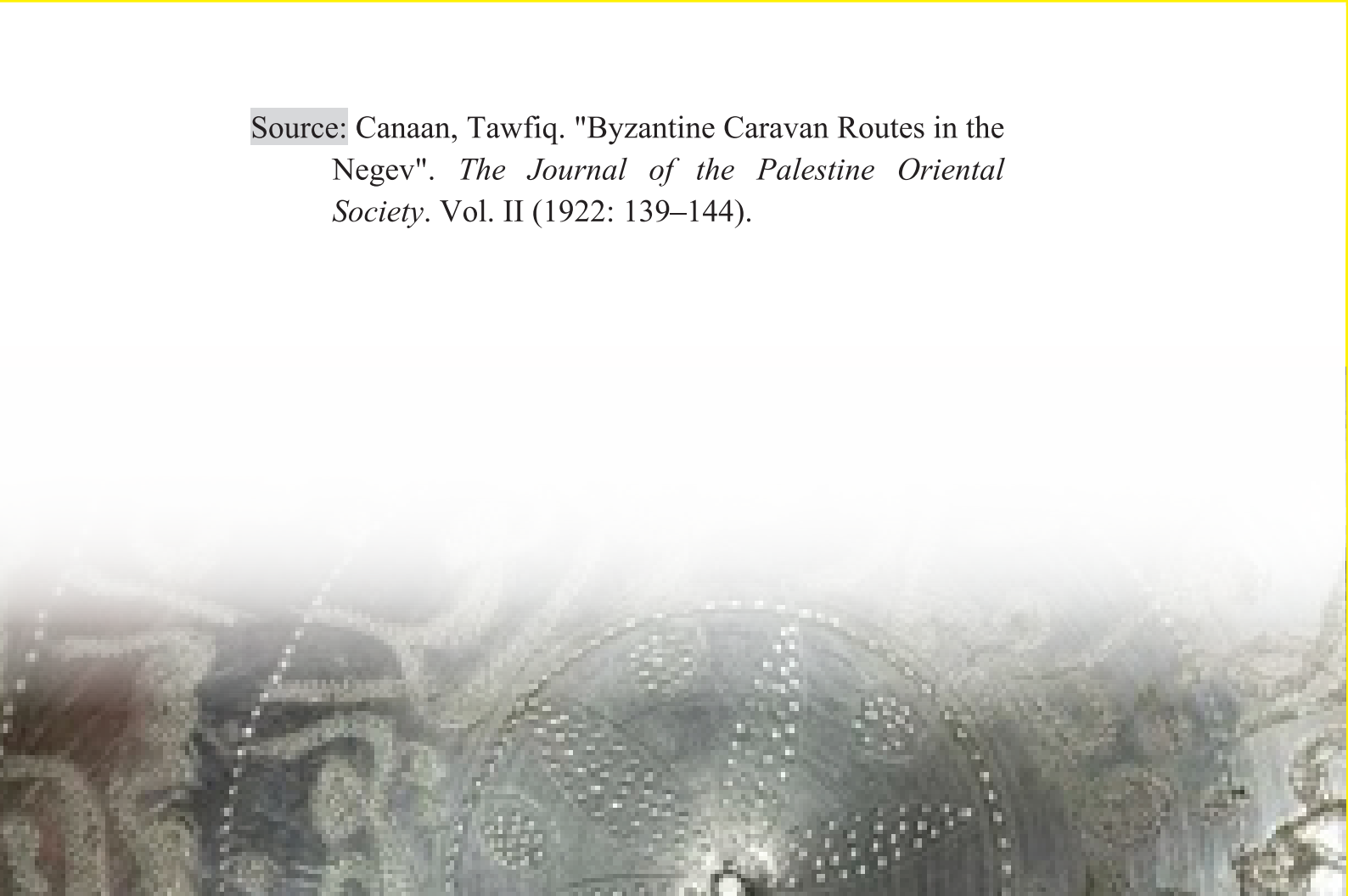


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BYZANTINE CARAVAN ROUTES IN THE NEGEB

T. CANAAN
(JERUSALEM)

IF one makes a trip from Beer-Sheba southward into the peninsula of Sinai, one observes many things which do not correspond in any way to what is known in Palestine: climate, geological formation, hydrographic conditions, fauna, flora and even remains of the past differ enormously. I wish to call attention only to a few points which bear a direct relation to the subject of my paper. I shall restrict my description to that part which stretches from the southern mountains of Palestine directly southward as far as the limits of civilization, and from the 'Arabah depression in the east to the western boundaries of the 'Azâzmeh region. The greater portion of the district in question (below Bîr es-Sabi') belongs to this Bedouin tribe.

This region is divided naturally by two water-courses—running from east to west—into three zones; Wâdî es-Sabi' separates the northern from the middle zone. The latter is bounded in the south by two water-courses, one running from west to east, the Marra-Fikrî valley, and the Wâdî el-Âbyaḍ, flowing in the opposite direction. The Marra-Fikrî valley rises in the mountains of 'Abdeh, not far from the origin of Wâdî el-Abyaḍ. Up to Rudjm el-Baqarah it bears the name Marra and from here onward Fikrî. Wâdî el-Abyaḍ has a W. N. W. direction and empties into W. el-'Arîsh. At el-'Ôdjah it receives W. el-'Ôdjah and shortly afterwards is called W. el-Azraq.

W. es-Sabi' receives its water from three branches. From the south comes W. 'Ar'arah, which unites at Khirbet es-Sabi' with W. el-Buṭum, flowing from the east; and soon after their union they receive W. el-Khalîl which comes from the north. Beyond Bîr es-Sabi' it bears

different names in different parts: W. Martabah, W. es-Şini, Sêl Shallâleh and W. Ghazzeh.

The three zones differ enormously in soil and formation. The northern one has a very fertile soil, washed down from the mountains. The central region is composed of large fertile patches with much larger areas of sand dunes and rocky, flinty mountains, while the southern zone is barren and stony.

Hand in hand with the geological formation goes the fertility of the Negeb. All the area to the north of W. el-Buţum-es-Sabi' is very fertile and when the winter is rainy the crops are most excellent.

The central zone is not nearly so fertile, but there are many valleys, plateaus and some plains which could well be utilized for agriculture. The most important plains of this sort are situated to the east of the mountain ridge which divides the region from north to south into two parts. This mountain ridge protects most of the eastern part of the central region from the flying sand which changes all places it reaches to inhospitable and barren deserts. The third part is a stony, flinty, sandy desert, absolutely worthless for agriculture.

Hydrographic conditions in the Negeb are very curious. With the exception of the small spring of Kurnub I do not know of any perennial spring. When the rainfall is scanty, as is very often the case, the condition is still more hopeless. Therefore in many places deep wells have been dug to reach the subterranean flow of water. Such wells are still to be found in Bîr es-Sabi', Khalâsah, Ruĥêbeh, el-'Ôdjah. The springs Quşêneh, 'Ên-Qdêrât and 'Ên-Qâdis lie to the south of our region. These water resources are not enough, and additions are necessary. Beduins subsist on the *wâdî* waters for the winter and spring months, but the spring is very short. In the beginning of winter these sons of the desert dig pits three to four metres deep and situated at the base of two hills. As the deeper strata of this region are composed mostly of clay soil, the rain water which has gathered in these pits can not seep through. Abraham's servants may have dug similar pits at Beer-Sheba and have called them "wells." At present they are known by the name *hrâbeh*. In the last dry months of the summer the Beduins gather around the old Byzantine wells and around Quşêneh.

After this short discussion of the geological formation, vegetation and water supply of the land of the 'Azâzmeh, the questions arise:

How could these Byzantine colonies exist in this barren desert? Why were they built? On what did their inhabitants live? To solve them let us consider briefly the civilization of:

1. The country to the north of Beer-Sheba,
2. That between Beer-Sheba and the line el-‘Ôdjah-‘Abdeh (which corresponds to the central zone),
3. The lands south of this line,
4. The land of the ‘Arabah depression.

1. It is most striking to note how the plain south of Djebel el-Khalil is sown with ruins. In some places as, for example, the country to the west of esh-Sheri‘ah nearly every hill shows some remains of old habitation. The hill to the northeast of the Tell esh-Sheri‘ah station, just north of the bridge, shows different strata, which indicate superimposed towns. In no place of this region except in Khirbet es-Sabi‘, in Beer-Sheba, and the ruins on the coast are remains of large buildings to be seen. The enormous number of ruins in this district points to a conclusion which is very important for us, namely, that it was once densely populated and that the soil, which is naturally of an excellent quality, was well utilized and that political conditions were settled.

2. In the second zone, which is, as we have seen, sandier, drier and much less fertile, we find, to our great astonishment, many ruins of what must once have been large and important villages. The houses are built of solid, well-hewn stones and many of them are finished in an artistic style. Nearly every town had a large basilica, and nothing was spared to beautify it; some possessed even more than one. Paintings, mural decorations, etc., were still to be seen in 1915. In Şbêta it almost seemed to me as if an earthquake had taken place only a few months before, forcing the inhabitants to leave their beautiful city. Many houses were still erect, and most had several walls more or less well preserved. What expense and what human energy were necessary to build such villages in the desert! But there are remains of a much older civilization to be seen here and there. On Djebel esh-Sherqi‘yeh, for example, an old altar of roughly hewn stones is still found. Traces of un-Byzantine work may be found elsewhere also.

3. The region south of ‘Abdeh-el-‘Ôdjah is also desolate, devoid of buildings, barren of human traces. Some flint artifacts are to be

seen near Qusêneh. Remains of a castle are found near 'Ēn-Qderât. Bir-Birên (between el-'Ôdjah and Qusêneh), though just below the line 'Abdeh-el-'Ôdjah, belonged in ancient times probably to the central region.

4. Quite different again is the Wâdi el-'Arabah region with the adjoining districts on its eastern side. Here again we find, as a look at the map will show, a great number of ruins, and history tells us that civilization once flourished here, when the names Petra and Aela had a special significance to the world.

After this survey we come to the solution of the question: How could these colonies in the Negeb exist? The answer is: They were the connecting link between the densely populated and well organised country of Palestine on the one hand and the land of the Nabateans on the other hand; they lay on the caravan road between Palestine in the north and Petra-Aela in the south. All caravans to Egypt from Petra-Aela and back had to pass by this road. The caravan road between Arabia, el-'Arabah and the ports of Palestine was also the foundation of the prosperity of Petra.

Supported by a flourishing, densely populated country, and attracted by the riches and the trade of the south, emigrants early went south from Palestine into the Negeb and established colonies. As communication between these lands increased, the necessity of establishing new stations on the caravan road arose. The further south these emigrants went, the further the nomads were pressed back into the desert; naturally these sons of nature looked with hatred at the intruders, and never rested until they triumphed over their enemies and drove them back into Palestine.

A minute study of the ruins reveals their past history and supports our theory. I shall try to describe the most important items in this connection.

The ruins followed two caravan lines, an eastern and a western one. The western line connected Bir-es-Sabi', Khalâşah, Ruḥêbeh, Mas'ûdiyeh, el-'Ôdjah with Şbêta. The eastern road went from es-Sabi', 'Ar'ara, Byâr 'Aslûdj, near Mashrafiyeh, to Şbêta. A shortcut from this caravan road went from 'Ar'ara directly to Kurnub and leaving Mashrafiyeh, Şbêta and 'Abdeh, followed the Fikrî valley until it reached the 'Arabah. Both these roads, the eastern and the western, ran from Şbêta to 'Abdeh and on to the Marra-Fikrî

valley, following 'Ēn Ḥasīb (or Bīr Kharrār), 'Ēn Webbeh, 'Ēn Ṭayyibeh, Naqb er-Rbâ'î to the 'Arabah. From Wâdî Fikrî the road went either directly past Naqb ed-Dakhl to Buşêrah, southeast to Wâdî Mûsâ, or directly southward to Aila. This caravan road was presumably not first built by the Byzantine authorities but was repaired and fortified by them.

The caravan road connecting north with southeast was also the cause of the lack of colonies to the south of the line 'Abdeh-'Ôdjah. They would have been far too remote from their base and at the same time more exposed to the attacks of the Bedouins. This explains at the same time why no settlements were made in the beautiful plain around the large spring Quşêneh, though water, one of the most pressing needs, is found in great quantities.

Owing to these continuous conflicts between the new colonists and the Arabs, the former were obliged to use every means to protect their lives and interests, and strong fortresses were erected. The northern colonies were fortified only by well-built walls, as they did not need elaborate defenses, being situated in the rear, while the southern stations were fortified strongholds built on naturally defensible mountains, more or less isolated from the ridge to which they belong. Mashrafiyeh, 'Ôdjah, 'Abdeh are examples of such strategic positions. Doubtless the nomads of those times often tried in vain to surprise and take these castles.

But even fields, vineyards and orchards were protected against assault by square watch-towers. In W. Rakhwat, W. Imm 'Irqân, W. Abu-Khenân, near Şbêta, el-'Ôdjah, and Ruḥêbeh, in the plain 'Aslûdj, W. el-Wqêr, etc., remains of such towers may be yet seen.

The caravan road itself had to be well protected by fortresses, between different stations and at exposed points. Such strongholds were situated in Tell Shunnârah between Ruḥêbeh and el-'Ôdjah, on the Naqb ed-Dableh etc. The new inhabitants of the desert had besides the Beduin another enemy, perhaps more dangerous than the first: the desert itself with its lack of water, its sand storms, poor soil and hot climate. But their unbreakable will, combined with indefatigable industry, overcame these difficulties. Most settlements (Şbêta, Ruḥêbeh, Bīr Bīrên) had a cistern in every house; pools were constructed; deep wells were dug to reach the underground waters ('Ôdjah, Khalâşah, Ruḥêbeh). The upper ends of many valleys

were changed into reservoirs by building a massive wall across their beds (E. of Ruḥêbeh, Kurnub). Every spot which could be utilised for agriculture was worked systematically. The walls which divided one piece of land from another are still to be seen all over this region. To keep the water of the wâdîs in check during winter and thus prevent the soil of their gardens from being washed away thick walls with a triangular section were erected. The base of one of these walls which I saw near El-Ôdjah measured 23 feet. They were so well built that they have resisted the attacks of nature through all the centuries.

The solitude of the desert with its beautifully clear sky and the ever-shining stars attracted the monks to the Negeb. Thus the great basilicas with their small adjoining monasteries were built. Most of our towns had more than one basilica. In the small church of El-Ôdjah, situated inside the fortress, a tomb and a monk's skeleton with a papyrus roll were found during the war.

As long as Palestine and the land of the Nabateans flourished the colonies in the Negeb flourished also, and their inhabitants became rich, since all the trade to and from Palestine, Egypt, and Petra-Arabia passed through them. This trade was the only source of their wealth and the very basis of their existence. Agriculture and sheep-raising were carried on only on a small scale.

Finally the political importance of Palestine began to dwindle, commerce with the south and the southeast waned, and as the life of the colonies became very precarious the occupation of the oases was no longer possible, for the caravan road fell into disuse. The Beduins seized the opportunity and hastened the downfall of the intrusive culture; thus barbarians again won a victory over civilization . . .