Nomads, Phylarchs and Settlement in Syria and Palestine*

Nomads and Sedentary Farmers

There has been much discussion of the relations between nomads and sedentary peasants. Some have emphasized that the relationship of the two ways of life, because of their competition for the same natural resources, is inevitably hostile.\(^1\) Others have pointed out that peasants and nomads are mutually dependent, and that the survival of each depends on their reaching agreement for conditions of peaceful coexistence and cooperation.\(^2\) More recently the proponents of a cooperative relationship have been in the majority. There has also been the important recognition of the point that the purely sedentary and the purely nomadic are extremes on a spectrum of different ways of combining agriculture with animal rearing. Even largely nomadic tribes are partly settled.\(^3\) Often only part of a nomadic group, sometimes a larger sometimes a smaller proportion of the whole, takes part in the annual migration, leaving the rest in their base area practising sedentary farming.\(^4\) Groups which are predominantly nomadic often have a permanent base in an agricultural environment to which they return for the driest season every year.\(^5\) They may have fixed

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1 S.T. Parker, Peasants, Pastoralists and Pax Romana: A Different View, BASOR 265, 1987, 35–51.
4 B. Spooner, The Status of Nomadism as a Cultural Phenomenon in the Middle East, JAAS 7, 1972, 122–130.
cemeteries. Nomads often exercise patronage and control over sedentary peasants and even towns. The facts that nomads usually had a permanent base area is of great importance when we try to understand the historical role of the nomads in Late Roman Syria: it made a great difference to their behaviour whether the base of a nomad group was on the Roman or the Persian edge of the desert.

The Role of the Army

Turning to relations of nomads and sedentary farmers in Roman Syria there is one phenomenon which immediately strikes the eye, the eastward advance of permanent settlements as far as the line beyond which there is not enough rainfall to allow agriculture unassisted by artificial irrigation, and in many places further than that. On average the advance must amount to something like hundred and fifty kilometres. This might suggest that as agriculture advanced nomadic groups were simply pushed into the desert. But this is not what happened. Nomads continued to be a significant part of the population. There is clear evidence for this in literary sources, particularly for the Negev but also for Palestine and Northern Syria. That nomads continued their traditional way of life within the frontiers of the Empire has also been shown by field surveys. The sources refer to them as Saracens. What seems to have happened is that nomads and peasants, as far as they were distinct groups, found arrangements that enabled farmers to cultivate their land and nomads to maintain their annual migrations side by side. It is also certain that a

8 The controversy between Banning and Parker (see n. 12 below) is partly about the interpretation of field surveys.
9 On the original meaning of Saracen see D.F. Graf, Defence of the Arabian Frontier, in Id. (ed.), Rome and the Arabian Frontier, cit. n. 2, 1–26, relevant 14–15.
10 Nilus, Narrationes, PG LXXIX, 661 (c. 400 AD); breakdown of agreement between Pharan in Sinai with local nomads giving security from raids against payment of money.