

AL-'USUR AL-WUSTA

THE BULLETIN OF MIDDLE EAST MEDIEVALISTS

Islamic Frontiers, Real and Imagined

by Asa Eger

eginning in the ninth century, Muslim historians, jurists, and geographers frequently discussed the Islamic-Byzantine frontier or *al-thughūr* and *al-'awāṣim* provinces primarily as a militarized region, *dār al-ḥarb*. Warriors of the faith, in their view, performed ritualized yearly raids termed *jihād* against non-Muslims in *bilād ar-Rūm* or, as it was sometimes known, *bilād al-kufr*. This vision of the frontier has been largely left unchallenged by modern historians and untouched by archaeologists working on the periods of Late Antiquity and Islam.¹ However, the historical sources' retrospective and idealized, religious interpretations are problematic and do not adequately explain the choices of frontier settlement, yearly raiding, and diverse communities that comprised the frontier region. Recent evidence from survey and excavation now permits a re-examination of the infamous Islamic-Byzantine *thughūr* of the 7-10th centuries from an archaeological perspective.

Since 1995, the University of Chicago has conducted surveys in the Amuq

Plain (the hinterland of Anṭākiya/Antioch) in the *thughūr* region. A key pattern of early Islamic settlements in the Amuq comprised new sedentary sites in marshland and along rivers and canals. These sites functioned as foci for the administration, maintenance, and facilitation of waterborne transport and irrigation. This settlement pattern is also seen in all the *thughūr* frontier forts which, as outlined by Haldon and Kennedy, are unlike the Byzantine style of upland fortresses.² Al-Ya'qūbi, the Muslim geographer/historian (d. 897 CE), further substantiates this by writing that the cities lay on level ground surrounded by mountains and inhabited by the Byzantines.³ In seeking other alternatives for the choices of frontier settlement and yearly raiding, Kennedy introduces the hypothesis that the conflict between the Byzantines and Muslims over the frontier resulted from as competition over favorable land for pastoralism. Nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists living on the plain in association with sedentary communities

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Middle East Medievalists

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FRONTIERS, FROM PAGE 1.

would have seasonally migrated north to the uplands of the Taurus Mountains in the summer months for pasture. Therefore, summer raiding and winter garrisoning could be seen as related to semi-nomadic transhumance. This competition provides an alternative model for the study of the early Islamic frontier based in environmental factors and land use. Although these transhumance routes could have been protected militarily, such activity departs from conventional and historical explanations of *jihad* ideology.

Christian and Muslim communities coexisted on the frontier. Furthermore, there is evidence that Christian communities were also located on the plains. How is one able to differentiate Christian settlements from Muslim ones in the archaeological record, or to identify sites with mixed communities? Haldon and Kennedy established criteria for distinguishing Byzantine from Early Islamic frontier forts, but tracing an Early Islamic signature in a pre-established Byzantine landscape from ceramic surface collections becomes less clear. Preliminary results from recent excavations conducted in the last two years at Domuztepe in the lower Marash valley reveal a small Christian community living atop a tell.⁴ The community would have been in close proximity to the early Islamic settlement at Mar'ash, which was most probably located in the southern part of the plain and not on the site of the modern city of Kahramanmaraş as has been assumed. The evidence for this comes from the Kahramanmaraş Survey where Whitcomb has demonstrated that many early Islamic settlements were also located in the marshy southern part of the plain, corroborating settlement patterns in the Amuq plain.⁵ Limited excavation (a single 10 x 10 m. square) at the summit of Domuztepe revealed a multi-phase settlement with poorly preserved buildings. The buildings spanned a date from Hellenistic to Middle Islamic (12th-14th c.) centuries. Early Islamic ceramics were found in association with the remains of a large wall and several smaller subsidiary walls. On the whole, the ceramics were of local provenance and with the exception of one kerbschnitt sherd, included no imported wares. A local farmer

discovered a large chancel screen fragment in the field just to the west of the summit. The decorated screen would have been part of a church on the site, as yet undiscovered. To the south of the summit, a cemetery was found while excavating the prehistoric phases of the tell. The cemetery contained 30-40 bodies, men and women, dating to the 9th/10th centuries.⁶ These were identified as Christian burials on the basis of the bodies' positions. Finally, preliminary analysis of the animal bone assemblage from the sounding excavation at the summit revealed the presence of a significant amount (30%) of pig bone in the early Islamic levels suggesting the presence of a non-Muslim community who raised and ate pigs.⁷ Christians are known from the Mar'ash area in several medieval sources describing Jacobite Syrian communities. One states that in 778, the Byzantines relocated many Jacobites to Thrace due to reasons of religious persecution.⁸ Michael the Syrian lists Jacobite bishops for the town, and a century after the Byzantine reconquest (950-1050) four new Jacobite bishoprics were established in the villages around Mar'ash.⁹

In order to address the significance of the Christian settlement on the frontier, it is necessary first to turn to the work of Frederick Jackson Turner and frontier theory. Turner's pioneering and controversial frontier thesis in 1893 viewed the western United States as a wilderness of savages ready to be tamed by civilization and democracy. Recent scholarship on frontier theory and medieval frontiers, however, has challenged many earlier assumptions of the frontier as a border among nations or as an untamed wilderness in the sense Turner conceived it. Frontier theorists, since then, have variously dissected, decried, or sometimes virtually deified his thesis. Certainly its monumental presence in frontier literature is a testament to its durability and provocativeness as a scholarly argument. Since Turner, study of the frontier has become almost a scholarly field in its own right, one that parallels the movement of the academy into wider and more interdisciplinary modes of thought.¹⁰

With regard to the medieval Islamic world, however, Turner's dichoto-

mies of the wilderness and the tame, the savage and the civilized, and the wild and the natural seem to come dangerously close the kind of essentialist thinking condemned by some as "orientalist" and, indeed, to some current anti-Islamic polemic.^{10A} It is now generally accepted that the medieval frontier was never conceived as a specific border of demarcation between two entities but rather was seen as a zone that was both defined by its inhabitants and by its character as a peripheral land in relation to its central ruling body. As a result, frontier societies seldom consisted of different communities in a state of binary opposition but rather were made up of mixed and diverse populations that fluctuated over time. The evolution of frontier theory has moved from the zone to zonal interaction, or as White calls it, the Middle Ground. The simplistic military vision of medieval frontiers dissolved into a set of interactive conflicts amid mixed communities comprising nomadic populations and settled peoples, and the effect on these of frontier institutions and religio-political ideologies. Frontiers have been further broken down into a series of processes embodying the cultural interactions taking place within these diverse societies such as religious, ethnic, economic, linguistic, political, or urban frontiers. At present, the state of the frontier seems not to reside in its definition, which has been dismantled in its monumental form and rebuilt over and over again across diverse socio-physical geographies. Rather, it is a discursive framework in which historians and archaeologists can speak of change and process by testing various theories such as the influence of centralization or decentralization on 'marginal' societies, sedentary or nomadic, or the assimilation or liminalization of ethnic and religious identities.

Returning to Turner's wilderness model, while perhaps appropriate in identifying academic lacunae on the *thughūr*, it is certainly not physically appropriate in describing the thriving pre-Islamic landscape of North Syria. As shown by recent surveys in the region such as the Amuq Valley Regional Project and the Kahramanmaras Survey, the frontier experienced an explosion of settlement from the Hellenistic period through until the

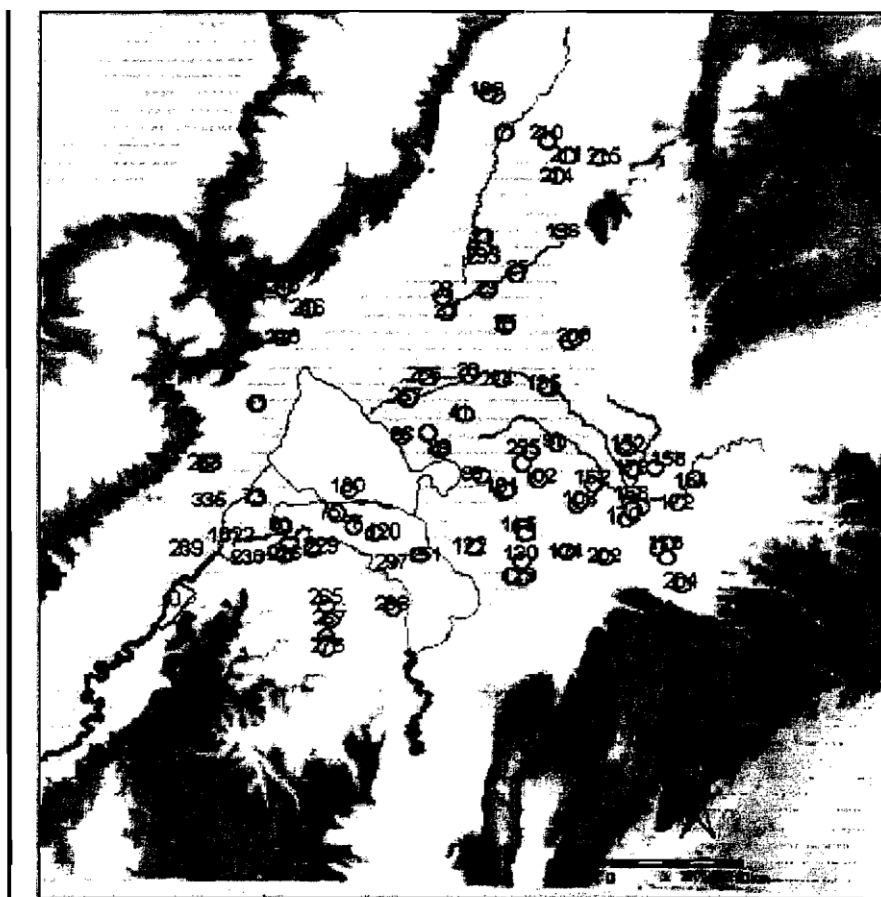


Figure 1. Early Islamic sites in the Amuq Plain.

10th century. These settlements on the plains and uplands were firmly invested in agriculture, irrigation, and the whole regional economy. However, Turner's thesis should not be dismissed outright, as it has significant implications for an imagined ideology of a frontier. Muslim sources such as Balādhuri and Christian ones like Michael the Syrian say that when the Muslims arrived the frontier was a wilderness, a no-man's land whose forts were destroyed and whose inhabitants had been deliberately removed in a 'scorched-earth policy' in the wake of Heraclius' retreat: 'What is known to us is that Heraclius moved the men from these forts, which he shattered. So when the Muslims made their raids, they found them vacant.'¹¹ Upon leaving, Heraclius utters from the Cilician Gates north of Tarsus: 'Peace unto thee, O Syria, and what an excellent country this is for the enemy' - referring to the numerous pastures in Syria.¹²

While archaeological investiga-

tion would not be able to perceive a short-term depopulation followed by a resettlement, it would seem doubtful that it happened. First, a scorched-earth policy or deliberate destruction of forts would leave archaeological traces, besides involving an excessive amount of labor for a people in retreat. Second, as demonstrated by Robert Schick for the Christian communities in Palestine immediately following the conquest, Islamic settlement was initially very small and focused on administrative urban areas. It probably would have been even more marginal on the edges of Islamic territory. Arab tribes who practiced nomadic or seminomadic pastoralism were also part of the landscape. Furthermore, while many city-dwelling elites and garrisons may have fled with the advent of the Muslims, many other peoples, particularly those in rural areas such as Monophysite and other Christian communities of non-Orthodox monastic orders, welcomed the new rulers who administered with great



Figure 2. Mar'ash Valley (Landsat image). The former marshes along the river, where most Islamic sites were located, now show as the crazy-quilt of cropped fields near Domuztepe and south of the built-up area of Kahramanmaraş, at top.

religious tolerance, in contrast to Byzantine Orthodox theological persecution. Creating this concept of a mythic wilderness is a powerful legitimizing tool for a new rising power and important to the branding of a new ideological frontier. Adam Smith draws comparisons among similar phenomena in history with the establishment of the Urartian state and Theodore Roosevelt: 'Both rulers were speaking of "wildernesses" that had been occupied by other peoples for centuries; by reclassifying them as "waste spaces," expansion was not only conscionable, it was mandated.'¹³

Expansion certainly seemed to be the order of the day in the early conquests, but by the 'Abbāsīd period, the significance of the frontier had shifted significantly, becoming a staging ground for token raids that neither gained nor held new territory. Coincidentally, at least a century and a half after the initial conquest and settlement of the frontier, the notion of *jihād* began to take shape in the writings of Muslim jurists. Although retroactively applied, the division of *dār al-Islām* and *dār al-ḥarb* was established, thus perhaps for the first time delineating a frontier zone which was defined by an unending holy war against the unbelievers until they were converted or subjugated. The proselytizing intimation of this war and "call to arms" by the central authority added a "spiritual level" to the frontier.¹⁴ As highlighted by Hillenbrand, stipulations also appeared, such as the notion that peace treaties could put off *jihād* for up to ten years.¹⁵ Additionally, non-Muslims residing within Muslim lands must be protected, but this only applied to Christians and Jews and excluded pagans. Their position within Muslim society should be questioned however. Non-Muslims who didn't convert had to pay the *jizya* tax and had *dhimmī* status. As protected citizens (*musta'min*), they could also be given temporary safe conduct.

By the tenth century, the articulation of the frontier from the central lands showed signs of adaptation. Scholars mention adjustments to the dichotomies of *dār al-Islām* and *dār al-ḥarb* by adding another metaphysical geographic layer: *dār al-ṣulḥ* (house of peace) or *dār al-'ahd* (house of covenant). In this ideological frontier, non-Muslims could remain au-

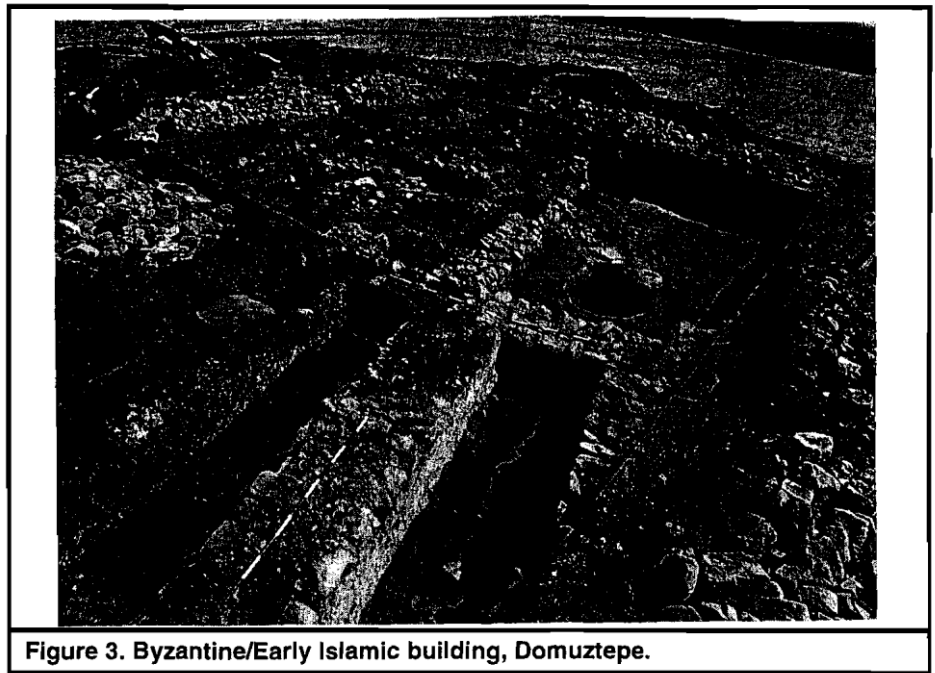


Figure 3. Byzantine/Early Islamic building, Domuztepe.

tonomous and protected from *jihād* fighting only if they recognized Muslim power and paid tribute. However, during this time, the *thughūr* frontier was already fragmented and ruled by local powers such as the Ḥamdānids of al-Mawṣil and Ḥalab and by the mid 10th century, the Byzantines reconquered much of the *thughūr* frontier lands. It is apparent, then, that the articulation and reinforcement of these ideological frontiers "on paper" were forms of propaganda from central lands on how to effectively administrate these changing peripheral lands. It is clear that for the original stage of the Islamic frontier and *jihād*, the curtain had fallen. Predictably, the tolerance for independent non-Muslim communities seems to have been fueled by economic motivation either through taxation or increased facility of commerce across the "frontier," rather than religious institutions.

In the midst of a Holy War, could the Christian community at Domuztepe have been incorporated by tax and treaty and incorporated as an Islamic frontier settlement? If so, was this practice of economic motivated religious tolerance distinctive of an Islamic frontier? While certainly possible, the questions raise more problems than they attempt to answer regarding the nature of societal interaction on the *thughūr* and the reality of *jihād*. How would they have perceived them-

selves, as subjects of the caliphate, original and rightful custodians of their land, or enemies of the state? Just as the authors of the Islamic sources were influenced by their patronage, audience, and own training, in many ways, the answers to these would involve a projection of one's own disciplinary outlook on past frontier societies. For example, how can an archaeologist perceive frontiers? In the medieval periods there were no linear borders. Natural features, such as the Taurus Mountains, were often used to demarcate areas. This can be seen in the early maps of some of the Muslim geographers such as Muqqaḍasī and Idrīsī that show abstracted lines for mountains ranges and coasts. Therefore the concept of borders, so much a part of contemporary nationalism, may not have been felt as acutely. For the archaeologist, settlement patterns and evidence of Christian communities on the *thughūr* reflects the same patterning seen in the central Islamic landscapes of Early Islamic Palestine and Egypt. The contrasts then are twofold. On the one hand, the material culture at Domuztepe reflects a set of evidence that can be interpreted as Christian and suggests an ethno-religious makeup of a community in close proximity to Muslim sites, therefore delineating a zone where two groups were interacting. On the other hand, the material culture is not necessarily paradigmatic of a frontier society.

Domuztepe reflects the dominance of local traditions and industries dictated in part by subsistence in a marsh environment. These may differ from other frontier settlements for example around Malatya and Zibatrah that were in higher elevations and hillier terrain or even from other more central Islamic lands that exhibit wider connections, the importation of material culture and animals, and the proximity to larger and denser settlements and urban areas. These qualities are not exclusive to identifying frontier societies, however, based on the fact that the archaeological evidence is so site-specific. But they cast the idea of territoriality in an archaeological light that

is distinctly apolitical. As articulated by Smith on the subject of territoriality: 'Ecological change or alterations in the nutrient requirements of populations are the only clear determinants that might explain changes in attachments between people and place.'¹⁶ Thus for the archaeologist, though categories of evidence may suggest ethno-religious frontier societies, the frontier as an identifiable regional space is imperceptible. The *thughūr* becomes an imagined frontier composed of religious/political ideologies. Stripped of its ideology, archaeology can show a "real" region of continuity, ecological subsistence, and local economy. However, frontiers,

whether real or imagined, all have historical relevance.

This final view seems decidedly deconstructionist, but should be taken as a point of departure. The study of frontiers thus far has expanded into an interdisciplinary discussion that at the same time has raised certain borders. Perhaps it is necessary to examine how our own disciplines, whether archaeology, history, or literature, determine where we place frontiers and whether they are, in fact, real or imagined. In studying these sets of liminal processes and change, our own interdisciplinary interactions become imbedded participants in the creation of frontiers.

Notes:

1 Kaegi in his examination of the frontier in the 7th century from textual sources, however, raises several important issues testing the physicality of the frontier from a military, economic, and transhumant perspective. Walter Emil Kaegi, "The Frontier, Barrier or Bridge?" *The 17th International Byzantine Congress: Major Papers*. New Rochelle, NY: A.D. Caratzas, 1986.

2 John F. Haldon and Hugh Kennedy, "The Arab-Byzantine frontier in the eighth and ninth centuries: military organization and society in the borderlands," *Zbornik Radova Vizantoloski Institut* (Recueil des Travaux de l'Institut d'Etudes Byzantines) (Belgrade) 19 (1980), 79-116.

3 Al-Ya'qūbī, *Kitāb al-Buldān*, Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum, vol. VII, ed. M.J. de Goeje, p. 362.

4 Limited information has been published thus far on the late periods at Domuztepe. See E. Carter. "Report on the Domuztepe Excavations, 2002." www.sscnet.ucla.edu/ioa/domuztepe02.htm; J. Snead. "The Local Survey around Domuztepe." www.humnet.ucla.edu/humnet/nelc/stelasite/james.html.

5 D. Whitcomb, "Letters from the Field: In Search of Lost Mar'ash," *The Oriental Institute News and Notes* 171 (Fall 2001).

6 Jessica Pearson (Univ. of Liverpool) is currently working on the skeletal remains which are currently unpublished.

7 I am grateful to Kate Grossman (Univ. of Chicago) for making available her preliminary analysis on the faunal assemblage from the 2003 sounding, currently unpublished.

8 Michael the Syrian, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*, edited and translated by J.-B. Chabot, Vol. II, Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1901, p. 526. The text of a Syriac inscription from the church of St. Serguis at Ehresh (Gimın) not far from Domuztepe on the Turkish lower Euphrates corroborates the displacement of its Syriac Orthodox residents at this time. A. Palmer. *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993, p. 71.

9 Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, Essex, UK: Longman Group Limited, 1986, p. 281.

10 The most important contributions have come from three conferences on medieval frontiers published with a variety of papers, *Medieval Frontier Societies*, edited by R. Bartlett, Robert & Angus MacKay, Oxford 1989; *Frontiers in Question: Eurasian Borderlands, 700-1000*, edited by Daniel Power and Naomi Standen, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999; *Medieval Frontiers: Concepts and Practices*, edited by David Abulafia and Nora Berend, Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2002; and Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991. These contributions have explored, complicated, and redefined the frontier into a set of interactive zones operating on many levels, departing from the traditional two ways of observing frontiers, either as a Turnerian wilderness or a border between two entities.

10A Two articles by Ralph W. Brauer, "Boundaries and Frontiers in Medieval Muslim Geography," Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, vol. 85, pt. 6, 1995; Tetz Rooke, "Writing the Boundary: Khitat al-Shām by Muhammad Kurd Ali." *The Concept of Territory in Islamic Law and Thought*, 2000, pp. 165-186 have focused on the idea of an Islamic frontier.

11 Al-Balādhurī, *Kitāb Futūḥ al-Buldān*, translated by P.K. Hitti, Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2002, p. 253.

12 Ibid, p. 210.

NEWS OF MEM

New MEM Board Members

At the MEM Business Meeting last fall, held November 20, 2004 in San Francisco in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Middle East Studies Association, the attending members elected two colleagues to serve on the MEM Board, to replace outgoing Board members Bruce D. Craig (University of Chicago) and Josef W. Meri (Ismaili Institute, London), whose terms expired December 31, 2004.

Suleiman Mourad, Assistant Professor of Religion at Middlebury College, earned a B.S. and M.A. from the American University of Beirut, and an M. Phil. and Ph.D. from Yale University. He specializes in early Islamic history and religious thought, and has a particular interest in the origins of Islam, Jesus in the Islamic tradition, the symbolism surrounding Jerusalem in Islamic tradition, and Arabic and Islamic historiography. He teaches courses on Islamic history and religion, Islam in the modern world, and comparative themes in Western religious history.

Bethany Walker, Assistant Professor of History at Grand Valley State University, received a B.A. in Classical and Near Eastern Archaeology from Bryn Mawr College, an M.A. in Near Eastern Studies from the University of Arizona, and a Ph.D. in History from the University of Toronto. After teaching for several years at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, she joined Grand Valley State University's faculty in 2004. She specializes in archaeology of the Islamic period in the Near East and has for some years participated in excavation of the Mamluk-era levels at Tell Hesban in Jordan. Her teaching focuses on Middle Eastern history.

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13 Adam Smith. *The Political Landscape: constellations of authority in early complex polities*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, p. 23. Interestingly, a similar event occurs in 965 when, after most of the thughūr has been reconquered by the Byzantines, Nicephorus asks the Syrian Jacobites to resettle the area, filling in the deserted towns. Jean Maurice Fiey, "The Syriac Population of the Thughūr al-Shāmiya and the 'Awāsim, and its Relation with the Byzantines and Muslims." *Bilād al-Shām during the Abbasid Period, Proceedings of the Vth International Conference on Bilad al-Sham*, edited by Muhammad A. al-Bakhit and Robert Schick, Amman: 1991, p. 43.

14 These have been discussed in recent papers by Ian Straughn, "The Landscape of the Islamic Frontier: General remarks on archaeological features, medieval geographical representations and the importance of Islamic spatial discourses," Paper given at the Eurasian Archaeology Conference, University of Chicago, 2005; Saud al-Zaid, "The Apocalyptic Frontier: Tarsus and the End of the World." Paper given at MEHAT Conference, University of Chicago, April 2004; and Fred Donner, "The Development of the Concepts of Dār al-Islām and Dār al-harb," Paper given at MESA Conference, 1991.

15 Carole Hillenbrand, *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives*, New York: Routledge, 2000, pp. 98-99.

16 Adam Smith, *The Political Landscape*.