

LIMESTONE HILLS OF NORTH SYRIA IN LATE ANTIQUITY: PROBLEMS OF RURAL DECLINE

[SLIDE: L:Map of the Mediterranean in Late Roman Empire, R: Map of Roman Eastern Mediterranean]

Traditional theories of Roman economy have predominantly drawn a pessimistic picture of the late Roman countryside in stagnation or decline. Such orthodox theories like those put forward by Moses Finley or A.H.M. Jones advocated a gradual impoverisation of the peasant societies under heavy taxation, with the increasingly parasitic nature of urban economies in the Roman Mediterranean. This minimalist view is now being challenged by systematic regional surveys in the ancient countryside. Survey archaeology, supplied with new scientific methods and the aid of various disciplines, turned our attention to the complex long-term relationships between the rural communities and their environment. By this means, not only the dynamics of socio-economic and cultural interaction between the ancient city and its hinterland is better understood, but also the mutual impact between human activity and the environmental conditions could be addressed.

Regional surveys in the limestone hills of North Syria represent relatively early attempts to achieve such broader perspectives of an ancient countryside. The results of these studies had definitely significant implications on the economy and society of the Near East at the end of antiquity. My particular emphasis will be confined to the very end of a 500 year-long rural prosperity in the region, which seems to have never resumed until then. I will try to address the problems of rural decline in the late antique period, and try to question the proposals of rural exodus after Persian and the early Islamic expansion.

[SLIDE: L:Map of Syria, urban centers Tchalenko, R: Map of Syria, physical]

The limestone massif that stretch between Antioch and Aleppo, and as far south as Apamea is one of the most spectacular but still marginal landscapes of the Eastern Mediterranean. The marginality of the region is generally discussed from an environmental point of view, in contrast to the surrounding river basins, like the Amuq valley, the plain of

Chalcis or the Euphrates. The plateau is covered with a thin layer of porous red soil, originating from the decomposition of limestone, which is not the best for cultivation. There is almost no surface water, so irrigation agriculture is not possible but the annual rainfall ranges between 400 to 600 mm, only sufficient for dry-farming.

Slide: L: Stone quarries at Qalat Seman; R: El Breiq, North Syria, limestone and architecture

On the other hand, the geological formation of the hills offer easily accessible building stone, which used to be quarried all over the region.

[SLIDE: L: North Syria, routes R: Near East: Hellenistic settlements

Among these limestone ranges, the intervening valleys not only provide controlled route between Antioch, Aleppo and Chalcis, but also offered an alternative fertile lowland terrain, as extensions of the surrounding plains.

The Hellenistic landscape of North Syria was marked with large agglomerations of population, with special concentration in the lowlands, in the immediate hinterlands of urban centers: Antioch on the Orontes, coastal Seleucia and Laodicea, inland centers of Apamea, Chalcis, Beroea and Cyrrhus. Following the establishment of the Roman *provincia* of Syria at the time of Augustus, Fergus Millar points out to a gradual transformation of these Hellenistic cities into Roman *coloniae*.

However what was happening in the countryside from especially 2nd century AD on, is of interest for us. Like the other previously unoccupied highlands of Syria such as the basaltic hills southeast of Aleppo and those of Hauran; the limestone hills in the territory of Antioch witnessed the resurgence of rural agrarian settlements. The currently barren landscape of the limestone massif was occupied by a dense network of well-populated villages.

[SLIDE: L: Overall plan of Limes Hills with settlements, R: slide of a view of a settlement, Sergilla.

This rural development continued at least through five centuries as it is immediately evident in the well-preserved remains of about 700 villages with prominent stone architecture, which has drawn the attention of scholars since mid-19th century.

SLIDE: L: detail from Qalat Seman, R:Qalbloze, 4th. c. church, throne of bema.

The distinctive tradition of limestone masonry with finely cut and elegantly decorated details evidently follows the rich architectural vocabulary of the Hellenistic Near East.

SLIDE: L:Andron and Bath, Sergilla: R: Tomb, el Bara

The settlements offer public buildings like baths, androns, inns or shops, and impressive monumental tombs,

SLIDE: L:Qalat Sem'an- R: Church façade, Baqirha.

but the most impressive is the architecture of churches and monasteries, which stand out as the clear evidence for the transformation of a pagan cultic landscape into a Christian one, with the well-known rise of the holy man in the first decades of the 4th century AD.

SLIDE: Two houses, one from Deir Sem'an, plan from Mugleyya

However, with the results of the latest surveys it is now clear that a considerable percentage of the buildings were village houses gathered in compounds and constructed with stone masonry.

SLIDE: Olive presses, Callot. drawing, picture. L: Kafr Nabu, drwg. R: el Bara, photo

The primary agricultural activity was olive cultivation, as suggested by numerous olive presses that were attested in the settlements. In a recent study of wine and olive oil production in the ancient mediterranean, Rafael Frankel has shown that several technical innovations were attested in the monumentalized olive presses of North Syria. Vines, cereal crops and fruit trees complete the basic cultivation picture of the typical Mediterranean highlands, while stock-breeding was also an important factor of this rural economy.

The decline and the subsequent abandonment of the region in the later 6th and 7th centuries is still a matter of debate. Several scholars worked on the region and suggested a variety of theories of the rural decline.

SLIDE: DeVogue, front page, and map of North Syria.

Earliest scholarly interest in the region was in 1860s: an architectural survey lead by Melchior Comte de Vogüë, the later French ambassador to Constantinople. In his two volume publication, elegantly engraved architectural reconstructions reflect a romantic and picturesque view of the settlements.

SLIDE: DeVogue, details and a typical reconstruction.

Impressed with the stone work, classical detailing and carving techniques, Count de Vogue's reconstructions looked very similar to what one could find in the French countryside at his time:

SLIDE: DeVogue, two typical reconstructions.

"les maisons de campagne": large and peaceful dwellings of bourgeoisie, surrounded with formal gardens. Count's explanation for the decline of this culture had also an orientalist flavour to it: an abrupt invasion by the Islamic Arab tribes and a sudden abandonment with the destruction.

SLIDE: Butler, front page, and a typical reconstruction.

In 1899 Princeton University inaugurated an archaeological expedition to Syria. Extensive surveys of both monumental buildings and complete settlements, accompanied with detailed discussions of the architectural material was published by Howard Crosby Butler in 1903.

SLIDE: Butler, a typical reconstruction.

Butler was the first scholar to ask questions about the contrast between the barrenness of the environment at his time and the prosperity that the ancient settlements proposed to his eye. He suggested that an extensive deforestation in 7th c. AD might have been responsible for

the regional decline, and it came with the Persian conquest of North Syria and the subsequent Arab invasions. This hypothesis remained influential on scholars for a long time.

SLIDE: Tchalenko, map: olive cultivation: schematic settlement plan.

The most thorough study of the region was later done in 1930s and 40s under the direction of a Russian architect, Georges Tchalenko of the the French Archeological Institute in Syria. In his monumental 3 volume publication in 1950s, Tchalenko supplied his meticulous study with a synthesis of social and economic history, "*a histoire totale*" for the region.

SLIDE: Tchalenko, plan of el Bara, plan of Beyho

Based on the detailed surveys of many settlements, Tchalenko proposed a hierarchical settlement pattern ranging from small market towns, to large village type settlements, as well as rural villas and estates and finally monastic complexes. He also presented a historical development of these large settlements through late antiquity and identified [quote] “a continuing break up of large estates, especially in the time of Justinian, and the growth of free peasant holders”[end of quote]. From the significant number of olive presses accommodated in and around the villages, Tchalenko proposed an exclusively olive monoculture. After the processing, the olive products were shipped to the market towns and to the larger spheres of trade. He concluded that the decline of this monoculture and the subsequent desertion of the villages should obviously be associated with the decline of the urban market in Antioch after the Persian invasions, since the dates on the inscriptions had an abrupt stop in 610 AD. Tchalenko disregarded the theories of environmental change and insisted on a sudden catastrophe.

To test Tchalenko's hypotheses, excavations were carried out in the region for the first time with the initiative of the French Institute of Near Eastern Archaeology in Beyrouth in 1976-78.

SLIDE: Plan of Gebel Barisa that show Dehes(Apamee de Syrie), Plan of Dehes.

Georges Tate and Jean-Pierre Sodini chose a typical middle-sized village called Dêhès in Gebel Barisa. The central area of the village was previously identified by Tchalenko as a commercial agora, surrounded by stoas, an andron and an inn.

SLIDE: Dehes plan of site , Tchalenko's plan,

After the sondages, all buildings turned out to be parts of domestic compounds, that is houses which were arranged around a courtyard, with 2 storeys, ground floor reserved for animals and upper storey for living.

SLIDE: Dehes, Tate's plan, photo of remains

Clearly pasturage was a major component in the economy of the peasants, in contrast to Tchalenko's view, and the cultivation of the land was not confined to olive orchards but accompanied by cereal crops, vines and fruit trees.

SLIDE: Dehes, Pottery evidence

Ceramic and numismatic evidence showed that the villages were not simply abandoned in 7th century but habitation continued through 9th even into early 10th c. AD. Ummayed and Abbasid coins formed 16 % of the total coinage.

SLIDE:Dehes, numismatic evidence

Along with the excavation, Sodini and Tate continued surface surveys and sampling in the area with a new eye, working through a new methodology which they called "*archeologie serielle*". In 1992, Tate published the results in a comprehensive volume, in which he drastically revised Tchalenko's conclusions. Here, Tate advanced an architectural typology of 46 well-preserved villages from the region.

SLIDE: House typology, Tate.

Using both quantitative and qualitative data from the surveys, and based upon the dating of the building units; he proposed a chronological development of the settlements, demographic estimates for their population and a socio-economic reconstruction for the genesis and decline of the North Syrian countryside. 95% of all the constructions that were subject to

study, turned out to be merely houses. The absence of any villa-estates, which are known from different rural areas of the empire helped Tate to advocate the development of a relatively free peasant society, although he acknowledged the economical dependency of the region to the urban market in Antioch and other ports of trade.

SLIDE: Tate's diagrams, total-regional.

In conclusion to his analysis, Tate suggested that the growth of the settlements was interrupted by stagnation or decline for a number of cases. [If you can follow on the diagrams] After a long period of growth from 1st c. to mid 3rd c. AD, there was a substantial decline around 250. The villages recover however quickly, and a continuous growth follows until 550, with particularly vigorous growth between 450 and 480. The following 70 years of reduced growth until 550 then lends itself to a period of stagnation afterwards. Extremely small amounts of houses were built after 550 but the building of the churches continued until 610. Although such statistical data only shows growth rather than decline, it became apparent the economic crisis had apparently started at least in mid 6th century if not earlier. The excavations at D  h  s revealed that by the early decades of the 7th c., the prosperous building tradition was *already* transformed to an impoverished squatter use, with the abandonment of some of the houses or the appearance of further partition walls of poor masonry.

SLIDE: Map of Syria with , city plan of Antioch

If we would like to correlate such decline with the changing condition of the urban centers in Syria, there is plenty of evidence. Sixth century had been catastrophic for Syria in general. The urban prosperity of Antioch which had a peak in the 5th c., was disrupted by a number of disasters in the first half of the 6th c. An enormous fire in 525, two violent earthquakes 526 and 528 was followed by a series of Sasanian-Persian invasions. The major devastation of the city came with the second wave of attacks by the Persians in 540, when the entire city including its suburbs was burnt down, as reported by Procopius. Textual evidence suggest subsequent attempts of rebuilding of Antioch by Justinian. Archaeological evidence

has shown that the main street was rebuilt at this time period but the street was immediately invaded by small scale buildings of poor workmanship. The bubonic plague that spread through the Roman Empire from Egypt, hit Antioch in 542 AD and 50% of the remaining population were reported by ancient historians to have deceased. One of the most important ports of trade in the Roman Mediterranean thus gradually lost its importance by the mid-6th c., driving its hinterland into a significant economic stress. Therefore long before the Arabic conquest of the region in 630s, the urban centers of North Syria had undergone a major social and economic decline.

SLIDES: Deir Seman, views

None of the disasters, mentioned above, was attested in the limestone hills either as a destruction level or a total abandonment. Instead churches continued to be built until 610, and the agricultural surplus could still be canalized into building activity. Georges Tate hypothesized a Malthusian type of crisis in the villages of the limestone hills in the second half of the 6th c. According to the Malthusian hypothesis, if a population tends to increase at a faster rate than its means of subsistence and unless it is checked by moral restraint or disaster, a general poverty and degradation in the community inevitably result. From the 4th c. to the mid 6th, the population increased here 3-4 times than ever before. Preliminary results of soil analysis from the region by J. Trichet show that erosion and degradation of soil occurred in late antiquity due to intensive agricultural use. David Mattingly, who has done extensive surveys of Roman North African landscapes, concurs: [quote] "intensive oleoculture in marginal zones is demanding, and nature can fight back. Indeed, we must accept the possibility that in some regions the Roman period increase in olive cultivation may have contributed to ecological stress". The pollen analysis from Southwest Turkey and Levant for the late Holocene period favor a fall in the temperature around 500 AD, which might point to a slight deterioration of the climatic conditions in the Eastern Mediterranean.

SLIDE: Map of Mediterranean

Recent archaeological surveys in the comparable marginal landscapes in the Mediterranean basin, like the pre-desert highlands of Tripolitania, high steppe region of Tunisia, the Negev desert, highlands of the Taurus mountains in Lycia and Rough Cilicia, all show evidence of similar rural developments from circa 1st c. AD on and a decline roughly in the later half of 6th and 7th centuries. The genesis of the intensive olive cultivation and settlement in marginal highlands can be associated with the increasing demand for olive products in the Mediterranean markets but perhaps more important of a factor must have been the overpopulation in the river basins and fertile plains that encouraged populations to inhabit previously uncultivated lands. The decline in the marginal countryside however, only came in the late 6th and 7th centuries with the gradual collapse of the maritime trade networks as a result of various exogenous shocks, adding perhaps to the overexploitation of the natural resources. The Islamic expansion might therefore be seen as an aftermath of the decline in wider interregional scale. The investigation of the internal factors of decline in the North Syrian highlands, should be considered along with the overriding factors in the larger spheres of interaction and ecological change at the time period.

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