Empire and Elites after the Muslim Conquest

The study of the early Islamic historical tradition has flourished in recent years with the emergence of new and innovative scholarship no longer dependent on more traditional narratival approaches. Chase Robinson's book, which takes full account of the latest research, interweaves history and historiography to interpret the political, social and economic transformations in northern Mesopotamia after the Islamic conquests. Using Arabic and Syriac sources to elaborate his argument, the author focuses on the Muslim and Christian élites, demonstrating that the immediate effects of the conquests were in fact modest ones. Significant social change took place only at the end of the seventh century with the imposition of Marwānid rule. Even then, the author argues, social power was diffused in the hands of local élites. This is a sophisticated study at the cutting-edge of a burgeoning field in Islamic studies.

CHASE F. ROBINSON is University Lecturer in Islamic History at the University of Oxford, and a fellow of Wolfson College.

CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION

Published titles in the series are listed at the back of the book

Empire and Elites after the Muslim Conquest

The Transformation of Northern Mesopotamia

CHASE F. ROBINSON
University of Oxford

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011–4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, VIC 3166, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org

First published 2000

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Monotype Times New Roman *System* QuarkXPress™ [SE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 521 78115 9 hardback

To Emiko

Contents

Preface *page* viii
Acknowledgements xiii
List of abbreviations xiv
Note on dates and citations xv
Map: The Fertile Crescent in the early Abbasid period xvi

1 Conquest history and its uses 1
2 The seventh-century Jazira 33
3 From garrison to city: the birth of Mosul 63
4 Christian élites in the Mosuli hinterland: the *shahārija* 90
5 Islam in the north: Jaziran Khārijism 109
6 Massacre and narrative: the Abbasid Revolution in Mosul I 127
7 Massacre and élite politics: the Abbasid Revolution in Mosul II 147
Conclusion 165

Bibliography 172
Index 200

Preface

This study is intended to demonstrate that one can write Islamic provincial history in the post-conquest and Umayyad periods (c. 640–750 CE), a time for which the source material is patchy, late and frustratingly inconsistent. The book's method is to marry history and historiography; its concern is with Muslim and non-Muslim élites who lived in a peripheral area at a time of political and social change. The area – for the most part, present-day northern Syria and Iraq – was peripheral because the caliphs lived in the south, while the Muslim–Byzantine frontier lay to the north. It was a time of political and social change because, in defeating Byzantine and Sasanian armies, the Muslims would begin to transform a region heretofore divided between Byzantine east and Sasanian west into the northern tier of the Umayyad and Abbasid empires.

To write seventh- and eighth-century history we must come to terms with our sources; and as long as early Islamic archaeology, epigraphy, papyrology and numismatics remain as underdeveloped as they presently are, this means coming to terms with authors who wrote well after the events they describe. We are thus forced to rely in large measure on the learned élite's representation of its past, and, this being representation rather than record, we can no longer subordinate the study of early Islamic historiography to historical reconstruction. The reader may find frustrating the interweaving of history and historiography that follows; and he may frequently feel that he is taking two steps forward only to take a third back. But he can at least take consolation in being forewarned, and perhaps also in knowing that the approach reflects what is now twenty years of fierce debate – and measurable progress – in the study of the early Islamic historical tradition.

History and historiography are thus intertwined in several ways. We begin with northern Mesopotamia writ large, and then focus on the city of Mosul, then as now the principal city of northern Iraq. Although this plan certainly reflects the growing political significance of the city, it more closely corresponds to the quantity and quality of our sources. One can say something in detail about Mosul in the eighth century for the simple reason that a Mosuli native, Yazīd b. Muḥammad al-Azdī (d. c. 334/945) did, writing a history of Mosul that

survives in part; one can say nothing comparable about Edessa or Nisibis – to take two of the most obvious examples from western northern Mesopotamia (the Jazira) – because they failed to produce an Azdī. For provincial traditions of historiography grew where the soil was most fertile. The great Islamic conquests of the early seventh century set in motion waves of settlement and urbanisation whose ripples travelled up the Tigris as far as northern Iraq, producing early medieval Mosul; the result was an Islamic city recognisable not only by its institutions (e.g. mosques, tribal quarters, governing palaces), but also by its politics and élite culture more generally. Mosul inherited Nineveh's enviable position astride the Tigris, became an administrative and military centre early on, and, by the end of the eighth century, had established itself as an entrepôt for riverine trade to the heart of the empire. An ambitious élite was the result; and it was this élite that generated the learning out of which al-Azdī's city record – and thus ours too – emerged. More precisely, al-Azdī's historiography was produced by a maturing local historiographic tradition that found itself, at the turn of the tenth century, in one of the two capitals of an ambitious provincial dynasty (the Ḥamdānids), one that actively patronised learning and had an interest in the past (Umayyad and Abbasid); al-Azdī's exceptional interest in local tribes of a century and half earlier – that is, the very material on which we must base our account of Umayyad (and Abbasid) politics – is not unrelated to the (tribal) Ḥamdānid milieu in which he wrote.

By contrast, cities of the early Islamic Jazira such as Edessa and Nisibis suffered multiple misfortune. The Euphrates, Balīkh and Khābūr rivers, and even more so the Syrian steppe, failed to conduct the same forces of settlement and urbanisation as did the Tigris; and such Muslim settlement as there was in the Jazira on the whole seems to have been conditioned by opportunism and desperation, rather than by the Qurashī élite's enthusiasm. Moreover, if a fortuitous combination of geography and Christology had endowed these cities with disproportionate political and cultural significance in Christian Late Antiquity, they were quickly marginalised in the pattern of regional politics ushered in by the conquests: too far south to serve as effective garrisons on the northern frontier on the one hand, and so well skilled in expressing local identity in Christian terms on the other, they had little appeal to, and apparently little interest in, the Muslim élite. Syriac learning, at least as measured by the barometer of (non-Edessan) historiography, more and more retreated to the monasteries; but Islamic learning did little to fill the consequent breach, most of it being concentrated in al-Raqqa. Writing a history of Mosul might fairly be called re-writing al-Azdī, whereas writing a history of the Jazira is writing almost *ex nihilo*. The present book's coverage illustrates precisely this. The experience of cities within the early Islamic north thus contrasts sharply, and it is precisely from the contrast that lessons can be learned; this is the principal reason why I treat together an area that was politically divided in the pre-Islamic period by the Byzantine–Sasanian frontier, and administratively divided in the early Islamic period.

Chapter 1 replaces the conventional survey of sources with a close examination of the conquest traditions of the Jazira and Mosul; the purpose of the chapter is not simply to distinguish what is valuable for reconstructing conquest history from what is not, but to draw some conclusions about the character of the conquest tradition and that of early Islamic rule itself. We shall see that the conquest tradition does provide invaluable evidence for understanding the conquests; but in greater amounts it records the controversies that arose as the post-conquest north was transformed into two imperial provinces, controversies conducted by the Christian and Muslim urban élites who shared the stewardship of what were now Abbasid cities. This transformation is the topic of chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5.

In the Jaziran west, a relatively loose, tribute-based rule in the post-conquest period yielded to a relatively formal, taxation-based provincial administration during the late seventh and eighth centuries (chapter 2); it was only with the imposition of direct Muslim rule under the Marwānids that the increasingly articulated state began to make consistent claims to sovereignty, these being expressed principally in the demand for provincial revenues. Here in the Jazira, where Syrian authority remained attenuated throughout the post-conquest and Sufyānid periods (c. 640–85), conquest had had but a minimal effect on local élites; the social power of some urban Christian notables, who seem to have enjoyed virtual autonomy, may have actually increased. It was also in the early Marwānid Jazira, when Muslims began to rule in earnest, that we begin to discern a form of Islamic belief (Khārijism) that took hold among some of those members of the Islamic élite who had failed to sedentarise in the wake of the conquests, particularly those who had material grievances of one kind or another (chapter 5). Stubbornly insisting on a conquest-era fusion of kinship, piety and undifferentiated *jihād*, Jaziran Khārijites illustrate how articulating primeval Islamic belief could channel what might otherwise have been mere banditry on the part of pastoralists and semi-pastoralists into a coherent (if ultimately futile) programme of rebellion. These Khārijites were an ascetic élite, one that acquired its status by exemplifying the community's passing virtues.

Meanwhile, in the Mosuli east, a garrison founded and ruled by Kufans was transformed by the Marwānids into what turned out to be an unruly city (chapter 3). Mosul, which lay on the western bank of the Tigris, now eclipsed the Sasanian settlement that had grown in the weeds of ancient Nineveh on its eastern bank, the shift from garrison to city being neither gradual nor natural, but rather resulting from a Marwānid commitment of resources and energies that established Syrian rule in Mosul for the first time. In practice this meant appointing kinsmen to rule as governors, and acquiring and developing land; the result was the partial eclipse of a conquest élite by a land-owning élite. The signs of Mosul's transformation appear not only in brick and mortar, but in the pattern of politics itself, since the urban forces that the Marwānids unleashed overtook them within two generations. In the Mosuli hinterland,

where imperial pressure was considerably lighter and Arab settlement all but non-existent, change was predictably much slower (chapter 4). Here a landed gentry formed the élite of a number of towns and villages, retaining their (deviant) Christianity and their land until well into the Abbasid period.

In chapters 6 and 7 I turn to the first and greatest crisis of state–provincial relations in the early medieval history of Mosul: the dreadful massacre committed by the Abbasid army only months after its defeat of the last Umayyad caliph, Marwān II, on the nearby Zāb river in 132/750. Since al-Azdī's description of the events is exceptionally valuable, here too my method is to carry out historiographic and historical inquiries in tandem. That the Marwānid city could become unruly reflects a truism of pre-modern Islamic social history: limitations imposed by technology and geography meant that state power was almost always made effective by locals, rather than by its agents and armies. What makes the case of late Marwānid and early Abbasid Mosul noteworthy is our evidence, which allows us a glimpse of state–local relations a century before they can be discerned elsewhere. Here we can see that the so-called 'politics of notables', whereby locals acquired (or preserved) social power by acting as intermediaries between the state and provincial subjects, did not simply appear, perhaps in accordance with some kind of centre–periphery functionalism unmoored in history; rather, locals and imperialists (the categories overlap) only reluctantly made their way towards compromise. For a relatively brief historical moment, provincials seem to have experimented with autonomy.

In different ways then, these chapters are all generally concerned with how two provinces experienced projections of power from the south and west, which varied in intensity and character; they are particularly concerned with how provincial élites, indigenous and immigrant alike, responded to the opportunities and challenges posed by the conquests, the Marwānids, and finally the Abbasid Revolution. By 'élites' I mean those social groups whose assertions of high status were underpinned by economic and/or cultural resources, these being principally (but not exclusively) land, descent, history and piety – the economic, cultural and symbolic 'capital' of some contemporary sociology. Whether these groups had a clear sense of corporate identity – the 'collective consciousness' sometimes held necessary for the designation of class – is usually impossible to determine, but in my view less significant than the effectiveness with which they broadcast their claims; with one exception (the Khārijites), all of these élites did enjoy some real and enduring success. It almost goes without saying that the picture is incomplete, focused in spots and unfocused in others, sometimes still and sometimes moving; the evidence rarely allows us to describe the élites as the dynamic, self-reproducing things that they generally are. Still, it is clear enough that the driving force of social change for these élites – their creation, adaptation, transformation and disappearance – was power projected by the Qurashī clans that ruled successively from Medina, Syria and Iraq, and which, starting in the last decade of the

seventh century, began to construct a framework for their own long-term reproduction: a dynastic state.

The speed and character of change among the élites of northern Mesopotamia were determined by the confluence of history, settlement and geography that distinguished the Jazira and Mosul from other regions – and indeed from each other. On its western flank a part of Syria, and on its eastern flank a part of Iraq, northern Mesopotamia can shed some light on early Islamic state building in both its Umayyad and Abbasid phases.

Acknowledgements

The publication of this book is the final instalment in a process of thinking, researching and writing that was longer than I care to admit, and this is something that I mention only in order to thank Roy Mottahedeh, who helped set it into motion, and William Graham, Wolfhart Heinrichs, Michael Cook and Fred Donner, who kindly read an early version; the last showed an exceptional kindness in sharing not only his knowledge of Mosul with a very green researcher, but indeed the topic itself. Since then I have also benefited from the expertise of Michael Morony, Sebastian Brock, Jeremy Johns, Donald Richards and Luke Treadwell, the last four members of the Faculty of Oriental Studies at Oxford University; no scholar could reasonably wish for a more pleasant place to work. Aloysious Mowe, Peter Starr and Mary Starkey improved the manuscript in several ways, Rachel Ward helped to choose and secured the cover illustration, and Marigold Acland and David Morgan deftly guided the book through the Press. To Lawrence Conrad, Patricia Crone and Emikam Elad, who read and criticised the penultimate draft of what follows, I have incurred still more costly debts. But it is two of the happier features of research and writing that readers' debts can occasionally be repaid, and that their investment in time and effort entails no real risks; these the author takes alone.

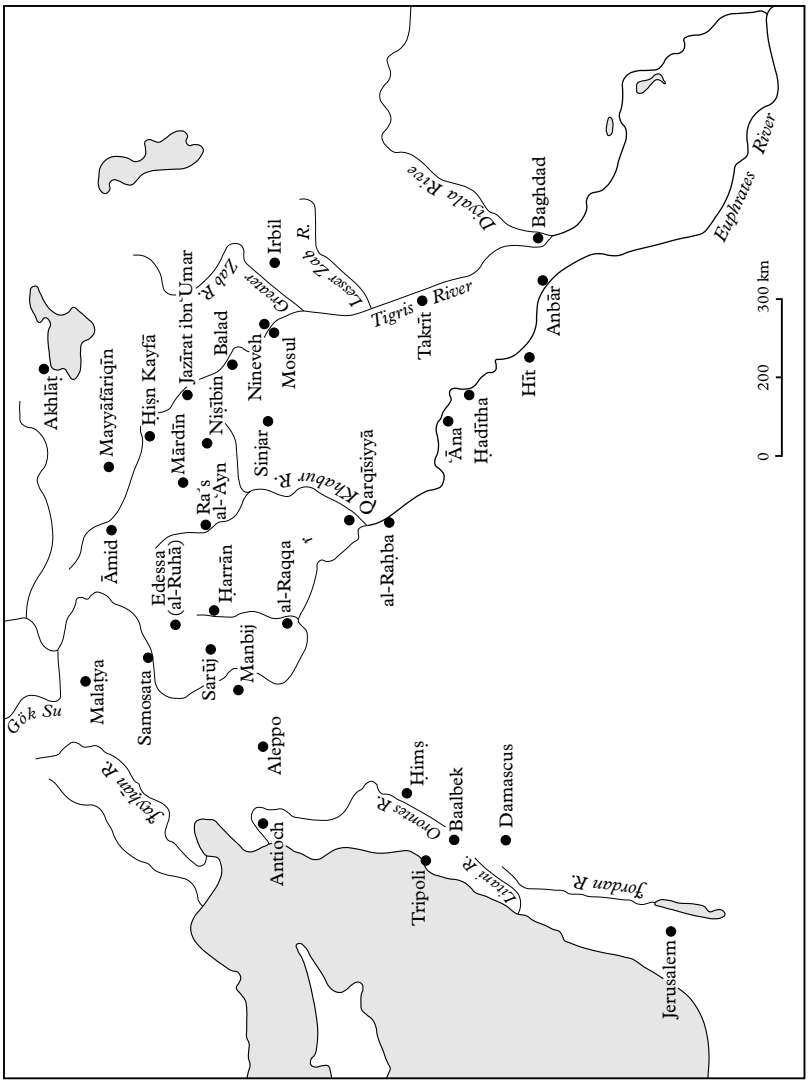
Abbreviations

BSOAS	*Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*
CSCO	*Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*
DI	*Der Islam*
EI	*Encyclopaedia of Islam*
EI^2	*Encyclopaedia of Islam* (second edition)
GAL	C. Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Literatur*
GAS	F. Sezgin, *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums*
IJMES	*International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*
JA	*Journal Asiatique*
JAOS	*Journal of the American Oriental Society*
JESHO	*Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*
JNES	*Journal of Near Eastern Studies*
JRAS	*Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*
JSAI	*Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*
PO	*Patrologia Orientalis*
SI	*Studia Islamica*
ZDMG	*Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*

Note on dates and citations

For the sake of simplicity, I use Christian dates throughout, but in order to remain faithful to the sources cited, I frequently add *hijrī* dates as well. It is in the nature of this period of history that all death dates should be preceded by an implicit *circa*; these generally come with both sets of dates, in the form of *hijrī*/Christian.

Whereas very few of the Islamic sources used in this study have been translated, nearly all of the Christian sources (mostly Syriac) do exist in translations, almost always in Latin, and quite frequently in modern European languages; these I have cited in the form of Syriac/translation.



The Fertile Crescent in the early Abbasid period