar Hebraeus’s chronicle, reproduce the traditional Muslim account which they copy faithfully from an Arab source”¹¹².

In addition to the aforementioned works, Nevo also analyzes the writings of patriarch Isho’yahb III of Adiabene (d. 659), the Jewish apocalyptic treatise *Secrets of Rabbi Simon ben Yoḥay* (mid-7th century), the epistle of Athanasius II Baldoyo (d. 686), an anonymous text of the discourse between patriarch John and an Arab emir (639–644?), the apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius (about 690) originating from the Monophysite environment, the works of the aforementioned Anastasius of Sinai (d. c. 700), the chronicle of John of Nikiu (originally from the end of the 7th century or the beginning of the 8th century, but preserved only in the form of indirect translations from the 17th and 18th century), the texts of James of Edessa (d. c. 708), the widely known text on heresies by John of Damascus (d. 749)

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 134.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁰⁹ For example, the Christian exegete Anastasius of Sinai (Anastasius Sinaïta, c. 610 – c. 700) in his description does not yet call Islam by name, nor does he mention the Qur’ān or Muḥammad. Cf. : Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw it: a Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*, Darwin Press, Princeton 1997, pp. 92–103.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 106.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 109.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 106.

and other works¹¹³. Potential references to ‘Muslims’ or ‘Islam’ appearing in these texts, Nevo interprets as later translators’ interpolations¹¹⁴. Copyists did also apparently update the terminology of the transcribed texts – replacing the terms ‘Hagarenes’ (‘Agarenes’), ‘Ishmaelites’ and ‘Saracens’ with terms used in their contemporary epoch – so with the term ‘Muslim’, in the same vein the word ‘prophet’ was eventually supplemented with the name ‘*Muhammad*’; similarly, scribes used to add names of battlefields that were not originally by name in the source texts¹¹⁵. Nevo states that “In fact, not one early Syriac or Greek source describes the Arabs of the early 7th century as ‘Muslims’”¹¹⁶, and that: “Byzantine literature (including Syrian Chalcedonian) displays no knowledge of Islamic teachings until the early 8th century”¹¹⁷. According to the scholar, it is a paradox that “Christians who came into contact with the newcomers and lived side by side with them did not, apparently, learn from them anything about Islam for more than two generations”¹¹⁸.

According to Nevo’s analysis, “The term ‘Muslim’ (...) does not appear in any pre-’Abbāsīd Arabic texts, including official inscriptions, popular graffiti, coins and protocols”¹¹⁹. Syriac authors begin to refer to Islam as a religion only much later. The Israeli archaeologist quotes the words of Sebastian Brock, perhaps the foremost scholar of the Syriac language today, who wrote that “it was perhaps only with Dionysios of Tellmahre (d. 231/845) that we really get a full awareness of Islam as a new religion”¹²⁰.

In his polemics Nevo also points out that the literature of the early Islamic ages survived to our times not in the form of original source materials, but their copies made over centuries, often by numerous scribes and translators. The copyists – following the generally accepted principle at the time – were usually updating the copied texts to their own state of knowledge, making corrections, inserting comments and remakes, adding or removing fragments, and interfering in many other ways with the original text. Hence, in literature dated originally to the 7th or 8th century, there appear references to future events or a conceptual grid is used that was not yet known by that time. Thus, when an original text mentions ‘Saracens’ or ‘Ishmaelites’, the later scribes of the 9th and 10th centuries replaced these terms with ‘Muslims’. And so, the original words ‘Hagarenes’, ‘Ishmaelites’ or ‘Saracens’ used in the source literature, were copied by scribes, and continue to be copied by some modern scholars today, being consciously or unconsciously identified with the term ‘Muslim’ and so translated.

A good example is the chronicle of the Coptic bishop John of Nikiu, written down in Egypt in the mid- or late 7th century (with narrative till 643)¹²¹. John of Nikiu was

¹¹³ Ibid., pp. 210–236.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 234–235.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 7.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 212.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 234.

¹²⁰ Sebastian P. Brock, *Syriac Views of Emergent Islam*, [in:] Gautier H.A. Juynboll (ed.), *The Studies of the First Century of Islamic Society*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale-Edwardsville 1982, p. 21.

¹²¹ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, pp. 233–234.

a direct witness of the events during the Arab expansion in Egypt. In the last pages of his chronicle, there appears the term ‘Muslims’ in reference to followers of the Arab religion. The majority of contemporary Islamic scholars considers this a proof of the obvious fact that the chronicle’s author acknowledges the existence of Islam as a new faith. The work of John of Nikiu is regarded by some as an invaluable source of information about the Arab-Muslim conquests and early Muslim administration in Egypt. However, according to Nevo, there are many methodological question marks that should contradict such reasoning. Firstly, the Egyptian chronicle survived to our times in its Ethiopic translation in the form of two manuscripts of different editors, supplied with a remark that the translations were made in 1602 from the Arabic version. The textual analysis of the forms of names and transliteration of some other words reveals that the original text of the chronicle was probably written in Greek, with possibly some fragments in Coptic. The source manuscript did not survive¹²². The Arabic translator affixed to the manuscript a list of chapters and summary of their contents in which he consistently uses the term ‘Muslims’ when referring to Arabs. What is significant here that the terms ‘Islam’ and ‘Muslims’ used by the translator were still not attested historically, as Nevo points out, in Arabic inscriptions dating back to the end of the 7th century. The word ‘Islam’ appears for the first time in the inscription of the Jerusalem Dome of the Rock in 690–691, decreed by ‘Abd al-Malik (years of life: 646–705). The term ‘Muslim’ is chronologically even later – it does not appear in Arabic sources preceding the Abbasid dynasty, including official and unofficial inscriptions, coins and normative documents, etc. Hence, it is likely to be concluded that the Arabic translation of Nikiu’s chronicle was made much later than the original Greek manuscript, already after the Muslim tradition has formulated the official version of history of the Arabs and the genesis of Islam, i.e. in the 9th century or later. Therefore, it is not surprising that the translator into Arabic (probably a Christian) used for his work updated terms ‘Islam’ and ‘Muslim’ in reference to Arabs and their religion. According to Nevo, by the end of the 7th century, the terms ‘Islam’ and ‘Muslim’ were not even used by Arabs themselves¹²³.

In parallel with monuments of archeology, epigraphy and literature, Nevo also attempts to analyze numismatics¹²⁴. What does he read out from coins of that time? By the middle of the seventh century, that is twenty years after the initiation of Arab rule, the degree of Arab sovereignty was apparently still incomplete. In the areas of the former eastern Byzantine provinces, Syrian coins were still struck in Byzantine patterns, however without dates or names of rulers (as opposed to new coins minted by Arabs in the former Sassanid provinces)¹²⁵. The analyzes lead Nevo to the conclusion that, among other things, in the

¹²² The problem of the scarcity of source materials for the conquest of Egypt is acute. Despite the existence of numerous Arabic chronicles reporting on the 1st half of the 7th century, they are dated, however, at the earliest to the 9th century (similarly late are texts from outside the Muslim tradition). Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, p. 234.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

¹²⁴ Koren, *Methodological Approaches to Islamic Studies*, pp. 103–106.

¹²⁵ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, p. 159.

year 661 Arabs still continued to operate as *foederati*. The progressive Arabization of coins indicates not so much the rise of the influence and degree of independence of the Arabs, but rather the process of a systematic disappearance of Byzantine interests from this area and the consolidation of Arab statehood. This process ends only after ‘Abd al-Malik’s reformed the coin-minting system in 696–699 by purging them from all signs of Byzantinism¹²⁶.

The early years of Arab statehood and the prophet of the Arabs

The distress of the local Syro-Palestinian population in regards to further unforeseeable intentions of Constantinople, beginning from the 30s until the 80s of the 7th century, was reflected in the inhabitants’ attitude towards Arab authorities. As said before, in Nevo’s theory, Byzantium did not officially renounce its sovereignty over this region in favor of the Arabs. The Byzantine Empire remained still for years the nominal sovereign of Middle Eastern provinces, but in practice they were of course under Arab rule, and it were the Arabs who – according to the Israeli researcher – continued to collect annual taxes and tributes on the basis of individual treaties with towns¹²⁷. Some of the towns, however, especially the larger ones (as reported by the Muslim tradition in the form of hadiths quoted by Nevo) put clauses in their treaties with Arabs stipulating that they were paying the Arabs only for so long as they did not receive different instructions from the Byzantine emperor. This may mean that the possibility of returning to Byzantine rule was still considered or even expected, and that the Arab reign was not perceived as final or irrevocable. This thesis is supported by another deductive argument that the urban elites, mainly Melkite (but not only), could see the dusk of the Byzantine rule as an end to their high social position, culture and lifestyle. Loyalists of Constantinople longed for political and/or military re-conquest. Also other parts of Syro-Palestinian population might not have perceived the change in power as a long-term, stable political reality¹²⁸. As Nevo claims, the state of political and religious uncertainty persisted even during the reign of Mu‘āwiya (years of life according to Islamic tradition: 602–680, years of rule according to Islamic tradition: 661–680)¹²⁹. A clear, readable move of Constantinople was awaited: either re-enforcing its sovereignty or recognizing the sovereignty of Arab authorities over the former Byzantine dominion.

Nevo argues that Mu‘āwiya was the first historical Arab ruler fully attested archaeologically and epigraphically (the Muslim tradition recognizes him as the founder and first ruler of the Umayyad dynasty)¹³⁰. Still in the 1st half of the 7th century, Mu‘āwiya was to rise to the forefront of Arab clients of Byzantium in Syria. His power extended

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 163.

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 160.

¹²⁸ Ibid., pp. 132, 159.

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 161.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 97.

from Damascus to all the former Byzantine provinces (he began his reign, in Nevo's theory, around the year 640 as the ruler of Syria)¹³¹. Mu'āwīya's name appears on coins after the Battle of Şiffīn (657) which is equivalent to having already at that time the status of an all-Arab ruler¹³². He is also mentioned on Arabic and Greek inscriptions and in literary sources – in the Armenian chronicle of (Pseudo-) Sebeos (brought to c. 661), the Syrian chronicle of John bar Penkaye (brought to c. 687), and in the *Life of Maximus the Confessor* (from the turn of the 50s and 60s of the 7th century). Nevo writes that "No caliph's name before Mu'āwīyah is mentioned in the early manuscripts (as distinct from the later ones dating from the 9th century or later, whose report of the 7th-century history is based on the Traditional Account)"¹³³. The first military event involving the Arabs, recorded in sources contemporary to Mu'āwīya, was his war with 'Alī (657)¹³⁴.

Mu'āwīya found himself in a rather complex political situation. It was obvious that he would not hold himself in power without compounding with such a powerful empire as Byzantium. As Nevo claims, Constantinople set its terms to Mu'āwīya. The empire wanted the state of Mu'āwīya (who in the Israeli scholar's theory was himself probably an Arab Christian, alike many of his subjects) not to approach doctrinally the Dyophysite orthodoxy – the state religion of the Byzantine Empire. For security reasons, out of questions was also further doctrinal drifting towards Monophysitism or Nestorianism, because too soon both neighbors (the Byzantine state and Arab authorities) would fall into an abyss of sensitive religious disputes. Moreover, it was also in the interest of Byzantium that Mu'āwīya's state would not fall into paganism, because then Byzantium would be obliged to formally and militarily intervene in defense of the left-behind Christians and the Holy Land, and it had just only effectively withdrawn from there. Hence, the solution available at hand were the aforementioned monotheistic beliefs of the Arab population brought from the south, developed on the basis of Abrahamism and Judeo-Christianity. And so, authorities of the Arab state began to care for the promotion and formalization of 'unorthodox monotheism'. The simple belief in one God was a common, natural denominator for elites and the vast majority of the Arab population, and therefore it was an element integrating statehood and offering firm counterbalance vis-à-vis Byzantium.

With Mu'āwīya's death, the Byzantine Empire again proclaimed its political vision, this time with the language of theology. At the Third Council of Constantinople (680–681), the Monotheletic doctrine – hitherto recognized as the pillar of the Chalcedonian doctrine – was renounced. This meant the final cut-off from pro-Byzantine inhabitants of the

¹³¹ Ibid., pp. 65, 97.

¹³² Ibid., p. 154. Cf.: Volker Popp, *Maavia der Aramäer und seine Zeitgenossen. Die muslimische Geschichtsschreibung als Mythologisierung eines theologischen Konzepts*, [in:] Markus Groß, Karl-Heinz Ohlig (ed.), *Vom Koran zum Islam. Schriften zur frühen Islamgeschichte und zum Koran*, Verlag Hans Schiler, Berlin 2009, pp. 107–176.

¹³³ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, p. 135.

¹³⁴ Ibid. This war is mentioned, inter alia, in the anonymous, fragmentary Syriac *Maronite Chronicles* (attested in a recension from the 8th or 9th century, but originally from the 50s or 60s of the 7th century), and in the *Life of Maximus the Confessor*.

Orient. Thus, Constantinople definitively resolved the loyalists' hopes making it clear that it has no intention of claiming authority over areas controlled by the Arabs. "(...) hopes that the emperor would come to the rescue of his loyal subjects and save the holy places from the Arabs, were revealed as the merest fantasy"¹³⁵ – writes Nevo adding that after 680 there was no Byzantium in Syro-Palestine.

After Mu'āwiya's epoch came to an end, there was no unanimity in the Arab state as to his successor in power (this fragment of history in the Israeli archaeologist's account is overlapping with the Islamic narrative, though Nevo silently omits the following caliphs: Yazīd I, Mu'āwiya II and Marwān I). Chaos reigned for a longer time, evolving into civil war. From the period of interregnum there emerged as the caliph another epoch-making figure: 'Abd al-Malik (years of life: 646–705; reign: 685–705) – the *spiritus movens* of the religious ideology of the Arab state¹³⁶.

In Nevo's theory, until the advent of 'Abd al-Malik rule in 685, the religious situation of the new Arab empire remained largely unchanged. The elites with Mu'āwiya were – out of political pragmatism – confessing a form of 'undetermined monotheism' marked by strong Judeo-Christian accents, however among the ordinary Arab and non-Arab population these beliefs weren't yet predominant¹³⁷. In the 2nd half of the 7th century, in the Arab state there was still a great many of intertwining diversified religious currents: monotheistic ones of a wider range, prophetic and non-prophetic, as well as those closer to Judeo-Christianity, and perhaps also other ones that later disappeared without a trace.

Since the reign of 'Abd al-Malik, which was for many reasons groundbreaking, the first doctrinal fundamentals of a distinct religious identity gradually crystallize among the Arabs. According to Nevo, a few years after taking over power, 'Abd Al-Malik came to the conviction that for political reasons it would be beneficial for the Arab state to have its own official religion. And so, together with the Arab elites he catalyzed the process of institutionalizing the doctrine of faith. The aim was an ultimate doctrinal cut-off from the main political enemy – Byzantium. In order to create a political and religious counterbalance to the Byzantine Empire, Arab authorities needed its own state religion, as well as an independent historiography with ideological references to its own Arab prophet. This was to strengthen their political mandate.

'Abd al-Malik decided to give the Arab faith a new evolutionary direction: he initiated, among other things, the concept of the Prophet of the Arabs, modeled after the figure of Moses and Abraham. This task was entrusted to the '*ulamā*' (Arabic: scholars, usually in the sense of interpreters of religious knowledge) giving them a full freedom in shaping the doctrine, provided that it remained within the limits of monotheism¹³⁸. As Nevo writes, "neither 'Abd al-Malik nor the Umayyad caliphs in general seem to have taken too much interest in the matter"¹³⁹. The most important was the intended purpose of it,

¹³⁵ Ibid. p. 161.

¹³⁶ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, s. 65.

¹³⁷ Ibid., pp. 247, 273.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 341.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

namely giving the Arab state a deserved historical depth – an element uniting Arab tribes not under the banner of ephemeral tribal inter-alliances, but under a common Arab ethnos (after some time the Abbasids modified this Umayyad concept by binding the idea of state unity with religion rather than primarily with Arabness)¹⁴⁰. At the same time, the Israeli archaeologist does not exclude in his theory that in the past there really lived a local Arab prophet/prophets (e.g. the one mentioned in *Doctrina Jacobi*), and it was partly on the canvas of his/their life that the model of the Prophet of Islam was based, without the need to create his figure *ex nihilo*¹⁴¹.

As Nevo argues, Muḥammad was officially proclaimed the Prophet of the Arabs not earlier than around the year 71 AH (690–691 CE), because this is when he becomes referred to by name in official religious nomenclature¹⁴². Rare references to Muḥammad in earlier non-Muslim literature are, for Nevo, later interpolations of scribes who were systematically updating and adjusting the copied texts to the standard version of the Muslim tradition¹⁴³. Another traditional literary source for historicity of Muḥammad is also disavowed by Nevo: the *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* – the biography of the Islamic prophet by Ibn Hišām (d. c. 833) who based his work on an unattested biographical story by Ibn Ishāq (d. c. 760–770). According to the Israeli scholar, “It is much more difficult to explain why, if he [i.e. Muḥammad] existed and played the central role accorded him in the Traditional Account, there are no references to him before 71/690 not only in the popular inscriptions but also where they should have been obligatory: on the coins and in the official pronouncements of the Arab State”¹⁴⁴. Nevo supports J. Wansbrough’s imperative maintaining that the sources of Islamic tradition are religious literature, rather than factographic or chronographic texts, and should therefore be analyzed by methods of literary criticism¹⁴⁵.

The doctrine of Islamic prophethood is therefore seen by the Israeli researcher as a previously unattested innovation of ‘Abd al-Malik’s epoch – it was introduced by imposing a new religious concept onto the conceptual religious grid of that times. As a later step, there arose the need for developing the entire biography of the prophet from available elements of the tradition. Nevo suggests that reading of the *sīra* evokes a strong impression that one of the main reasons for writing it was to provide external referent to the Qur’ān’s language – highly obscure and allusive of the prophet himself¹⁴⁶. He states that “Not just that one date [i.e. the date of Muḥammad’s birth – 570 AD],

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 344, 348.

¹⁴¹ This thread was developed before Nevo by a Druze scholar Suliman Bashear (1947–1991), who considered many stories of prophet Muḥammad’s life reported by the Muslim tradition as a retrospective projections of later events, taken from, among other things, the biography of a certain ‘prophet’ Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥanafīyya of the 2nd half of the 7th century. Cf.: Suliman Bashear, *Muqaddima fi āt-Tā’rīḥ al-Aḥar. Naḥw qirā’a gadīda li-ār-riwāya āl-islāmiyya*, Al-Quds 1984.

¹⁴² Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, p. 131.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁴⁶ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, p. 258.

but the whole chronology of his life, survives in a form so confused and contradictory that the *sīrah* literature fails to collate it, and manages to resolve difficulties only by a very high-handed and arbitrary approach. If we ask, did the Prophet Muḥammad in fact exist in the early 7th century? – the *sīrah* literature cannot resolve the question”¹⁴⁷.

Nevo indicates that although the Arabic terms *nabī* (prophet) or *rasūl Allāh* (God’s messenger) appear in the Qur’ān numerous times, yet the main figure mentioned in it by name is not *Muḥammad* (this word/name appears in the Qur’ān only four times), but Moses (136 times) and Abraham (79 times). More important, however, as Nevo notes, is that the Qur’ān uses to quote the prophet’s words without mentioning him by name. And this prophet – in Nevo’s reception – proclaims Judeo-Christian dogmas: “If we examine the Qur’ān without prior acceptance of the Traditional Account, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the material collected in it is, or was originally, a work of some Judeo-Christian sect(s) who acknowledged a prophet, defined as the messenger of God, who had been sent to warn them of the dangers of unbelief and guide the Community of the Faithful to the right path (just as He had guided Abraham)”¹⁴⁸. Nevo believes that this mysterious prophet could have been a real, historical person (e.g. a spiritual leader), however within the terminology of this Judeo-Christian faction the faithful could have been calling him by a religious title instead of his proper name (e.g. analogically to the Qumran community who was referring to its own spiritual leader by the title Teacher of Righteousness – *mōrē ha-šedeq*). It may not be excluded that Judeo-Christian communities could have still been operative in ‘Abd al-Malik times¹⁴⁹. ‘Abd al-Malik could potentially make use of Judeo-Christian writings (from Palestine, Syria and/or Mesopotamia)¹⁵⁰. He was the one to approve for his needs as a state religion the faith in the messenger of God and Judeo-Christian Christology¹⁵¹.

As mentioned above, Nevo notes that the name *Muḥammad* begins to appear on coins and in Arabic inscriptions, including the well-known inscription of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, since ‘Abd al-Malik’s takeover of power (685). The famous Jerusalem inscription (from years 691–692) is for Israeli researcher a proclamation of the official religion of the Arab state with *Muḥammad* as its prophet¹⁵². *Muḥammad* becomes, with ‘Īsā (Jesus), the central figure of this inscription and protagonist of ‘Abd al-Malik’s state faith promoted therein. A year earlier, the Arabic expression *Muḥammad rasūl Allāh* (Arabic: Muḥammad God’s messenger) for the first time enters official use, according to Nevo’s analysis, on a coin of Ḥālid Ibn ‘Abd Allāh struck in the Arabic-Sassanid formula in Damascus (with the date 71 AH / 690–691 AD)¹⁵³. Nevo concludes that “Before 71.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 257.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 258.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 259.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 340.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 341.

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 231.

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 247; Nevo, *Towards a Prehistory of Islam*, p. 110.

A.H. he [Muḥammad] is not mentioned; after 72 A.H. he is an obligatory part of every official proclamation”¹⁵⁴.

Linguistically, Nevo postulates that the consonant root *h m d* (in today’s Arabic expressing the semantic field of ‘praising’) was originally meaning in Semitic languages ‘desire, covet, wish to have or acquire for oneself’, whereas the semantic field of ‘praising’ was expressed by another root: *s/š b ḥ*¹⁵⁵. This could have still been the case in the 7th and 8th century in the Arabic language. It was only later in the course of reinterpretation that the present meaning was given to this root in the Qur’ānic *tafsīrs*. This would mean that the passive participle *muḥammad* could have still been understood during the formative period of the Arab state not in the meaning of ‘the praised one’, but rather ‘the one desired’ (and so chosen) by God to be His messenger, or in the translation into English as the equivalent of the ‘Chosen One (i.e. the Messiah)¹⁵⁶. For Nevo, it is only with the *sīra* that the idea of God’s chosenness which is included in the religious epithet *muḥammad* is transposed onto the first name of the prophet Muḥammad (however Nevo admits at the same time that the word *Muḥammad* was also used among Arabs already earlier as a rare proper name). This transition from a religious title to the prophet’s name had to take place in the first half of the 8th century. The Israeli archaeologist suggests that three out of the four mentions of the term *muḥammad* in the Qur’ānic text still refer to the religious title, while the fourth one, stemming probably from a later textual (editorial) layer, is already clearly pointing by name to prophet Muḥammad¹⁵⁷.

Similarly to the figure of Muḥammad, also three of the four Rightly Guided Caliphs – Abū Bakr (632–634), ‘Umar Ibn al-Ḥaṭṭāb (634–644) and ‘Uṭmān Ibn ‘Affān (644–656) are not, in Nevo’s theory, figures historically attested in early non-Arab sources (but only in later Abbasid ones), and so they should not be considered historical¹⁵⁸. As for ‘Alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib (656–661) regarded by the Muslim tradition as the fourth Rightly Guided Caliph, he is, as mentioned above, known from at least one of early Syriac sources by name where he appears in the context of war with Mu‘āwīya at the end of the 50s century of the 7th century. The epigraphy of coins read by the Israeli researcher does neither indicate that ‘Uṭmān Ibn ‘Affān conquered the Sassanid empire. The analyzed coins do not contain names of any early commanders or administrators described in the Muslim traditional narrative.

The process of institutionalizing and prioritizing religious doctrines of early Islam continued still for many decades after ‘Abd al-Malik’s reign. According to Nevo, it is reflected in writings of church hierarchs from the 7th and 8th century. With the advent of the 8th century, Christian writers were still perceiving the official religion of the Arab elites – in spite of its constant evolution – as a faction of Christianity. At the same time, a large part of ecclesiastical dignitaries complained that a large proportion of Arab

¹⁵⁴ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, p. 248.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 261–262; Nevo, Cohen, Heftman, *Ancient Arabic inscriptions from the Negev*, p. 6.

¹⁵⁶ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, pp. 263–264.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 154, and also pp. 9, 11, 96–97, 135.

population remained pagan (in their opinion), what does not serve well the spirituality of Arab Christians¹⁵⁹. It is not until around the mid-8th century that the emerging Arab religion gradually ceased to be perceived in the eyes of Middle Eastern Christians as a form of Christianity¹⁶⁰. “This [religion-formative]process, as we understand it, took approximately 150 years, from the general, basic Indeterminate Monotheism of Mu‘āwiyah’s days, to the Muslim texts of the late 2nd and early 3rd centuries A.H.”¹⁶¹ – Nevo writes. Direct origins of Islam as a separate religion can therefore be dated back only to the final period of the Umayyad dynasty (the Marwanid period), and in practice – to the early Abbasid epoch¹⁶².

Origins of the Qur’ān

In parallel, during the reign of ‘Abd al-Malik, there started to emerge the need for the independent Arab state to have its own official interpretation of religious and juridical doctrine. However, the existence of such an interpretation requires a permanent reference point in the form of a codified scripture. This gave an impulse to initiating the process of gathering and compiling materials and traditions that could serve as the backbone of Arab dogmatism and Arab jurisprudence. In the theory of the Israeli scholar, the end result of these efforts, finalized not earlier than at the turn of the 8th and 9th centuries CE, was the normalized and religiously canonized codex of the Qur’ān. As Nevo puts it, “(...) the Arab state preceded the Arab religion”¹⁶³, and “In fact the Qur’ān as we have it cannot be dated, outside the framework of the traditional account of history found in the Muslim literature, to the 7th century”¹⁶⁴.

Interestingly, Nevo postulates tentatively that the entire *corpus coranicum* consists of written materials physically deriving from different religious traditions¹⁶⁵. Some of them had to be originally Arabic – such as fragments of the Qur’ānic passages evoking the universally known belief about Arabs’ descent from Abraham, as well as stories about Arabic prophets such as Hūd or Šāliḥ, not mentioned anywhere else. Other parts of the Qur’ān might have been taken or inspired by the heritage of monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity and especially Judeo-Christianity. Although these borrowings from Judaism and Christianity (mainly in the form of paraphrasing and referring to facts, accounts, legends, and parables widely known from the Old and New Testaments and other religious literature, and alluding to them) are in a quantitative majority in Qur’ān, however, crucial for the Qur’ānic message are, according to Nevo, ideas borrowed from

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 245.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 297.

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 171.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 4 (fn. 10).

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 337–338.

Judeo-Christianity¹⁶⁶. Nevo primarily means here those essential Christological concepts that constitute the doctrinal manifesto of the Qur'an, such as the negation of Christ divinity while simultaneously recognizing his miraculous birth and prophethood¹⁶⁷, as well as, inter alia, the idea of the prophet Abraham as the first Muslim/monotheist.

Judeo-Christian materials incorporated into the Qur'an were to come originally from different areas still inhabited by Judeo-Christians by that time, that is, from both Syro-Palestine and Mesopotamia. Only in places where remnants of Judeo-Christian community survived, could these texts be preserved. Possibly also, such texts could have been enjoying some respect of Nestorians and maybe remaining in their possession, because this religious group was leaning towards certain Judeo-Christian arguments and remaining in such a close contact with Jews and Judeo-Christians, that their adversaries were accusing them of being Jewish. The Israeli archaeologist argues that although when analyzing Christian elements of the Qur'an one cannot specify the geographical area where the Qur'anic texts might have been assembled into one wholeness, however the presence of Jewish and Judeo-Christian elements indicates that at least the parts of the Qur'an that had been transposed into the Arabic language from Syriac must have originated somewhere in the area of present Iraq¹⁶⁸.

Stopping for a moment at this thesis of Nevo, one would have to infer further that the carrier of the influence of Judeo-Christian heritage on the Qur'an must have probably been sources in the Syriac language, because the modern scholarship does not know evidence for the existence of collections of Judeo-Christian literature in the Arabic language from the 6th or 7th century CE. It is potentially possible that the educated '*ulamā*' while working on the theology of the nascent Arab state used some Judeo-Christian sources in the Syriac language, which in the 7th century was still the dominant language of the Levant. Then the '*ulamā*' could have expressed these ideas in their new religious formula and already in Arabic. This would explain the presence in the Qur'an of many Arameisms that could have found its way into it with the incorporation of Judeo-Christian ideas.

The Qur'an also abounds in references to disputes and interfaith persecutions whose context remains scientifically unclear and unspecified. At the same time, the rich early Christian literature in the Syriac language has a long tradition of religious discourses devoted to the main dogmas of Christianity¹⁶⁹. Hypothetically, an echo of these disputes could have also have found its way into the Qur'anic text through the inclusion of some Syriac source material. Their original context could have been lost in the course of further editorial work on the text of the holy book of Islam.

¹⁶⁶ Nevo, *Towards a Prehistory of Islam*, pp. 125–126.

¹⁶⁷ The fact that before the 7th century the idea of Jesus being a human prophet, not divine (while acknowledging the miracle of his birth and his status as a prophet), was present only among Judeo-Christian doctrines, is argued by Shlomo Pines. It was a basic tenet of Judeo-Christians. Pines Shlomo, *Notes on Islam and on Arabic Christianity and Judaeo-Christianity*, "Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam" 1984, 4, pp. 135–152.

¹⁶⁸ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, pp. 340–341.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 337–339.

In the theory of an Israeli researcher, one of the first fruits of *'ulamā*'s work and, at the same time, the first official enunciation of the Arab state doctrine of 'Abd al-Malik, was – long before the Qur'ān itself – the aforementioned inscription of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (690–691)¹⁷⁰, which was to be the Arab voice in the Christological debate. Nevo calls it the first explicit manifestation of the adaptation by Arabs of elements of original Judeo-Christian theology. Prior to that date, we have Arab religious formulas of a general monotheistic nature which could have been translated from Syriac into Greek, or, more likely, composed directly in Arabic as a linguistic calque from Syriac Judeo-Christian texts¹⁷¹.

Nevo postulates that more or less from this year till the end phase of the Umayyad period (740–750), Arabs assembled and reformulated the available written (and possibly oral) legacy of one or more Judeo-Christian communities, by creating a new, original theological quality. In the written form the Arab faith was originally expressed in simple and then more and more sophisticated forms of literary Arabic. Materials being developed in such a way (called *sūras* already by then) were becoming an increasingly effective medium for spreading the idea of state religion¹⁷².

And so, in the middle of the 8th century, there was a rough framework of the Qur'ānic materials, however it was not yet the Qur'ān in today's sense. From this corpus of assembled, selected and edited materials in Arabic, the *'ulamā*' were choosing the most representative passages, rejecting others¹⁷³. In his famous treatise *On Heresies* written around 743–749, John of Damascus still is still referring not to a single, authoritative scripture of the Arabs, but to various (separate?) scriptures (Greek: *γραφαί*), including the text (*sūra*?) of *The Camel of God* not present in today's recension of the Qur'ān. The John of Damascus' work does not mention the term 'Qur'ān' or 'Islam' (although it is common to find in many scholarly and popular works the erroneously claim that John of Damascus does use the word 'Islam' in his writing as the hundred first heresy)¹⁷⁴.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 338.

¹⁷¹ In this context, cf.: Christoph Luxenberg, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran. Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache*, Das Arabische Buch, Berlin 2000.

¹⁷² Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, pp. 339, 342, 343.

¹⁷³ Ibid., p. 341.

¹⁷⁴ John of Damascus, who was working in the administration of the Umayyad caliphs, calls them 'Ishmaelites', perceiving their faith not yet as religion, but as a heresy being the continuity of a pagan cult, oscillating between idolatry and Christianity, with elements of Judaism. It seems that the faith of Arabs grew out of the borderland of the Christian world, whereto flew many of 'heretics' persecuted by the Byzantine orthodoxy, such as Arians, Nestorians or Monophysite, who then took on preaching to the local population. In reference to the Arabs, John of Damascus also uses their other casual depictions of late-Antique as 'Saracens' or 'Hagarenes'. It may not be excluded that John of Damascus is using the term 'Ishmaelites' in reference to faith rather than ethnicity. Whereas the term 'Saracens' seems to refer by him either to Christianized Arabs or to those originating from outside of the former Byzantine *limes* (the author himself being an Arab, writes about the 'Ishmaelites' in the third person). It is worth noting that Greek-speaking authors were in general using quite differentiated terminological delimiters. For example, Cyril of Scythopolis (c. 524–599) believed that Arabs after getting baptized ceased to be 'Hagarenes' or 'Ishmaelites' and instead became 'Saracens' – children of Sara and heirs of the promise. On the other hand, the term 'Saracens' used by other authors is suggesting a nomadic way of life, and then it was transposed onto

According to Nevo, the earliest non-Muslim work authentically referring to the Qurʾān by name (but still as to one of several books of the Arab community of the faithful alongside other books such as: *Al-Baqar*, the Gospel and the Torah) is the dispute of a Nestorian monk of Bēt Hālē with an Arab, probably from between year 710 and 740¹⁷⁵.

Editorial works on these materials were to last for at least several more decades. Interestingly, as Nevo believes, the *ulamā*'s did not necessarily have to intend from the beginning that this process had to end with a recension of a separate holy scripture, but rather an Arabic commentary to the Holy Scripture or yet another revered book within its canon (!), but this time in Arabic¹⁷⁶. The sacred scripture for the Arab state was still considered at that time the Old and New Testaments. Eventually, however, these materials grew larger, and also for many other reasons the outcome was finally different – the scripture of the Qurʾān came to being and was then canonized in the Abbasid period, probably at the end of the 8th century or in early 9th century¹⁷⁷.

Single words and expressions from the Qurʾānic text appear on Arabic epigraphs also in earlier years (e.g. in late Umayyad epoch), but, as Nevo writes, the general language and tone of these inscriptions clearly differs from the Qurʾānic language and message: “The scribes draw their phrases and formulae from a certain set of religious texts which are demonstrably monotheistic and, from a certain stage, even Mohammedan. But they are not quotations from the Qurʾān, and the vocabulary and the content of the inscriptions do not indicate familiarity with the Qurʾān”¹⁷⁸. According to Nevo, the few similarities of lexical resource between them may be rather indicative of the use by both – the Umayyad inscriptions and the Qurʾān – of common, older sources of religious vocabulary. Still in the Abbasid period, inscriptions from the Negev from years 776–781 (and also, as Nevo writes, from other Middle Eastern locations) show similarity to the text of the Qurʾānic only as to the form of its two verses (including the following text repeated in the Qurʾānic verses 9:33, 48: 28, 61:9: “He is the One who sent His Messenger with guidance and religion of truth”¹⁷⁹), however, in a textual variant somewhat differing from the present version of the Qurʾān¹⁸⁰. It was not until around 170 AH (c. 786 CE) fragmentarily, and

all the Arabs outside the eastern Byzantine *limes*. See, inter alia: Teresa Wolińska, *Arabowie, Agareni, Izmailici, Saraceni. Kilka uwag na temat nazewnictwa*, [in:] Teresa Wolińska, Paweł Filipczak (ed.), *Bizancjum i Arabowie. Spotkanie cywilizacji VI–VIII wiek*, pp. 37–46.

¹⁷⁵ This datation of this text is given by Robert Hoyland in: Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, pp. 465–469; see also: Barbara Roggema, *The Disputation between a Monk of Bēt Hālē and an Arab Notable*, [in:] David Thomas, Barbara Roggema (ed.), *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History. Volume 1 (600–900)*, Brill, Leiden–Boston 2009, pp. 268–273.

¹⁷⁶ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, p. 342.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 11, 342–343. This estimate is very similar John Wansbrough's assessment made on the basis of a different methodology (literary criticism of Muslim written sources). Wansbrough argues that the codification of the standardized Qurʾānic text occurred not earlier than by the end of the 2nd century AH / end of the 8th century CE, or the beginning of the 3rd century AH / early 9th century CE. John Wansbrough, *Qurānic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1977, p. 44.

¹⁷⁸ Nevo, *Ancient Arabic inscriptions from the Negev*, p. 9.

¹⁷⁹ Arabic: *Huwa ʾal-laḡī arsala rasulahu bi-ʾal-hudā wa-dīn ʾal-haqq*.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

till c. 200 AH (c. 815 CE) explicitly that epigraphs and written sources (already Islamic ones) began to contain longer expressions attested also in the Qur'ān¹⁸¹.

Undoubtedly, the process of compiling and codifying the Qur'ān must have already been completed during the lifetime of the Muḥammad's biographer Ibn Hišām (d. c. 833 CE) who adopted the textual core of the sīra written down by Ibn Ishāq¹⁸². Ibn Hišām's sīra is already drawing on numerous narrative elements from the Qur'ānic narrative. According to Nevo, the formative process of the Muslim religion, with its own Arabic prophet, its original holy scripture, and its own history of salvation, symbolically attained its full expression in the literary works of Abū Ġa'far at-Ṭabarī (838–923) devoted to Qur'ānic history and exegesis, written in the late 3rd century AH¹⁸³. The book of the Qur'ān became the reference for law interpretation. Unlike the Umayyads, who for lack of alternatives were basing on the canon of Byzantine law, the Abbasids developed their own system (later called sharia law), consisting of exegesis and consensus of scholars (the so-called *iğmā'*) – not without similarity to the Jewish rabbinical jurisprudence¹⁸⁴.

Similarly to research done by other skeptical scholars of Islam (Patricia Crone in particular in this case), also the Israeli archaeologist opposes to the classic axiom that Islam was born in the Arabian Peninsula, in the region of Al-Ḥiğāz. Nevo writes that despite that archaeological missions in the 2nd half of the 20th century in the Al-Ḥiğāz and northern part of the Arabian Peninsula (except Mecca and Medina) unearthed archeological sites from the Hellenistic, Nabatean, Roman and even Byzantine periods, “But no 6th- or 7th-century sites have been found which accord even partially with the descriptions of the Jāhili Ḥiğāz in the Muslim sources. In particular, no archaeological remains of pagan cult centers have been found in either Trans-Jordan or the Ḥiğāz, nor any signs of Jewish settlement at Madīnah, Xaybar, or Wādi al-Qurā”¹⁸⁵. From the period immediately preceding the birth of Islam, “In Ḥiğāz itself, there are no remains of settlements, a negligible amount of postherds, no coins, and most important of all, no Classical Arabic epigraphy, although Classical Arabic was supposed to be the language of the pre-Islamic Arab tribes. Thousands of inscriptions in various Epigraphic Peninsular Languages (Lihyanite, Ṭamūdian and Šafaitic) have been found there, but none in Classical Arabic or in Kūfic or proto-Kūfic script”¹⁸⁶. This is for Nevo an *argumentum e silentio* against the demographic structure of the Al-Ḥiğāz as reported in the Muslim traditional account. He argues that the choice of a distant and mostly uninhabited Al-Ḥiğāz for the place of the geographical projection

¹⁸¹ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, pp. 342–343.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 347.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 354.

¹⁸⁴ The thesis that many elements of the Islamic law attributed to the prophet Muḥammad may in fact come from a much later period (i.e. from mid-2nd AH) was described in the 1960s by the German scholar of Islamic studies Joseph Schacht (1902–1969). This implies an indirect conclusion that the Qur'ān must also be a later textual compilation. Joseph Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1950, pp. 224–227.

¹⁸⁵ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, see p. 13, and also p. 185; see also: Nevo, Koren, *The Origins of the Muslim Descriptions of the Jāhili Meccan Sanctuary*, p. 24.

¹⁸⁶ Nevo, *Pagans and Herders*, pp. 120–121.

of Arab history was taken still during the reign of Umayyad caliphs. This idea was then upheld and supported by the Abbasids. In fact, however, the cradle of the Arab faith was located, according to Nevo, in Syro-Palestine and Iraq¹⁸⁷.

Moreover, the Israeli researcher indirectly suggests the existence of numerous parallels between the central pagan cult site of Sede Boqer in the Negev and the description from the Muslim sources of the pagan Al-Ka'aba shrine in the Ġāhiliyya period¹⁸⁸. He also argues that the term 'Arabs' (from the Semitic root 'rb and 'rbn) originally referred only to inhabitants of the Fertile Crescent and northern Arabia, and not to the population of the Arabian Peninsula further south¹⁸⁹.

As unconfirmed historically and archaeologically finds Nevo reports of the Muslim tradition that the Arabian Peninsula was inhabited by numerous nomadic tribes which, after their conversion to Islam, provided thousands of warriors for the conquest of Syro-Palestine, Iraq and Egypt. According to Nevo, archaeological facts speak for something quite different: "Most of the peninsula (excluding of course its southern coastal region) is a parched desert which, judging from the material remains so far discovered, was never densely inhabited and whose population was not only sparse but extremely poor by any standard at any historical time¹⁹⁰. Nevo states that the period between the 5th- till the 7th century could not have been an exception. If there were human settlements in the Al-Ḥiġāz, they were rather few, and their inhabitants did not use any form of classical Arabic. The inscriptions found there are written in epigraphic languages of the Arabian Peninsula¹⁹¹. Contrary to the traditional historical narrative, "(...) the Arab population of the northern and central peninsula and of Ḥiġāz was neither numerous nor economically advanced"¹⁹². Probably most of the desert regions of the northernmost Arabian Peninsula was inhabited by Bedouins wandering seasonally up north towards the Syrian Desert (what they were still doing until quite recently in modern times).

Yehuda Nevo went down to history of modern Islamic scholarship, alongside another Israeli scholar of Islamic history and Arabic epigraphy Moshe Sharon (b. 1937), as a prominent representative of the skeptical school dealing with early Islamic history. On the one hand, his merits in the field of epigraphy are referred to as invaluable, and are very useful for reassessing some scholarly assumptions; on the other hand, however, his theory on the Islamic genesis as a whole is usually dismissed by historians as not worth reviewing. Among its substantial faults reviewers usually list methodological inconsequences in analyzing literary sources: arbitrarily dismissing Arabic ones for being late and unattested in original form and so negating most of their value as historical sources, nonetheless accepting some non-Arabic sources of the 7th-century and 8th centuries as trustworthy

¹⁸⁷ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, p. 346.

¹⁸⁸ Nevo, Koren, *The Origins of the Muslim Descriptions of the Jāhili Meccan Sanctuary*, pp. 26–39.

¹⁸⁹ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, pp. 70–71; see also: Israel Eph'al, *The Ancient Arabs (9th–5th century B.C.)*, Brill, Leiden 1982.

¹⁹⁰ Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, p. 67.

¹⁹¹ Nevo, Koren, *The Origins of the Muslim Descriptions of the Jāhili Meccan Sanctuary*, p. 24.

¹⁹² Nevo, Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, p. 71.

(although they have also been subject to heavy interpolations), in the light of Nevo's own methodological declaration that non-contemporary historical sources are inadmissible as historical evidence¹⁹³. David Cook, in turn, generally positive of Nevo's theory, points out to an inconsequence in Nevo's narrative: "If the Qur'an were redacted at such a late date [as Nevo suggests], when numerous datable hagiographical accounts of the conquests already existed, these accounts would surely have been represented within the text of the Qur'an. Their absence pushes the date of the Qur'an back to the earlier period"¹⁹⁴. Nevo's research has also gained positive reviews from the part of the German-based group of skeptical researchers associated in the Inârah Institute (including Karl-Heinz Ohlig, Gerd-Rüdiger Puin, Volker Popp, Christoph Luxenberg, Sven Kalisch et al.) who constructed a substantial part of their unorthodox theory on Islam's genesis on Nevo's findings.

The Israeli researcher has in general the tendency to undervalue literary sources as subjective from nature, and giving priority to archeological and epigraphic findings (which, however, also need to be interpreted, and this is what Nevo is doing... subjectively, as in Sede Boqer). This is why, what Nevo can be blamed for in general is creating an entirely imaginative historical vision with no literary source explicitly supporting his thesis. Doubtful and quite hard-to-defend historically and pragmatically are also Nevo hypotheses about the alleged Byzantine planning a few centuries ahead for a voluntary systematic withdrawal from its Oriental provinces (and leaving Jerusalem with all the Christian sanctities at the mercy of fate), the quite vague and arbitrarily invented story of a Judeo-Christian migration into the Negev from Mesopotamia and its following contribution to Islamic dogmatism, or the creation of the fundamentals of Islamic theology in the 8th century and the script of the Qur'ân by religious scholars 'on demand' from the Abbasid caliphs, as if one could artificially create a religion in 'laboratory' conditions and make it work among people (a conspiracy theory *par excellence*). These arbitrary elements are all go-between joints which Nevo needed to mechanically link parts of his archeological findings to make it sound as a smooth running story.

These archeological and epigraphic findings themselves, however, are as mentioned above, in contrast to his literary conjectures, quite highly valued by reviewers. When mentioning Nevo amongst known non-orthodox scholars of early Islam, the British archaeologist Jeremy Johns writes that "Unlike his interpretation of the excavations at Sede Boqer, Nevo's epigraphic studies demand to be taken seriously"¹⁹⁵. The lack of archaeological evidence for the existence of Islam during the first seventy years of the hiğra calendar is not something unknown or unexpected. It is only in the course of the formation of the Arab-Muslim statehood that there began to appear archaeological and historical materials that can be the subject to research on the new religion. For

¹⁹³ Colin Wells, review of: *Crossroads to Islam: The Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State*, Bryn Mawr Classical Review, vol. 2004.02.33 (retrieved from: <http://bmcr.brynmawr.edu>).

¹⁹⁴ David Cook, review of: *Crossroads to Islam: The Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State*, Middle East Quarterly, vol. 13, no. 4, 2006 (retrieved from <http://www.meforum.org/1038/crossroads-to-islam>).

¹⁹⁵ Jeremy Johns, *Archaeology And The History Of Early Islam: The First Seventy Years*, "Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient", vol. 46 (2003), p. 412 (fn. 1).

years, however, there are no archaeological discoveries bringing new quality into the narrative of earliest Islamic history from before the year 70 AH (690 CE). As Jones writes, during the construction and reconstruction works of the mosque complexes in Mecca and Medina, these sites “have been razed to the ground and completely rebuilt in such a manner as to deny any possibility of archaeological excavation, even were it to be permitted”¹⁹⁶. Due to the current, specific status of a large part of the Saudi Al-Ḥiğāz, carrying out archaeological works in this region (the more using Western critical methodology) remains impossible.

Or, maybe was the entire theory of Nevo yet another methodological experiment of the skeptical scholarship, to liven up the a bit uptight scholarly discipline? Nevo himself, however, does seem to take his research very seriously. Whatever the scholarly outcome of it all, as the historian of Islam Chase F. Robinson sees it, Nevo’s theory remains instructive on some counts: “(...) it shows just how much can be said – and how much power models can exert – when so little evidence remains”¹⁹⁷, and “(...) most importantly to those working so hard to understand the seventh-century history – it reorganises the field. Those of us who belong to what is conventionally known as the “critical” or “skeptical” school of early Islamic history, which holds that much of this history is unknowable in real detail because of the paucity of reliable sources, owe Yehuda Nevo (and Judith Koren) a great debt of gratitude”¹⁹⁸.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 433.

¹⁹⁷ Chase Robinson, “The Times Literary Supplement”, January 28, 2005 (retrieved from: <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/private/too-little-too-late/>)

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.