



# THE ISLAMIZATION OF THE HOLY LAND, 634–1800

by  
**MICHAEL EHRLICH**

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To my parents  
Hannah (née Friedländer) and Felix Ehrlich  
*In memoriam*

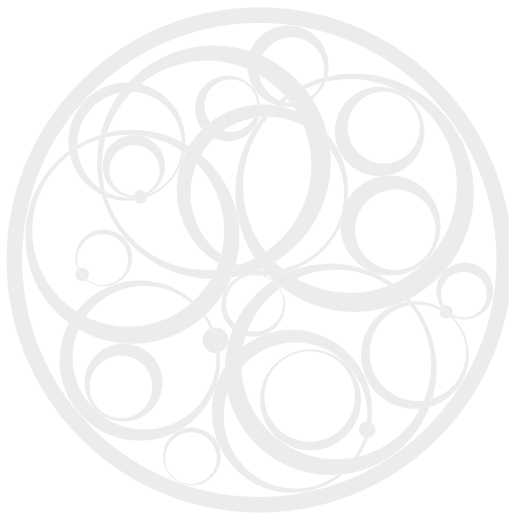
## **PREFACE**

**THIS BOOK IS** the product of several undergraduate courses and seminars I have taught during the last few years about conversion, urbanization, pilgrimage, and migration in the Middle East. Many of its concepts, insights, and ideas were developed and crystallized during the courses' preparation and through discussions held with my students. I am grateful to them for their collaboration and feedback. Many friends and colleagues shared their vast knowledge with me and helped me finish this ambitious project. We have discussed different related subjects, and they shared publications with me and provided me with photos and illustrations: Prof. Mustafa Abbasi, Prof. Reuven Amitai, Arie Bar, Prof. Haim Ben-David, Dr. Katia Cytryn-Silverman, Dr. Eyal Davidson, Prof. Nahem Ilan, Dr. Raphael Lewis, Prof. Joseph Patrich, Ron Peled, Dr. Kate Raphael, Meir Roter, Dr. Doron Sar-Avi, Raffi Shalev, and Prof. Yinon Shvitiel. I also miss the fruitful discussions with my colleague Prof. Ronnie Ellenblum, who passed away a year ago. We seldom agreed, but his innovative, intriguing, and sometimes provocative ideas and insights significantly contributed to this research. I am always in debt to my great teachers, Prof. Yvonne Friedman and Prof. Yaacov Lev, who accompanied my career from its earliest stages. I often discussed this book with them, and they were always kind, supportive, responsive, and insightful.

Arc Humanities Press staff have been professional and helpful. I would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewer, whose comments were greatly beneficial and significantly improved the book's final version. I am also grateful to Marty Friedlander for editing the book's final version.

My family continuously tolerated me during the long process of this book's writing, including the challenging days of quarantine we experienced. My eldest son Yishay was the first to read the book and made many helpful and valuable comments. I want to heartfully thank him, my other children, Netta and Gilad, and especially my wife Bracha. It would have been impossible to bring this project to an end without their love and support.

Jerusalem, January 2022





## Chapter I

# INTRODUCTION

**WHEN THE PROPHET** Muhammad died in 632 CE, Syria was a battered region. It had been afflicted by frequent outbreaks of the “Justinianic Plague” for nearly a century and was still recovering from the recent Sasanian conquest in 614 and Byzantine reconquest in 629.<sup>1</sup> These events facilitated the Muslim conquest of Syria, starting in 634. This conquest, and the various processes and events that followed it, eventually led to the conversion to Islam of most of the local population. Conversion occurred in many other regions, as well. In most areas conquered by the Muslims around the Mediterranean, religious conversion was accompanied by a shift from the vernacular languages to Arabic, emigration of local elites and immigration of Muslims, many of them Arabs, and changes in the urban network, as well as substantial changes to the plans of those Roman–Byzantine cities that continued to exist during the Early Islamic period.

The aim of this book is to answer three basic questions: when, where, and under what circumstances did the majority of the Holy Land’s population become Muslim? Its working hypothesis is that the causes that led to the conversion of most of the Holy Land’s population, as well as the survival of some religious communities, are essentially social and geographic in nature, rather than theological. Namely, conditions in some regions facilitated conversion, whereas in other areas they did not. Consequently, local communities in those areas resisted conversion more vigorously. This book does not deal with issues such as the economic or social pressure exerted by Muslim authorities. Those measures were presumably imposed indiscriminately on all religious communities, in all regions, and in rural areas as well as urban ones.

I suggest that two parallel processes were the main catalysts of Islamization: de-urbanization and urbanization. In areas where existing urban nuclei were abolished, nearby rural communities converted to Islam. Similarly, the establishment of an urban centre in a previously rural region facilitated the conversion of the nearby villages’ populations. However, in areas where the pre-existing cities endured, the minorities managed to survive. In my opinion, the continuous existence of cities over the centuries allowed for the survival of religious and social institutions, which played a vital role in the survival of urban and rural religious communities. However, wherever these cities ceased to exist, the religious communities collapsed.<sup>2</sup> The communities’ collapse gave

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\* Abbreviations used in the notes are listed at the head of the Bibliography below. To ease finding the full citations, all works cited in the Bibliography are only given in short form below. If pagination is not indicated then the whole article or book is meant.

**1** Hugh Kennedy, “Justinianic Plague in Syria and the Archaeological Evidence,” in *Plague and the End of Antiquity*, ed. Lester K. Little (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 8–98; Schick, *The Christian Communities*, 68–84.

**2** Fierro, “The Islamisation of al-Andalus,” 202; Mikel de Epalza, “Falta de obispos y conversion al Islam de los cristianos de Al-Ándalus,” *Al-Qantara* 15 (1994): 385–400 at 388–90.

rise to emigration of the elites, as well as conversion of the remaining followers of the religion who remained behind. This emigration was often accompanied by the immigration of a Muslim population.

Arab tribes migrated to the Holy Land throughout the Byzantine period. These tribes converted to Christianity, and later to Islam, through a different mechanism that is typical to tribal societies.<sup>3</sup> Tribal conversion is usually initiated by a foreigner, such as Saint Remi in the case of Clovis, or the rabbi in the story of the Khazars' conversion to Judaism.<sup>4</sup> I will not address the historicity of these events. Nevertheless, they faithfully reflect the mechanism of tribal conversion. Ordinarily, tribal chiefs were reluctant to initiate such processes. The introduction of a new religion risks potential discontent from the dignitaries whose positions could be jeopardized by the changes. Likewise, chiefs were intolerant toward conversion attempts initiated by inferior members of the tribe. Such a proposal was likely to be interpreted as an infringement of the chief's authority. The conversion is usually characterized by a swift, top-to-bottom process. The conversion includes the entirety of the tribe. Those who do not convert usually leave the tribe.<sup>5</sup>

In the 630s, when the Muslims conquered the Holy Land, the local population included Christians, Jews, and Samaritans.<sup>6</sup> The relative size of these groups is unknown, but it is universally accepted that the Christians were the largest community. It is also accepted that during the Byzantine period, the Holy Land's Samaritan and Jewish communities underwent a long process of decline.<sup>7</sup> In the late Byzantine period, Christian communities existed almost everywhere in the country. According to Gil, the Christian inhabitants of Jerusalem were mainly Chalcedonians. However, he suggested that a large percentage of the Christians who lived in the countryside belonged to non-Chalcedonian churches.<sup>8</sup> Hagith Sivan demonstrated that non-Chalcedonians who lived in the region of Gaza lost ground during the sixth and seventh centuries. Thus, it seems likely that the Chalcedonian church became increasingly dominant throughout most of the Holy Land shortly before the Muslim conquest. Nevertheless, non-Chalcedonians were still numerous in areas such as the Negev and the Decapolis.<sup>9</sup> The Samaritans mainly lived in the region around Neapolis (Nablus) and in the coastal plain, whereas most of the

**3** Gil, *A History of Palestine*, 18–20.

**4** Yehuda HaLevy, *The Kuzari*, 141–42, 656–71; Michel Rouche, *Clovis* (Paris: Fayard, 1996), 253–85; Carole M. Cusack, *Conversion Among the Germanic Peoples* (London: Cassell, 1998), 63–87; Peter B. Golden, "The Conversion of the Khazars to Judaism," in *The World of the Khazars*, ed. Peter B. Golden, Haggai Ben-Shammai, and András Róna-Tas (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 123–62.

**5** Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period*, 114.

**6** Avni, *Byzantine–Islamic Transition*, 333–37.

**7** Lee I. Levine, "Between Rome and Byzantium in Jewish History: Documentation, Reality, and the Issue of Periodization," in *Continuity and Renewal: Jews and Judaism in Byzantine-Christian Palestine*, ed. Lee I. Levine (Jerusalem: Dinur Centre for the Study of Jewish History, 2004), 22–40 [in Hebrew]; Hagith Sivan, *Palestine in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 16–48, 113; Pummer, *The Samaritans*, 35.

**8** Gil, *A History of Palestine*, 447–48.

**9** Sivan, *Palestine in Late Antiquity*, 342–43.

Jews lived in the Galilee region, especially in Tiberias and its vicinity, and in the coastal cities. However, Samaritans and Jews also lived beyond these cities and their environs. Samaritan rebellions during the fifth and sixth centuries were crushed by the Byzantines and as a result, the main Samaritan communities began to decline.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the Jewish community strove to recover from the catastrophic results of the Bar Kokhva revolt (132–135 CE). Although some of these attempts were relatively successful, the Jews never fully recovered. During the Late Roman and Byzantine periods, many Jews emigrated to thriving centres in the diaspora, especially Iraq,<sup>11</sup> whereas some converted to Christianity and others continued to live in the Holy Land, especially in Galilee and the coastal plain.<sup>12</sup>

During the Byzantine period, the three provinces of Palestine included more than thirty cities, namely, settlements with a bishop see.<sup>13</sup> After the Muslim conquest in the 630s, most of these cities declined and eventually disappeared. As a result, in many cases the local ecclesiastical administration weakened, while in others it simply ceased to exist. Consequently, many local Christians converted to Islam. Thus, almost twelve centuries later, when the army led by Napoleon Bonaparte arrived in the Holy Land, most of the local population was Muslim. Only Nablus and Jerusalem maintained their urban status throughout the entire period. In my opinion, it is not a coincidence that religious minorities survived in these two cities. To this day, Jerusalem is the see of a Greek Orthodox patriarchate, whereas Nablus is the centre of the Samaritan religion. Both of these cities include a relatively substantial community of its respective religion's adherents. The fates of other cities varied. Some cities, such as Acre, were destroyed and later rebuilt,<sup>14</sup> while others, such as Caesarea, declined until their eventual abandonment;<sup>15</sup> some other cities, such as Sepphoris, became townships or villages.<sup>16</sup> Non-muslim indigenous communities did not survive in these cities. However, indigenous communities did survive in places such as Safed, which was a village until the Crusader period, and Gaza, which declined before the Crusader period. Safed emerged as a city and Gaza re-emerged during the Mamluk period.

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**10** Alan D. Crown, "The Byzantine and Muslim Period," in *The Samaritans*, by Alan D. Crown (Tübingen: Mohr, 1989), 70–78 at 72–74; Pummer, *The Samaritans*, 139–41.

**11** In Jewish sources Iraq is usually called Babylon.

**12** Ze'ev Safrai, *The Missing Century* (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 73; Uzi Leibner, "The End of the Amoraic Period in the Land of Israel: Periodization, History, and Archaeology," *Tarbiz* 86 (2019): 575–610 at 576–80 [in Hebrew].

**13** Arnold H. M. Jones, *The Cities of the Eastern Roman Provinces*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), 278–81; Philip Zymaris, "Episcopacy," in *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, ed. John A. McGuckin (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011) 1: 222–24; Avni, *Byzantine–Islamic Transition*, 354–55.

**14** Cohen, *Palestine in the Eighteenth Century*, 128–29; Thomas Philipp, *Acre: The Rise and the Fall of a Palestinian City 1730–1831* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 6–7.

**15** Kenneth G. Holum, *King Herod's Dream: Caesarea on the Sea* (New York: Norton, 1988), 237–41; Yael D. Arnon. *Caesarea Maritima: The Late Periods* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2008), 12.

**16** Seth Ward, "Sepphoris in Sacred Topography," in *Galilee through the Centuries*, ed. Eric M. Meyers (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 391–406 at 391–96.

The Holy Land is the fertile region closest to *al-Hijāz*, namely the western region of the Arabian Peninsula. Therefore, it probably would have attracted many immigrants from the arid neighbouring peninsula. This is likely, because in normal circumstances, migrants tend to travel short distances.<sup>17</sup> Such immigration also occurred during earlier periods but was intensified during the Early-Islamic period. However, although some Muslims did immigrate to the Holy Land, as well as to other adjacent regions, many others did not intend to settle in the nearest fertile region, but rather to conquer vast territories far beyond it. Nevertheless, the Muslim armies were of limited size, a fundamental datum that dictated many of their actions.<sup>18</sup> Thus, they tended to conquer cities by agreement rather than by force, and did not leave behind large garrisons and large groups of settlers.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, most of the Muslims who participated in the conquest of the Holy Land did not settle there, but continued on to further destinations. For most of the Muslims who settled in the Holy Land were either Arabs who immigrated before the Muslim conquest and then converted to Islam, or Muslims who immigrated after the Holy Land's conquest. Both groups constituted a tiny minority among a mostly Christian population. The residents of the Byzantine Empire, especially those who lived in urban settlements, considered the Arab conquerors to be inferior, barbaric, and even non-human or bestial creatures. If so, how did the Muslims manage to convert most of the Holy Land's population? Many of them considered the Christian defeat by the Arabs to be a manifestation of God's wrath. Sophronius, the last patriarch of Byzantine Jerusalem, wrote:

The godless Saracens entered the holy city of Christ our Lord, Jerusalem, with the permission of God and in punishment for our negligence.... They took with them men, some by force, others by their own will, in order to clean that place and to build that cursed thing intended for their prayer, and which they call a mosque.<sup>20</sup>

A strong and vigorous sceptre to break the pride of all the barbarians, and especially of the Saracens who, on account of our sins, have now risen against us unexpectedly and ravage all with cruel and feral design, with impious and godless audacity.<sup>21</sup>

Maximus the Confessor, who died in 662, also described the miseries he experienced:

For indeed, what is more dire than the evils which today afflict the world.... To see a barbarous people of the desert overrunning another's lands as though they were their own; to see civilisation itself being ravaged by wild and untamed beasts whose form alone is human.<sup>22</sup>

**17** Ernst G. Ravenstein, "The Laws of Migration," *Journal of the Statistical Society* 48, no. 2 (1885): 167–227 at 198.

**18** Fred M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 119; Hoyland, *In God's Path*, 42; J. W. Jandora, "Developments in Islamic Warfare: The Early Conquests," *Studia Islamica* 64 (1986): 101–13; Hugh Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests* (Philadelphia: Da Capo, 2008), 57; Levtzion, "Toward a Comparative Study of Islamization," 8.

**19** Ehrlich, "From Church and Forum to Mosque and Süq," 298–301.

**20** Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 63.

**21** Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 69.

**22** Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 78.

Such texts manifest the notion held by Byzantine elites. However, I suggest that although Samaritans, Jews, and non-Chalcedonian Christians were happy to see the Byzantine authorities and supporters leave, they did not admire the Muslim conquerors. On the contrary, they had not struggled to preserve their religion and way of life under the hostile Byzantine regime merely to convert to Islam shortly afterwards. Moreover, the Muslims did not coerce people to convert; on the contrary, they allowed conquered populations to retain their properties and to continue practicing their religions.<sup>23</sup> These people were defined as People of the Book (*ahl al-Kitāb*), and they became protected persons (*ahl al-Dimma*). These conditions should have enabled the continuation of the previous situation, meaning that the local Christian majority should have been preserved. Had the Christians retained their social status, many Muslims would probably have converted to Christianity or left the area. Yet, the opposite occurred. Most of the so-called “civilized” population eventually converted to Islam.

The Holy Land’s transformation from an area populated mainly by Christians into a region whose population was predominantly Muslim was the result of two processes: immigration and conversion. I will demonstrate that while local Christian, Jewish, and Samaritan inhabitants emigrated from the Holy Land, Muslims, many of them Arab, immigrated to the area. Additionally, many of the non-Muslims who remained in their homes converted to Islam over the centuries, through various processes. The pace of Islamization of Christian, Jewish, and Samaritan communities varied, even within the same region. Christian communities managed to survive in larger numbers than Jewish and Samaritan ones, either because they were better organized or because of their superior numbers, or for both reasons. Jewish communities, which were on the verge of extinction, recovered following the arrival of Jews from various diaspora communities, whereas Christian immigration was limited, and Samaritan immigration was rare.<sup>24</sup>

## Chronological and Geographical Scope

This book deals with the Islamization of the Holy Land’s population from 634 until 1800 CE. The area called the “Holy Land” includes the modern-day State of Israel and the Palestinian Authority, as well as the western administrative governorates of the Kingdom of Jordan, from Irbid in the north to Karak in the south, and South Lebanon up to the Litani River (see Map 1 below). This terminology is useful because the region’s borders have changed in the course of the different periods. Byzantine Palestine included an extensive area now included in northern and southern Jordan but excluded important regions such as the southern district of Phoenicia. The Early Islamic period provinces of *Jund Filasṭīn* and *Jund al-Urdunn* included Phoenicia but excluded the southern districts of modern-day Israel and Jordan. At its zenith, the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem also included areas beyond the scope of this study, to the north of Beirut. Be that as it may, the Crusader Kingdom was never called Palestine.

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<sup>23</sup> Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims in the Early-Muslim Empire*, 32–34.

<sup>24</sup> Pummer, *The Samaritans*, 159–60.

The names “Palestine” and “the Holy Land” were used interchangeably by Western medieval and early modern authors, who often referred to Biblical and classical borders. In the late nineteenth century, the London-based Palestine Exploration Fund published an extensive survey titled *The Survey of Western Palestine*. This voluminous work included modern-day Israel, excluding some significant regions such as the Negev desert. It also included the Palestinian territories, except the southern part of the Gaza Strip, and South Lebanon up to the Litanī River.<sup>25</sup> The title “Western Palestine” implies that the fund’s researchers considered the Jordan River’s eastern bank to be Eastern Palestine. Yet, today this division is irrelevant. The use of modern terms such as Palestine, Israel, or Jordan is, of course, inaccurate and anachronistic. Through the course of history, these toponyms referred to different areas than the ones they demarcate today. Therefore, “The Holy Land” seems the most adequate name for describing the area included in this study.

The chronological span of this book is divided into five main periods: Early Islamic (634–1099), Crusader (1099–1260), Ayyubid (1187–1250), Mamluk (1260–1517), and Early Ottoman (1517–1800). Before the seventh century, Islam did not exist, but Arabs lived in the area and Arab tribes migrated to the Holy Land and its vicinity during the centuries that preceded the Muslim conquest.<sup>26</sup> These Arabs spoke Arabic, so there was a certain degree of knowledge of Arabic in the region prior to the Muslim conquest.

I decided to limit the scope of this book to the end of the eighteenth century, since the events and innovations introduced during the following century caused dramatic changes in the Holy Land’s demography. These events included the growing involvement of foreign powers in Middle Eastern affairs, and especially in the Holy Land, since Napoleon’s invasion in 1798–1799, the vast Egyptian immigration during the nineteenth century’s first half,<sup>27</sup> and eventually the increasing Jewish immigration beginning in the early nineteenth century, culminating in the immigration of the proto-Zionists who established new Jewish settlements from 1882 onward.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, the great advancements made in naval transport made the Holy Land much more accessible.<sup>29</sup> Presumably, the demographic changes in the Holy Land during the nearly twelve hundred years covered in this volume (excluding the Crusader period) were primarily induced by local or regional forces. The events from 1800 onward were connected to global occurrences that were not necessarily related to the Middle Eastern reality.

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**25** Charles Warren and Claude Reignier Conder, *The Survey of Western Palestine*, 9 vols. (London: Palestine Exploration Fund, 1882).

**26** Irfan Shahīd, “Arab Christianity in Byzantine Palestine,” *Aram* 15 (2003): 227–37.

**27** Reuven Aharoni and Gideon Kressel, “Egyptian Immigrants in the Bilad Al-Sham,” *Jama’a* 12 (2004): 201–48.

**28** Arie Morgenstern, *The Return to Jerusalem: The Jewish Resettlement of Israel 1800–1860* (Jerusalem: Shalem, 2007) [in Hebrew].

**29** Ruth Kark, *Jaffa: A City in Evolution 1799–1917* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 1990), 220; Leila Tarazi-Fawaz, *Merchants and Migrants in Nineteenth Century Beirut* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 61–84.



Map 1: Map of the Holy Land including regional subdivisions (© Reuven Soffer).

This book focuses on five areas. In chapter 2: the Coastal Plain, including the *Shefela* (i.e., the foothills of the Judean mountains); chapter 3: Western, Lower, and Upper Galilee, *Jabal ʿAmil*, the *Decapolis* region, and the Golan Heights; chapter 4: Samaria; chapter 5: Jerusalem and the Judean Mountains, including the region of Karak; and chapter 6: the Negev.

I maintain that there are substantial differences between the nature of these regions' Islamization and its pace. Even neighbouring regions, such as Lower and Upper Galilee, underwent independent and different processes. Therefore, a holistic view of the area requires researching them independently of one another.

### Conversion and Islamization

According to Andrew Peacock, Islamization includes aspects that extend beyond mere religious conversion.<sup>30</sup> Peacock notes that scholars sometimes use "Islamization" as a synonym for "conversion to Islam." Nonetheless, in the book he edited, "Islamization," he does not enforce a single definition of Islamization, but expresses hope that the "wide variety of ways in which Islamization can be understood is reflected in the various essays collected here."<sup>31</sup> Such an attitude is laudable in a collection of essays. However, other authors have used their own definitions for Islamization, and in this book, I will use my own.

<sup>30</sup> Peacock, "Introduction: Comparative Perspectives of Islamisation," 1–8.

<sup>31</sup> Peacock, "Introduction: Comparative Perspectives of Islamisation," 9–10.



I define the process of Islamization on the basis of three criteria: first, religious conversion; second, Arabization, i.e., the replacement of vernacular languages with Arabic; and third, “Islamization of the Landscape.”<sup>32</sup> Religious conversion is an obvious criterion for Islamization, but Arabization is not. There are millions of non-Muslims whose first language is Arabic, while most of the Muslims around the world do not speak Arabic. In some areas of Greater Syria, Iraq, and North Africa, communities became Arabic-speaking without converting to Islam. However, in most cases, wherever Arabic replaced earlier vernacular languages, many of their speakers adopted Islam. Therefore, conversion is the only *condicio sine qua non* for Islamization. However, even though the other two processes are not obligatory, they have both occurred in the Holy Land.

The term “Islamization of the Landscape” was coined by Yehoshua Frenkel and Nimrod Luz. However, these scholars mostly dealt with the “Islamization of the Landscape” during the Mamluk period. They referred to the increasing numbers of Islamic elements in the topography of the Holy Land, such as mosques, shaykhs’ tombs, etc. in the local landscape during this period. Jacob Lassner studied different aspects of Islamization in Umayyad Jerusalem as well.<sup>33</sup> I suggest a different perspective. Even though the Holy Land’s landscape became dotted with elements such as monumental mosques (some of which were formerly Crusader churches) and shaykhs’ tombs during the Mamluk period, these processes began much earlier. Likewise, Umayyad Jerusalem is a unique case, and so, basing a general theory about the Islamization of the Holy Land in the Umayyad period on it is problematic. I shall refer hereafter to Islamization of the Landscape in a much broader sense: the shifting of capital cities, the abolition of fora as well as of leisure facilities, and so on, throughout the centuries that followed the Muslim conquest.

A fundamental study related to these issues is Hugh Kennedy’s 1985 ground-breaking article “From *Polis* to *Madina*: Urban Change in Late Antique and Early Islamic Syria.”<sup>34</sup> Kennedy, who does not deal with conversion in his article, clearly demonstrated that the Arab conquest of Syria was accompanied by extensive cultural changes in the urban sphere. I suggest that changes occurred in rural settlements as well, and that those changes played a vital role in the Islamization of the rural segments of the Holy Land’s population.

## The Ocean and the Islands

Between 634, when the first Muslim forces arrived in the Holy Land, and 1800, the religious profile of the local population altered dramatically. What had been an area with a Christian majority and substantial Jewish and Samaritan minorities became home to

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**32** Yehoshua Frenkel, “Baybars and the Sacred Geography of Bilād al-Shām: a Chapter in the Islamization of Syria’s Landscape,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 25 (2001): 153–70; Luz, “Aspects of Islamization.”

**33** Jacob Lassner, *Medieval Jerusalem: Forging an Islamic City in Spaces Sacred to Christians and Jews* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 60–80.

**34** Kennedy, “From *Polis* to *Madina*.”



an overwhelmingly Muslim majority, with several Christian communities, a few Jewish communities, and a handful of Samaritans.<sup>35</sup> Yet, although it is undeniable that by the start of the Ottoman period a large majority of the Holy Land's population was Muslim, a close examination clearly reveals that there were substantial regional variations in the degree of conversion, and that the various religious communities converted at different times and through diverse processes. Moreover, while it is true that over the centuries most of the region's population converted to Islam, some religious communities did manage to survive. What was it that enabled those communities' survival?

I suggest that the durability of communities was largely dependent on the survival of religious administration. Religious administration, especially Christian, was usually an urban institution. As mentioned above, almost none of the Holy Land's cities were continuously inhabited as cities between the Muslim conquest and 1800. I suggest that the collapse of cities provoked a chain reaction that led to the abolition of bishoprics, and eventually to the conversion to Islam of most of the region's population. In Jerusalem, the surviving local patriarchate supported the local Christian community of Jerusalem and Bethlehem, which still exists today.<sup>36</sup> Other Christian enclaves survived around Nazareth and in the southern district of modern-day Jordan.<sup>37</sup>

## Sources

"Why, in the abundant medieval Arabic literature devoted to the religious community of Islam, is there so little information on conversion to that religion?"<sup>38</sup> Bulliet's question faithfully describes one of the main obstacles in writing about medieval conversions in the Islamic world. The paucity of conversion stories is also typical of the Holy Land. Sources regarding conversion are scarce. There are narratives about tribal conversions, but the grassroots conversions of rural and urban communities were usually long processes, which, in many cases, were only mentioned in passing by contemporaries. And since most of the Holy Land's residents lived in cities and villages, documentation of their conversion process is very poor. Most existing documents are from the Crusader period or later. Some of them, such as *waqfiyyat*, may indicate the religious profile of a certain population. Likewise, pilgrim accounts occasionally reference details such as the ethnicity and religion of a region's inhabitants. However, narrative sources about the history of a certain region are rare. A contemporary chronicle, such as the Chronicle of Zuqnīn, which describes the hardships which befell a Christian community in northern Syria in detail, does not exist in the Holy Land.<sup>39</sup> The most similar source, a Samaritan

**35** Schick, *The Christian Communities*, 12–13.

**36** Pacini, "Socio-Political and Community Dynamics," 279.

**37** Pacini, "Socio-Political and Community Dynamics," 272; Marcus Milwright, *The Fortress of the Raven* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 51.

**38** Richard W. Bulliet, "Conversion Stories in Early Islam," in *Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands, Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Michael Gervers and Ramzi J. Bikhazi (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), 123–33.

**39** *The Chronicle of Zuqnīn*, trans. Harrak.

chronicle published by Milka Levy-Rubin to be discussed below, reused earlier materials, but was composed five hundred years after the events it describes.<sup>40</sup> According to Levy-Rubin, based on comparison with other sources, the author used materials of a contemporary well-acquainted individual, who, generally speaking, should be trusted as a reliable source.<sup>41</sup> A similar attitude should be applied to al-Ashrafānī's book *Umdat al-'Arāfīn*,<sup>42</sup> a seventeenth-century history book which chronicles the Druze history since its inception in the eleventh century. It includes many otherwise unknown details about the dawn of this religion's history. This information seems to be reasonable; namely, it provides a logical explanation to the situation in al-Ashrafānī's days, and it does not contradict other reliable sources. However, since in many cases it is a single information source, it should be used cautiously.

Since 1997, Moshe Sharon has published a corpus of Arabic inscriptions from modern day Israel and Palestinian territories up to the letter "J" (including the first Jerusalem volume).<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, as far as this research is concerned, the information included in such a corpus about Islamization is very sporadic.

Archaeological findings provide further information on conversion, such as the existence of mosques and other Muslim structures, which will be discussed below. Growing evidence suggests that an ever-increasing part of the local population used mosques, which indicates that the Islamization process advanced during the Early-Islamic period.

### Previous Studies

Many studies during the last decades have dealt with conversions in the Holy Land, and elsewhere in the Middle East, during the Muslim rule. Yet, these works were mostly confined either to a single religion, an isolated region, or a specific period.

This review is mostly chronological; however, when a scholar has published more than one study on a particular subject, I have reviewed all their relevant works before returning to the chronological order.

Up to the mid-1980s, the dominant approach was that Islamization equalled decline. In 1976 Moshe Sharon published an extensive article titled "Process of Destruction and Nomadization in Eretz Israel under Islamic Rule." This article's main argument was that the Muslim rule's neglect, especially under the Abbasid dynasty, allowed for the infiltration of nomad tribes, who eventually destroyed local agriculture. According to Sharon, these events accelerated the decay and destruction of the Holy Land's non-Muslim communities.<sup>44</sup>

The idea that the Holy Land's population decreased as a result of nomadic incursions was popular during the second half of the twentieth century. In 1984, the Israeli journal *Cathedra* published a discussion between three leading researchers entitled: "The Pen-

**40** *The Continuatio of the Samaritan Chronicle*, ed. Levy-Rubin.

**41** *The Continuatio of the Samaritan Chronicle*, ed. Levy-Rubin, 10–19.

**42** al-Ashrafānī, *Umdat al-'Arāfīn*, ed. 'Azām.

**43** *CIAP*.

**44** Sharon, "Process of Destruction and Nomadization," 24–25.

etration of Arab Tribes in Eretz Israel during the First Century of Islam," suggesting that this migration had a significant negative effect on the region's prosperity.<sup>45</sup>

In 1979, Richard Bulliet published a seminal book about conversion to Islam during the medieval period.<sup>46</sup> Aside from Bulliet's quantitative methodology, he notes that the Islamization of a region's population had particular characteristics. Therefore, the pace of Islamization, and the methods by which the population of a specific area becomes Islamized, vary between regions. However, the chapter in Bulliet's book dedicated to the Islamization of Syria is too general and does not allow us to understand the processes the region underwent during the medieval period.

Also in 1979, Bulliet was among the contributors to a volume edited by Nehemia Levtzion.<sup>47</sup> The book deals with the conversion to Islam of the population in areas from western Africa to China and Indonesia. The wide geographical range of this book, and the different methods used to spread the Islamic message, are reflected in Levtzion's introduction, "Toward a Comparative Study of Islamisation." Levtzion's book did not include an independent study concerning the Islamization of Syria and the Holy Land.<sup>48</sup>

Levtzion and Bulliet also contributed to a volume called *Conversion and Continuity*, published in 1990 following a conference in Toronto. This volume deals with the survival of various Christian communities across the Muslim world between the eighth and the eighteenth centuries. Bulliet examines the scarcity of conversion stories in medieval Islam, whereas Levtzion's contribution highlighted the survival of Christian communities in Syria and Palestine, and the role played by nomads in the conversion process.<sup>49</sup> This volume also includes an article by Hadia Dajani-Shakeel about the Holy Land's population during the Crusader period. However, unlike other articles in the book, this article does not discuss the conversion or survival of communities, but rather the relations between Franks and the Christian indigenous population.<sup>50</sup>

In 1980, Shelomo Dov Goitein, the renowned researcher of the Cairo Geniza, published a compendium of Hebrew articles entitled *Palestinian Jewry in Early Islamic and Crusader Times*.<sup>51</sup> This collection includes many articles that shed light on Jewish com-

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**45** Multiple contributors, "Discussion: The Penetration of Arab Tribes in Eretz Israel during the First Century of Islam," *Cathedra* 32 (1984): 51–74 [in Hebrew].

**46** Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period*.

**47** Nehemia Levtzion, *Conversion to Islam* (New York: Holmes and Meyers, 1979).

**48** Bulliet, "Conversion Stories in Early Islam," 123–34; Levtzion, "Toward a Comparative Study of Islamization."

**49** Nehemia Levtzion, "Conversion to Islam in Syria and Palestine and the Survival of Christian Communities," in *Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands, Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Michael Gervers and Ramzi J. Bikhazi (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), 289–311.

**50** Hadia Dajani-Shakeel, "Natives and Franks in Palestine: Perceptions and Interaction," in *Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands, Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Michael Gervers and Ramzi J. Bikhazi (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), 161–84.

**51** Shelomo D. Goitein, *Palestinian Jewry in Early Islamic and Crusader Times* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 1980) [in Hebrew].

munal life in the Early Islamic and Crusader periods, but only sporadically refers to conversion.<sup>52</sup>

In 1983, Moshe Gil published a three-volume study of Palestine's history in the Early Islamic period, based on Cairo Geniza documents.<sup>53</sup> The text volume of this monumental research was translated into English in 1992. Gil explicitly suggested that the local population of Palestine suffered immensely during the Muslim conquest, and that many villages were destroyed and uprooted. He also suggested that many synagogues and churches were destroyed during the conquest.<sup>54</sup>

As stated above, Hugh Kennedy's article "From *Polis* to *Madina*" does not deal directly with conversion. Nevertheless, it changed the perception that the Muslim conquest provoked dramatic and swift changes in Syria's urban sphere. Kennedy's then-novel approach, that the changes were gradual and extended over a long period, beginning even before the Muslim conquests, mostly addresses the physical manifestations of the cultural changes in Syrian cities. This attitude also had substantial implications on the cultural and religious aspects of urban life during the Early Islamic period.<sup>55</sup>

There are important differences between the studies published before Kennedy's "From *Polis* to *Madina*" and those published afterward. While earlier studies tended to ascribe a major role to the physical destruction that allegedly accompanied the Muslim conquest and emphasized the role of nomads in the Islamization processes, later studies minimized the destruction's extent during the conquest and described Islamization as a gradual process.

Sidney Griffith and Robert Schick published extensive research concerning the fate of the Christian communities of Palestine under Muslim rule. Griffith examined the cultural background of Islamization and dedicated an important part of his studies to the Arabization of Christians in the Fertile Crescent. Schick examined the survival of Christian communities in Palestine during the first centuries of Muslim rule.

Milka Levy-Rubin published extensive studies about the conversion and survival of non-Muslim communities during the Early Islamic period. She summarizes her view in her book *Non-Muslims in the Early Islamic Empire*. Levy-Rubin's opinion is that the conquered land's population played a key role in the establishment of reciprocal relations with the Muslim elites. Levy-Rubin also highlights the economic hardships and severe restrictions imposed on non-Muslim communities, particularly on the Samaritans during the second half of the ninth century, and especially during the rule of Aḥmad ibn Tūlūn (868–884).<sup>56</sup>

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**52** Goitein, *Palestinian Jewry*, 242.

**53** Moshe Gil, *Palestine during the First Muslim Period (634–1099)*, 3 vols. (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 1983) [in Hebrew].

**54** Gil, *A History of Palestine*, 61.

**55** Kennedy, "From *Polis* to *Madina*."

**56** Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*; Schick, *The Christian Communities*; Milka Levy-Rubin, "New Evidence Relating to the Process of Islamization in Palestine in the Early Muslim Period—The Case of Samaria," *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient* 23 (2000): 257–76; Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims in the Early-Muslim Empire*; *The Continuatio of the Samaritan*

An article by Clive Foss about Syria during the transition between the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods features regions that are beyond the scope of this study.<sup>57</sup>

Alan Walmsley's book provides an excellent and useful summary of the archaeological excavations and offers new attitudes for the study of the geographical history of the region during the Early Islamic period.<sup>58</sup>

In 1998, Ronnie Ellenblum argued that the Franks settled in the Western Galilee region and the southern parts of Samaria because these areas were populated by indigenous Christians. Eastern Galilee and the central and northern districts of Samaria were originally settled by Jews and Samaritans, who suffered under Roman-Byzantine rule and were more vulnerable than Christians. Consequently, these regions' populations converted earlier, and they were home to a larger percentage of Muslims.<sup>59</sup> However, Ellenblum's book dealt with Frankish rural settlement, not with Islamization, and hence his research on this subject is far from exhaustive. He provides two case studies, suggesting that the reality he describes in these regions indicates that Franks settled in areas populated by indigenous Christians. However, a thorough re-examination of relevant data indicates that while the population of these regions included a significant Muslim segment during the Crusader period, there is little evidence of significant indigenous Christian presence in them. In a later book, Ellenblum suggests that many non-Muslim communities suddenly collapsed during the eleventh century; Ellenblum maintains that ethnic and non-Muslim communities suffered more than their Muslim neighbours during the severe hardships of the tenth and eleventh centuries, including two major earthquakes and many years of drought. These disasters triggered emigration and destabilized regimes and existing social structures, culminating in civil disorder, political chaos, and military invasions. In a later essay, Ellenblum repeats his view about the linkage between climatic calamities and conversion to Islam. He maintains that climatic disasters, such as relatively long-lasting famines and earthquakes, stirred up internal unrest, leading to popular and governmental persecutions of non-Muslim communities. Ellenblum goes on to emphasize the role played by migration in the conversion of indigenous peoples, positing that these sorts of occurrences fostered conversion among many of those who chose to remain in the area despite the hardships.<sup>60</sup>

Gideon Avni surveyed the Byzantine-Muslim transition of Palestine through an archaeological prism. Avni's book is based on a very detailed and up-to-date archaeological database. He also observed regional variations between the different areas he

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*Chronicle*, ed. Levy-Rubin, 95, 102.

**57** Clive Foss, "Syria in Transition, A.D. 550-750: An Archaeological Approach," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 51 (1997): 189-269.

**58** Walmsley, *Early Islamic Syria*.

**59** Ellenblum, *Frankish Rural Settlement*, 213-76, 282-87.

**60** Ronnie Ellenblum, *The Collapse of the Eastern Mediterranean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 7-11, 163-95, 228-48; Ellenblum, "Demographic, Geography and Accelerated Islamization in the Eastern Mediterranean," in *Religious Conversion: History, Experience and Meaning*, ed. Ira Katznelson and Miri Rubin (London: Routledge, 2016), 66-80.

researched.<sup>61</sup> Although Avni's book does not deal directly with Islamization, the author does dedicate a chapter to the topic. Avni suggests that Christians remained the largest religious community in the Holy Land until the end of the Crusader period. Although literary sources indicate that minorities were persecuted and harassed both by the government and by Muslim grassroots activity, Avni believes archaeological discoveries may indicate that Muslims and non-Muslims co-existed during the Early Islamic period.<sup>62</sup>

Thomas Carlson scrutinizes Syria's Islamization on the basis of ten geographic texts dating from the Early Islamic period to the Ottoman conquest.<sup>63</sup>

Benjamin Z. Kedar wrote an extensive article about the Muslims under Frankish rule. Kedar presents various strategies used by the Muslims to cope with the Frankish challenge.<sup>64</sup> Although Kedar deals with a limited period of time, during which Islamization was probably halted, his observations on the mechanisms employed by the Muslims during this period are highly relevant for this study. Kedar also wrote articles about the Samaritans and the Jews during the Crusader period, in which he describes the contemporary Samaritan population and its relatively respectful relationship with the Frankish authorities.<sup>65</sup>

Nimrod Luz published an important article about the role played by Sufis in the Islamization of the hinterland of Jerusalem. He notes that Sufis settled in the rural hinterland of Jerusalem and changed its cultural landscape by building various Muslim religious buildings in the countryside. These activities attracted Muslims to settle in areas previously inhabited by Christians. Luz emphasizes that almost no Christian religious remains, such as churches destroyed or converted into mosques, survive in this area. However, he suggests that the actions ascribed to Sufis brought about the Islamization of many of the rural area's inhabitants. Moreover, one of Luz's case studies demonstrates that when a Sufi settled in a Christian village, the local population converted to Islam.<sup>66</sup>

In his article, Reuven Amitai includes several important observations about the Islamization of the southern Levant. Amitai notes that parts of the region remained predominantly Christian up until the Crusader period, and that Islamization was presumably halted during the Crusader period, with the significant leap in the rate of conversion probably occurring during the Mamluk period. He asserted that many Oriental Christians left the country following the Mamluk conquest, and that substantial "Syrian" communities were established in Latin Cyprus.<sup>67</sup> However, Amitai's case study deals with a rather limited area. Therefore, it would be prudent to examine whether similar occurrences took place elsewhere in the Holy Land.

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61 Avni, *Byzantine-Islamic Transition*, 351–52.

62 Avni, *Byzantine-Islamic Transition*, 331–37.

63 Thomas Carlson, "Contours of Conversion: The Geography of Islamization in Syria," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 135 (2015): 791–816.

64 Benjamin Z. Kedar, "The Subjected Muslims in the Frankish Levant," in *Muslims under Latin Rule*, ed. James M. Powell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 135–74.

65 Kedar, "Samaritan History: The Frankish Period."

66 Luz, "Aspects of Islamization".

67 Amitai, "Islamisation in the Southern Levant," 158–62.

A sub-discussion about Islamization is the point at which most of the Holy Land population had converted to Islam. According to Joshua Prawer, when the First Crusade arrived in Palestine “the overwhelming majority of the native population of Syria and Palestine was already Moslem.”<sup>68</sup> Moshe Gil suggests that on the eve of the First Crusade, most of the rural Palestinian population was still Christian.<sup>69</sup> Ronnie Ellenblum and Avni also believe that the majority of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem’s indigenous population was Christian.<sup>70</sup> Yet the statistical data to support such theories does not exist, and as a matter of fact, these theories are based on random literary descriptions of low credibility and on archaeological excavations. These descriptions cannot provide a solid basis for such far-reaching conclusions about the ratio of Christians to Muslims during these periods. For example, if the region of Jerusalem still had a substantial Christian population in 1100, it does not necessarily imply that this was the case in the coastal plain as well. Furthermore, there is no indication of the size of the population in each region. Therefore, any attempt to ascertain whether Muslims were the largest segment of the Holy Land’s population in 1100 seems to be mere speculation. Yet, about five centuries later, non-Muslims were a tiny minority within a relatively large Muslim population.<sup>71</sup> Of course, the Franks did not foster Islamization during the first Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem (1099–1187). The second Latin Kingdom (1191–1291) occasionally controlled areas beyond the Levant coastal plain. However, other regions were first dominated by the Ayyubids (until ca. 1250), and later by the Mamluks. Subsequently, the most intensive Islamization processes in the Holy Land probably occurred during the Mamluk period.

## Urbanization and De-urbanization—Physical Aspects

### Umayyad and Abbasid Periods

During the first century of their rule, the Muslim authorities moved the occupied districts’ capital cities. For example, Damascus replaced Antioch as the capital city of *al-Shām*, Ramla became the capital of *Jund Filastīn*, replacing Caesarea, the capital of Palestina Prima, and Cordoba became the capital of *al-Andalus* instead of Toledo. These changes were most likely the outcome of a premeditated policy. The rearrangement of the capital cities must have provoked a large-scale reshuffling of provincial elites. People whose families enjoyed generations of close ties with local, provincial, or even imperial authorities now found themselves in decaying cities far from the decision-making centres and alienated by the new authorities. The new regional capitals were either established in pre-existing cities of secondary importance, such as Tiberias, or in newly founded cities, such as Ramla. This situation probably led to the emigration

<sup>68</sup> Joshua Prawer, *The Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972), 52.

<sup>69</sup> Gil, *A History of Palestine*, 170–72.

<sup>70</sup> Ellenblum, *Frankish Rural Settlement*, 20–30; Avni, *Byzantine–Islamic Transition*, 331–37.

<sup>71</sup> Cohen and Lewis, *Population and Revenues*, 19–41; Hütteroth and Abdulfattah, *Historical Geography*, 52–53; Carlson, “Contours of Conversion,” 791.



of Byzantine-period elites from regional capitals, either to Christian-dominated areas or to the new administrative centres.<sup>72</sup> For example, although it seems that Caesarea, Palestina Prima's capital city, was not destroyed in the Muslim conquest, its built-up area contracted and its population diminished drastically during the Early Islamic period.<sup>73</sup> I suggest that the discernible decline of Caesarea was to a certain degree caused by the emigration of local elites. On the other hand, a city like Ramla, the capital city of Jund Filasṭīn, established by the Muslims, thrived during the same period.<sup>74</sup> A similar occurrence happened in Palestina Secunda, where the regional capital was moved from Scythopolis to Tiberias, while the province of Palestina Tertia was altogether abolished.<sup>75</sup> Ramla's population included Muslim immigrants and indigenous inhabitants from nearby localities who wanted to enjoy the opportunities offered by the new city. Tiberias was a secondary city in Palestina Secunda, and as such, already had resident elites. However, Muslim immigrants, who probably settled there at the authorities' initiative, replaced the local elites who left the area.

Byzantine regional elites included people who worked in the regional administration as well as bureaucratic officials, military personnel, clergy, landowners, and traders. Their emigration had a devastating effect on the welfare of those who remained behind. However, there were probably differences between emigration from central cities and emigration from secondary ones. Secondary cities had their own elites, but most of these elites were of secondary importance in the regional hierarchy. Palestina Prima had two major cities: Caesarea and Jerusalem. While Caesarea was home to the province's administration, Jerusalem was a patriarchal see from the mid-fifth century onward, upgrading its regional status.<sup>76</sup>

Nonetheless, regional centres were not the only ones to decline during the Early Islamic period. Many secondary cities were also affected. The coastal cities, for example, seem to have declined during the Umayyad period. According to al-Balādhurī, Mu'āwiya, the first Umayyad caliph, found the coastal cities in ruins, and settled them with people of diverse origins.<sup>77</sup> However, the archaeological evidence does not support al-Balādhurī's description. Excavations have not revealed substantial indications that the Palestinian coastal cities were severely damaged in the Muslim conquest. Moreover, even after these supposed settlement activities during the Umayyad period, the extent of which is vague, the coastal cities are known to have sharply declined during the Abba-

**72** Milka Levy-Rubin, "Changes in the Settlement Pattern of Palestine Following the Arab Conquest," in *Shaping the Middle East: Jews, Christians and Muslims in an Age of Transition 400–800 C.E.*, ed. Kenneth G. Holum and Hayim Lapin (Bethesda: University Press of Maryland, 2011), 155–72.

**73** Avni, *Byzantine–Islamic Transition*, 49; Donald Whitcomb, "Qaysāriyah as an Early Islamic Settlement," in *Shaping the Middle East: Jews, Christians and Muslims in an Age of Transition 400–800 C.E.*, ed. Kenneth G. Holum and Hayim Lapin (Bethesda: University Press of Maryland, 2011), 65–84 at 79–82; *CIAP* 2: 198–99.

**74** Avni, *Byzantine–Islamic Transition*, 159–83.

**75** Katia Cytryn-Silverman, "The Umayyad Mosque of Tiberias," *Muqarnas* 26 (2009): 37–61.

**76** Rauf Abu Jaber, "Arab Christians in Jerusalem," *Islamic Studies* 40 (2001): 587–600 at 589.

**77** Al-Balādhurī, *Futūḥ al-Buldān*, ed. De Goeje, 128.



sid period (750–878).<sup>78</sup> This decline is reflected in the contraction of the built-up area and the inferior building quality of dwellings, as well as of public facilities.<sup>79</sup> Other cities, such as Jarash and Baysān, continued to exist, yet their size and living standards were inferior to those of earlier periods, as well.<sup>80</sup>

Perhaps the most visible physical remains of the Muslims' urbanization activities are the mosques built in city centres. Construction of a large and impressive mosque in the centre of a city is a clear example of landscape Islamization. Yet, the construction of a mosque in the city's centre did not necessarily reflect the conversion of its population. The construction was the result of the government's motivation to manifest the supremacy of Islam. For example, Saint Willibald, who visited Tiberias while its Umayyad mosque was under construction, recorded the existence of many churches and synagogues in the city.<sup>81</sup> Likewise, about three centuries after the construction of the monumental Dome of the Rock and *al-Aqṣā* Mosque in Jerusalem, al-Muqaddasī noted that the city of Jerusalem was mainly inhabited by Christians.<sup>82</sup> Namely, no matter how splendid the mosque built by the government was, it did not necessarily reflect the local population's religion, nor did it instigate its conversion to Islam. Perhaps, in a certain way, the opposite is correct; namely, humble mosques built by local inhabitants imply that their builders were determined to have a place to pray together. Consequently, the construction of a mosque in a rural settlement, where the government's interest in manifesting the superiority of Islam was limited, probably suggests that at least some of the local residents had converted to Islam.<sup>83</sup>

Many of the first mosques were built near pre-existing churches, a phenomenon discussed in many studies, including a recently published book by Mattia Guidetti, who believes this phenomenon reflected Muslim veneration of the holy sites of earlier religions.<sup>84</sup> This is problematic, because the contiguity of mosques and churches was a widespread phenomenon, starting with the earliest stages of Muslim conquests. In other words, it seems doubtful that Muslim authorities in Zaragoza, for example, found the local Christian saints attractive enough to become an integral part of their religious life.<sup>85</sup> Likewise, does the proximity of a mosque to the synagogue of the remote Jewish village discovered in Khirbat Susiya indicate that Muslims venerated local Jewish saints?<sup>86</sup>

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**78** Elad, "The Coastal Cities," 151–53.

**79** Avni, *Byzantine–Islamic Transition*, 49.

**80** Achim Lichtenberger and Rubin Raja, "Middle Islamic Jerash through the Lens of the Longue Durée," in *Middle Islamic Jerash*, ed. Achim Lichtenberger and Rubina Raja (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), 5–36 at 5–9; Mazar, *Excavations at Tel Beth-Shean*, 1: 42–44; *CIAP* 2: 198–222.

**81** Tobler, *Descriptiones Terrae Sanctae*, 26.

**82** Al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan*, ed. De Goeje, 166–67.

**83** Ehrlich, "From Church and Forum to Mosque and Süq," 303–4; Mattia Guidetti, *In the Shadow of the Church: The Building of Mosques in Early Medieval Syria* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 67–70.

**84** Guidetti, *In the Shadow of the Church*, 67–70.

**85** José Antonio Hernández Vera, "La mezquita aljama de Zaragoza a la luz de la información arqueológica," *Ilu. Revista de ciencias de las religiones*, Anejos 10 (2004): 65–91 at 75.

**86** Steven H. Werlin, *Ancient Synagogues of Southern Palestine, 300–800 C.E.: Living on the Edge*

Since the sources on this matter are not explicit, it is impossible to discard such an explanation. In some cases, it definitely could have been the reason for the proximity or the replacement of the church by a mosque, as occurred in Damascus. However, Damascus' cathedral was dedicated to Saint John, who was also venerated by the Muslims.<sup>87</sup> Therefore, the Muslim motivation to take over or to build a mosque nearby was evident. Nevertheless, in most places the local saints were probably not venerated by the Muslims or were unknown to them. In such places, the Muslims would have had no apparent reason to build their mosque near the cathedral. Moreover, as noted by Guidetti, many of the Muslims were newly converted from Christianity. In these circumstances, it would have been advisable to distance the new converts from their former houses of prayer. The converts' family members and friends still prayed in the area, and socialization with such people could have brought with it the risk of re-conversion to Christianity. It seems unlikely to base a general assumption regarding the Muslim mosque-building policy on the exceptional cases of Christian figures venerated by Islam. Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and Saint John are mentioned in the Qurān and are also venerated by Muslims. However, those few examples do not give any indication that the Muslims venerated local saints across their vast empire, or that they gave the local cults any legitimacy. Therefore, I suggest that mosque–church contiguity was the result of planning constraints rather than religious motivations. Specifically, I propose that in many cases, mosques were built near the cathedral as a result of low land availability.<sup>88</sup> When the Muslims conquered the region, the cities they found had already stood for centuries. The last city established by the Romans in Syria was Philippopolis (est. 244 CE).<sup>89</sup> Consequently, many of the city centres were densely built. Since the Muslims did not usually destroy churches in conquered cities, the only suitable land for construction of a central mosque was, in many cases, the forum, where many cathedrals were built.<sup>90</sup>

The Muslims fostered trade, and the decrease of commercial activity was not in their best interests. Therefore, the abolition of the fora, which impacted the cities' commercial activity, demanded substantial alteration of the cities' urban plans. For example, in Jerusalem, where a mosque was built in the forum adjacent to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Muslims divided the nearby *Cardo* into three parallel streets.<sup>91</sup> As a result, the number of shops in the *Cardo* was tripled. The same phenomenon has been observed in Aleppo, as well.<sup>92</sup> Yet, unlike the majestic, wide *cardines*, these streets were narrow and functional. They enabled trade, but not meetings or socialization. Likewise, the Muslims

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(Leiden: Brill, 2015), 180.

**87** Nancy Khalek, *Damascus after the Muslim Conquest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 92–97; Guidetti, *In the Shadow of the Church*, 68.

**88** Ehrlich, "From Church and Forum to Mosque and Sūq," 302–4.

**89** Arthur Segal, "Roman Cities in the Province of Arabia," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 40 (1981): 111.

**90** *CIAP* 2: 207–14.

**91** Avni, *Byzantine–Islamic Transition*, 123.

**92** Ross Burns, *Aleppo: A History* (London: Routledge, 2017), 81–82.

built a new market in Baysān, the former capital of Palestina Secunda.<sup>93</sup> The construction of Baysān's market during the last years of the Umayyad dynasty reflects Caliph Hishām's decision to invest in economic infrastructure projects in order to increase future revenues. I suggest that in many cases, the transformation of various cities' landscapes and street plans were not only culturally inspired, but purely practical, as well.

Many cities in and near the Jordan Rift Valley were destroyed by a strong earthquake in January 749.<sup>94</sup> Yet, although the damage inflicted by the earthquake on neighbouring cities, such as Tiberias and Hippos, should have been roughly equivalent, Tiberias reached its zenith during the Abbasid period, beginning in 750, whereas Hippos became a neglected hamlet.<sup>95</sup> The Abbasid caliphate decided to lavishly invest in Tiberias, not in the reconstruction of Hippos. In this situation, the residents of Hippos who survived the earthquake had two gloomy options: emigrating to one of the nearby cities, such as Tiberias or Damascus, or remaining in a ruined city with no means of rebuilding even the most basic infrastructure. In other cities, such as Baysān and Jarash, the Abbasid authorities invested a limited amount of money so that they could continue to exist as urban centres, yet only as pale shadows of their classical past.<sup>96</sup> Yet, not only cities affected by the earthquake declined during the Abbasid period. Even inland cities, which were apparently less affected by the earthquake than those in the Jordan Valley, such as Sepphoris and Bayt Jibrīn, were in decline.<sup>97</sup> In other words, the decline of most of the Holy Land's cities indicates that de-urbanization was not the result of natural disasters, but of a premeditated policy, or at least collateral damage caused by the Abbasid policy. The Abbasid policy in the region had three main pillars: first, the Abbasids favoured Iraq over Syria;<sup>98</sup> second, the Arab residents of Syria were often closely associated with the Umayyad dynasty, the Abbasids' nemesis; and third, the Abbasids fostered commerce with eastern regions such as China and India.<sup>99</sup> Contemporary Holy Land city dwellers would probably have been convinced that Abbasid policy towards Syria would not change. Despite the damage inflicted by the earthquake, recovery was possible in most cases, and many people did manage to recuperate from its devastating results. However, the Abbasid policy, based on the above rationales, was seemingly permanent. Therefore,

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**93** Avni, *Byzantine–Islamic Transition*, 62–64.

**94** Avni, *Byzantine–Islamic Transition*, 75.

**95** Avni, *Byzantine–Islamic Transition*, 71–86, 93.

**96** Lichtenberger and Raja, "Middle Islamic Jerash," 5–9; Mazar, *Excavations at Tel Beth-Shean*, 1: 42–44; *CIAP* 2: 198–222.

**97** *CIAP* 2: 120–21; Ward, "Sepphoris in Sacred Topography."

**98** Elad, "The Coastal Cities," 152.

**99** Hamidreza Pashazanous, Majid Montazer-Zohouri, and Talia Ahmadi, "Sea Trade between Iran and China in the Persian Gulf Based on the Excavations of Sirāf City," *Indian Journal of Economics and Development* 2, no. 2 (2014): 6–13 at 10–12; Ahmed A. el-Ashker and Rodney Wilson, *Islamic Economics: A Short History* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 155; Brigitta Hårdh, "Oriental–Scandinavian Contacts on the Volga as Manifested by Silver Rings and Weight Systems," in *Silver Economy in the Viking Age*, ed. James Graham-Campbell and Gareth Williams (Walnut Creek: Left Coast, 2007), 135–47; Christophe Picard, *The Sea of the Caliphs* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 98–110.

even the people who initially remained in their homes found it increasingly difficult to stay once the Abbasid policy was enforced.

The physical manifestation of Abbasid policy was the decay of pre-existing cities and the establishment of the Holy Land's coastal plain as a border dotted with small- to medium-sized cities, such as Caesarea and Arsūf, as well as many forts known as *ribāṭāt* (sing. *ribāṭ*).<sup>100</sup> As noted by Kennedy, these cities lost their classical aspect: their churches were either in a state of decay or were destroyed completely, their main streets became winding alleys, and most of their classical period civic buildings ceased to exist as such.

A significant outcome of the decline of many Byzantine period cities throughout the region was the collapse of the ecclesiastical administration. The decline or disappearance of many cities prompted the departure of the local ecclesiastic administration. The Christian communities' economic system relied on revenue gained from endowments, contributions, tithes, and church property. Local communities may also have enjoyed donations from the occasional pilgrim, but it seems that these economic means were not sufficient to cope with the increasing needs. Moreover, the Christian communities suffered from cutting of imperial support, emigration of the local Christian society's upper socio-economic echelons, the decline in pilgrimage, and the heavy land taxes. In addition, natural disasters, such as earthquakes, caused the Christian communities to deteriorate even further. Consequently, it became increasingly difficult to support communal welfare networks, maintain decaying buildings, rebuild ruined or otherwise unusable ones, and support the local clergy. In this gloomy reality, only those who were unable to liquidate their property who did not have a realistic prospect of continuing their lives elsewhere remained in the decaying cities. Rural communities, usually dependent on the urban religious institutions, became even more vulnerable. There is scant information about the rural population during these periods. However, villagers would have had even fewer options than their urban counterparts. The impoverishment of nearby cities triggered a steep decline in demand for the commodities that villagers sold there; their assets were usually less lucrative than urban properties, and they lacked the basic education and skills that may have facilitated their absorption in other regions. Moreover, resuming their agricultural work in the destination settlements was almost impossible since they could not afford to purchase new property in those places. These phenomena explain the decrease in the number of rural settlements in the Holy Land, and the contraction of the areas of surviving settlements.<sup>101</sup> Likewise, while during the Early Islamic period mosques mushroomed across the Holy Land's rural areas, there are few churches and synagogues known to be built in these areas. This suggests that many local inhabitants emigrated after the Muslim conquest, and that the remaining inhabitants converted to Islam rather quickly.

Although many cities declined during the Early Islamic period, others thrived. As Avni observed, despite the gradual decline of many of the Holy Land's cities, some cit-

**100** Jörg Feuchter, "Ribāt", in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed. Emad el-Din Shahin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 2: 343–45; Elad, "The Coastal Cities," 146–67.

**101** Avni, *Byzantine–Islamic Transition*, 363–64.

ies, such as Ramla and Tiberias, became important centres and attracted newcomers, Muslims and members of other religions. However, the local non-Muslim communities in these cities had complex relationships with the neighbouring rural communities. For example, Ramla was established near Lydda. The new Muslim city probably absorbed many of Lydda's Christian residents and inherited its hinterland, whose population was mainly Christian. Throughout the period, the Christian community of Ramla lost ground to the new Muslim community. The majority of immigrants who settled in Ramla and its vicinity were Muslims, and an increasing number of Christians either converted to Islam or emigrated from the region. As a result, although there were Christians in the city and its environs when the Muslims occupied the area, by the time the Crusaders conquered the land, a large part of the region's population was Muslim.<sup>102</sup> For example, al-Muqaddasī wrote that the name of one of the gates of Ramla was "The Gate of the Mosque of 'Annaba," implying that the residents of 'Annaba were Muslims."<sup>103</sup> There are several indications that the rural population of the region of Ramla/Lydda included a significant percentage of Muslims during the Crusader period. Seawulf, one of the first pilgrims to arrive in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem (1102–1103), wrote that Muslims assaulted Christian pilgrims all along the road between Jaffa and Jerusalem.<sup>104</sup> Willibrand of Oldenburg (1212) noted that the inhabitants of Bayt Nūba were Muslims.<sup>105</sup> On the other hand, although it is possible that indigenous Christian villagers lived in the area during the Crusader period, the evidence that could support this option is scarce. These data indicate that although some of the region's Christian communities may have survived until the Crusader period, substantial evidence suggests that when the Crusaders conquered the area, most of Ramla's hinterland was Muslim.

### Tulunid and Fatimid Periods

The short Tulunid period (884–905) constitutes an important landmark in the Holy Land's urban history. After nearly 150 years of Abbasid Asian orientation, the Tulunids resumed naval activities in the eastern Mediterranean area. Thus, Aḥmad ibn Tūlūn renovated the port of Acre and built a fortress in Jaffa.<sup>106</sup> This change of policy had a significant effect on the urban network of the Holy Land. I suggest that this was a decisive step toward the Islamization of the Holy Land. The decline of the inland cities caused the enfeeblement of inland non-Muslim communities. The coastal cities, which began to recover during this period, became home to relatively large Muslim communities, especially during the Fatimid period. It seems, however, that the reconstruction and fortifica-

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**102** Itamar Taxel, "Rural Settlement Processes in Central Palestine, ca. 640–800 C.E.: The Ramla-Yavneh Region as a Case Study," *Bulletin of the American School of Oriental Research* 369 (2013): 157–99 at 189–93.

**103** Al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan*, ed. De Goeje, 165.

**104** *Peregrinationes tres*, ed. Huygens, 63–64.

**105** *Peregrinatores medii aevi quatuor*, ed. Laurent, 184.

**106** *CIAP* 1: 24; al-Balawī, *Sirat Aḥmad ibn Tūlūn*, 351; Al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan*, ed. De Goeje, 163; *The Continuatio of the Samaritan Chronicle*, ed. Levy-Rubin, 104.

tion projects carried out by Ibn-Tūlūn were primarily of a military nature rather than a commercial one. While Mediterranean trade during the Tulunid period was still rather minor, Ibn Tūlūn had a fleet, which was docked at Acre, whose port was reconstructed on his orders.<sup>107</sup> Although these infrastructure projects were probably motivated by military objectives, they had a long-range impact on the Holy Land's urban network.

A major change to the coastal cities occurred during the Fatimid period (969–1099). During this period, the coastal cities recovered, and some of them, such as Ascalon and Tyre, became important cities.<sup>108</sup> The Persian traveller Nāsir-i Khusraw reports that the city of Acre had a rectangular shape and its mosque was in the city's centre.<sup>109</sup> This plan might indicate that Ibn Tūlūn not only renovated the city's port, but also that he, or the Fatimids, reconstructed the entire city according to a plan which resembles earlier cities, such as the Umayyad city of 'Anjār.<sup>110</sup> The Fatimids also fostered Shi'ite immigration to the coastal cities, as well as to Tiberias and its surroundings.<sup>111</sup>

### Crusader Period

The Crusader period (1099–1291) introduced important changes to the urban–religious landscape. During its first years, the Crusaders massacred indigenous populations in coastal cities as well as in Jerusalem. As a result, although some of the indigenous inhabitants survived the massacres and deportations (excluding Jerusalem, which became exclusively Christian), the Frankish newcomers became the dominant elites in these settlements. They transformed mosques into churches and introduced other innovations to the occupied urban tissues. It seems that most of the coastal cities were large enough to accommodate both the surviving indigenous population and the Frankish immigrants. Some cities, such as Acre and Jaffa, absorbed so many newcomers that they had to expand beyond their Early Islamic walls.<sup>112</sup>

Still in the inland cities the Frankish *modus operandi* was quite different. Except for Jerusalem, these cities were conquered by the Crusaders without significant resistance and their populations were neither massacred nor deported. In these cities, the Franks established exclusive, new, Frankish neighbourhoods.<sup>113</sup> Once these were abandoned by the Franks, they were inhabited by the indigenous residents who had lived nearby during the Crusader period, and became the cities' urban nuclei up to the modern era.

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**107** Thierry Bianquis, "Autonomous Egypt from Ibn Tūlūn to Kāfūr," in *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, vol. 1, ed. Carl F. Petry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 86–119 at 99.

**108** *CIAP* 1: 133–37.

**109** *Sefer Nameh*, ed. Schefer, 48–49.

**110** Robert Hillenbrand, "Anjar and Early Islamic Urbanism," in *The Idea and Ideal of the Town between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Gian-Pietro Brogiolo and Bryan Ward-Perkins (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 60–98.

**111** Friedman, *The Shi'is in Palestine*, 9–27.

**112** Michael Ehrlich, "Urban Landscape Development in Twelfth Century Acre," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 18 (2008): 257–74; Boas, *Crusader Archaeology*, 41–42, 50.

**113** Ehrlich, "The Frankish Impact on the Urban Landscape," 41–42.

### Mamluk and Ottoman Periods

The Mamluk conquest had a dramatic impact on the Holy Land's urban network, as well as on the religious profile of its inhabitants. The Mamluks destroyed the coastal cities they conquered. As a result, the Holy Land's coastline, which for many centuries was a thriving and urbanized area, was deserted. Famous cities such as Caesarea, Acre, and Tyre fell into ruin, and ports were silted up and scarcely visited by ships. The Frankish population disappeared, yet most of the indigenous non-Muslim population also left the region. Thus, in the late sixteenth century Ottoman census, almost the entire coastal plain population was Muslim.<sup>114</sup> The Mamluks also established administrative centres in Gaza, Safed, and Karak, which were cities and towns of secondary and tertiary importance during the Crusader period. These cities were in areas with substantial Jewish communities, such as in Safed, or Christian ones, in Gaza and Karak, which resisted conversion to Islam until the Mamluk period. Jerusalem, which was home to a relatively large Christian community in the city itself and its hinterland, became a Muslim city as well, and many of the rural inhabitants of the city's environs became Muslim. I suggest that the establishment of Mamluk cities in hitherto rural areas was a key element in the final stage of the conversion of the Holy Land's population.

The Ottomans did not introduce major changes to the Holy Land's urban network. They used the same cities their predecessors had, and the religious profile of the area remained roughly unchanged throughout the period.

### Re-organization of Urban Populations

Muslims were involved in urbanism, either by establishing new cities or by developing pre-existing ones. If the shifting of capital cities included a reshuffling of the regional elites, new elites should have emerged to replace those that were pushed aside. Newly established cities, such as Ramla, had no previous elites to replace. Nonetheless, a functioning capital city demanded skilled manpower able to run the region's affairs. According to several sources, a large percentage of the residents of Ramla were former inhabitants of nearby Lydda.<sup>115</sup> Although this narrative seems to be reliable, it is doubtful whether there was enough efficient, skilled manpower among the inhabitants of Lydda to administer a province. Nimrod Luz suggested, based on Early Islamic period sources, that the reason for the foundation of Ramla in spite of Lydda's existence was its founders' desire to bring Lydda down. Luz suggested that Lydda's survival as an independent urban nucleus was made possible because Lydda was one of Jund Filastīn's two capital cities before the establishment of Ramla, the other being Jerusalem. Luz's theory is a very intriguing one; nevertheless, there is not enough evidence to give it significant support. Thus, although Luz acknowledged that there is plenty of circumstantial evidence indicating that the Umayyads planned to convert Jerusalem into a capital city, he rejected this suggestion, arguing that there is no clear-cut proof to support it. Hence, it is obvious that the theory that Jerusalem and Lydda were co-capitals of Filastīn before

<sup>114</sup> Hütteroth and Abdulfattah, *Historical Geography*, 137–60, 190–94.

<sup>115</sup> Avni, *Byzantine–Islamic Transition*, 178–80.