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Whence Diyār Bakr? An Inquiry into Early Jazīran Administrative Geography

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Abstract: This article discusses the emergence of Diyār Bakr as the northern sub-division of the Jazīra in the early Islamic period. It shows that this sub-province is a product of the 10th century CE and not, as has hitherto been assumed, of the conquest or Umayyad period. As a first step, the paper traces the appearance of the name Diyār Bakr in the Arabic sources to the mid-10th century. It then turns to the ‘Abbāsīd geographical tradition and gives an overview of the various portrayals of the region of the Jazīran north up to al-Muqaddasī (d. after 990), who is the first to provide a rudimentary depiction of the Jazīran north as ‘Diyār Bakr’. The article then turns to the history of the Banū Shaybān of Bakr/Rabī’a in the Jazīran north to offer a tentative explanation for the origin of the term and administrative district of Diyār Bakr. It concludes with a brief discussion of the need to re-evaluate the political and administrative history of the Jazīra before the 10th century.

Keywords: Diyār Bakr; Jazīra; Northern Mesopotamia; early Islamic Empire; Banū Shaybān; early Islamic geography.

Introduction

Scholarship has long engaged with the history of the early Islamic Empire (7th–10th century), but only in recent years has the emphasis shifted from a centre- and caliph-focussed view to an approach that regards the study of regional politics and powerbrokers as vital to our understanding of how the Umayyad and ‘Abbāsīd caliphates operated.¹ This paper will look at the early

1 See e.g. BULLIET 1972; SHOSHAN 1986; PAUL 1996; ROBINSON 2000; NEF/TILLIER 2011. The Hamburg-based ERC project pursues a similar approach, as does Petra Sijpesteijn’s new project at Leiden University, for which see <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/research/research-projects/humanities/embedding-conquest#tab-1>. For a later example, see Paul 2016.

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Islamic province of al-Jazīra (Northern Mesopotamia), what are today parts of northern Syria, northern Iraq, and southeast Turkey. The Jazīra features quite regularly in the works of the early Islamic tradition, but with a few exceptions, like the move of the caliphal capital to this province during the reigns of the last Umayyad Marwān II and of the ‘Abbāsīd Hārūn al-Rashīd,² it appears mainly as a transit region and the scene of (mostly Khārijite) revolts. This is reflected by modern scholarship: a considerable amount of archaeological and numismatic work has been done (primarily on the western district of al-Jazīra, Diyār Muḍar),³ but al-Raqqā and al-Mawṣil are the only Jazīran cities that have been studied in greater detail,⁴ and on the whole, the province’s pre-10th-century history has been neglected. The present article is intended as a small step towards filling that gap.

Our point of departure is the Jazīra’s provincial structure in the early Islamic period. The province is said to have consisted of three subdivisions: the already-mentioned Diyār Muḍar in the west with its capitals at Ḥarrān and then al-Raqqā, centred on the area stretching from the Balikh valley to the Euphrates; the eastern district of Diyār Rabī’a, roughly the region from the Tigris to the Khābūr and including the Ṭūr ‘Abdīn; and finally the Jazīran north, Diyār Bakr, which encompasses the Upper Tigris basin, a mountainous region with high summits.⁵ According to the *EP*, Diyār Bakr’s principal towns included Āmid, Mayyāfāriqīn, Ḥiṣn Kayfā, and Arzan.⁶ All three Jazīran subdivisions were reportedly named after the tribal confederations who had moved into the region following (and to an extent already before) the conquests of the 7th century.⁷

Now, Diyār Muḍar and Rabī’a indeed appear in the earliest relevant sources at our disposal, and the former in particular seems to have been pretty much

2 Already during the reign of the Umayyad caliph Hishām (r. 724–743 CE), the seat of power had (at least for part of the year) moved to the vicinity, to al-Ruṣāfa, which is located just south of the Euphrates in the north Syrian desert and close to al-Raqqā. Administratively, it was associated with Syria, although it undoubtedly had close ties with the Jazīra, and specifically the Diyār Muḍar, as well. See *EP*, “al-Ruṣāfa” (C. E. BOSWORTH/C. P. HAASE/M. MARÍN); ILISCH 1996, 130.

3 See e.g. GYSELEN/NÈGRE 1982; BARTL 1994; HEIDEMANN 1998 and 2008; Lyonnet 2000; EGER 2015.

4 On al-Raqqā, see e.g. MEINECKE 1996; the articles collected in Becker/Heidemann 2003 and Becker/Daiber 2004; HEIDEMANN 2006; AL-FAYṢAL 2010. On early Islamic al-Mawṣil, the principal study remains Robinson 2000. See also FORAND 1969; AL-SĀMIR 1970; ROBINSON 2016; MUNT 2018.

5 For the geography of the region, see POSNER 1985, 33–72; for the (human) landscape in the Ḥamdānīd period, see CANARD 1953, 75–86.

6 *EP*, “Diyār Bakr” (M. CANARD/CL. CAHEN).

7 On the conquest of the Jazīra, see POSNER 1985 and 1988.