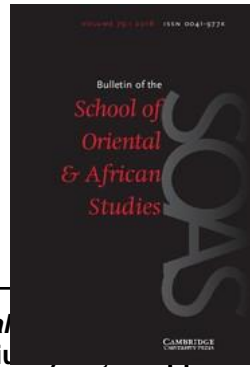


Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies

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Gideon Avni: *The Byzantine–Islamic Transition in Palestine: An Archaeological Approach.* (Oxford Studies in Byzantium.) Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. ISBN 978 0 19 968433 5.

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GIDEON AVNI:

The Byzantine–Islamic Transition in Palestine: An Archaeological Approach.

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Gideon Avni's book offers a timely and much-needed reappraisal of the archaeological evidence for the complex and diverse processes of transition in settlement and society from late Byzantine to early Islamic rule in Palestine and its various phases (Umayyad, Abbasid, Fatimid, etc.) and short interregnums until the onset of the Crusader era in the Holy Land in the late eleventh century. As observed on several occasions by the author, and as exemplified by a growing series of studies (a number of which are still available only in Hebrew), in the last thirty years or so archaeological research (systematic excavations, field surveys, etc.) have contributed

in a number of crucial spheres to the better understanding of these multifaceted processes in Palestine, as well as in the greater context of the Near and Middle East. Significantly, on some occasions the results and conclusions of these studies have contradicted or are at variance with the historical record of the socio-economic, political and religious transformations accompanying and following the Muslim Arab conquests in the Levant and Middle East. Inevitably these studies have also posed an increasing challenge to influential historiographic models in earlier and current scholarship drawing predominantly or exclusively on the extant historical data.

One of the undoubted benefits of this book is that Avni has provided an up-to-date and balanced summary and critical scrutiny of the current state of and principal lines of debate within archaeological research on late Byzantine and early Islamic Palestine. The material and changing trajectories of argument and opinion presented in these discussions will be of great help to social, political, economic and religious historians of the Near and Middle East during this period as well as in broader chronological frameworks. Furthermore, the analyses of the archaeological evidence and its interpretations profit from the fact that the author draws on his own first-hand knowledge of and archaeological work at a number of the sites under discussion, particularly in Jerusalem and its environs.

Another benefit of the book is that the diverse and complex archaeological data is analysed and contextualized in a well-structured and coherent manner which makes it easier to comprehend and “digest” by readers who otherwise may not have been exposed to the recent and latest developments in the archaeological investigation of the early medieval Near and Middle East. The discussion of this archaeological data on the development of Jerusalem and Ramla during this period occupies a significant part of the book; other important and relevant sites which receive a similar in-depth treatment include Cesaria, Jarash, Tiberias, Beth Shean, Pella and Gadara, as well as sites in Palestine’s northern and southern coastal plains and the Negev, etc.

Ultimately, the principal thesis of the book, that the eventual decline of settlement and society in eleventh-century Palestine represented the concluding stages of a lengthy process, with its regional variants and different patterns of continuity and change, is supported by a wealth of evidence and persuasive argumentation. These regional variants and the stages of transformation they underwent (which could intensify or diminish at times) could be conditioned by differing interplays of internal and external factors, ranging from political developments and military incursions to environmental and climatic circumstances which need a careful and interdisciplinary approach and methods of inquiry. Avni’s book highlights and reiterates the already articulated appeal for new research strategies and models in the study of Palestine and Jordan (and the Near East in general) in the early Islamic period. These research strategies and models will need to address broader methodological issues and concerns such as how best to approach and interpret convincingly cases of glaring disagreements between the historical and archaeological record. This is evident in the cases of the Persian Sasanian and Muslim Arab conquests and occupation of Palestine in the seventh century, but also in other instances in which the archaeological data (for reasons which may include its paucity) does not reflect widespread destruction, damage and abandonment of settlements and religious sites alleged in the historical sources. Apart from pointing to the difficult and intricate problems arising from the application, potential and limitations of conquest archaeology, Avni’s book offers plenty of material and arguments that in all these instances where the archaeological findings allow a reconstruction of the stratification, distribution and chronology of settlement and settlement trends, such findings can effect re-evaluation of and shed new light on key aspects and phases of the early

medieval history of the Near and Middle East. In the field of economic history, for example, the archaeological data can provide a solid base for a reappraisal and reconstruction of the local and trans-regional networks of production, consumption and commerce. And as demonstrated by the work of Avni and his colleagues, archaeological research can contribute crucially to some of the most important and intensely debated areas of the religious history of the early medieval Levant and Near East such as the patterns of transition from paganism to Christianity and Islam, and the related conversion, Christianization and Islamicization processes (and how rapidly or gradually they evolved); the religious dimension (or absence of such) of military conquests and occupation in the region; ethno-confessional composition and lines of segregation (or lack of them) in settlements; syncretism and co-existence of Christian and Muslim forms of worship (as at Jarash, Tiberias, the Kathisma church to the south of Jerusalem, Shivta in the Negev, the Mamshit churches, etc.) and sharing of sacred space; models of cultic and cultural interaction at multi-cultural and pluri-religious urban centres and rural areas; and the survival and adaptation of pre-Christian and pre-Islamic practices among the local pastoral nomad groups, etc. Indeed the widening and diversifying perspectives on the subtle or more abrupt shifts in culture and religion in early Islamic Palestine and Jordan (on the basis of the evolving study of the archaeological record) are prominent among the areas especially well mapped out by Avni. It is hoped that future research will be able to integrate into similarly sharp and even broader interdisciplinary approaches the material and insights presented in Avni's book for the further exploration of one of the most intriguing and momentous transition periods in the history of the Near East.

Yuri Stoyanov