Karak’s role as a regional capital is clearly of fundamental importance to the analysis of the historical and archaeological records. The administrative status of Karak defined the nature of its relationship with the surrounding lands of central and southern Jordan, as well as with other centres of government and commerce in Bilād al-Shām and Egypt. For much of the Middle Islamic period Karak was the administrative centre for the lands south of the Wādī Zarqā‘ including the east and south banks of the Dead Sea and the southern section of the eastern Jordan valley. At times the administrative region of Karak included Khalīl in the south and Nāblus in the north. In the period c. 1100–1650 central and southern Jordan was a productive agricultural region with some limited mineral resources and manufacturing capacity. The written sources also indicate that livestock rearing formed a significant part of the economy. The Karak plateau and Balqā‘ were populous from the late twelfth to the early fifteenth century. Sharāt and Jibāl were probably more sparsely settled.

The picture after 1500 is more difficult to discern. A continuity of settlement seems likely on the Karak plateau until at least c. 1600 though much of Balqā‘, and perhaps the areas south of the Wādī al-Ḥasā‘ reverted to more nomadic occupation before the end of the sixteenth century. The period after c. 1650 is characterised by lower levels of sedentary occupation,¹ although the descriptions of the lands east of the Ghawr as an area virtually devoid of permanent settlement made by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century travellers require revision.² The fertility of the lands of central and southern Jordan and the continuity of settlement in the period c. 1100–1500 meant that the area usually produced an agricultural surplus. The desire to exploit this agricultural region is an important reason for the interest shown by the political dynasties of the Levant in the Middle Islamic period.

¹ Archaeological surveys indicate that the sedentary population of the Karak plateau was clustered in villages in the highlands on the south-western flank of the plateau in the Ottoman period. See Brown (1992), pp. 440–42.
The discussion of the political history (chapter 2) emphasised the importance of the location of Karak and the defensive strength of the castle. While the strategic significance of the castle varied according to the wider political developments, factors that remain important throughout the Middle Islamic period are: the proximity of the castle to the King’s Highway, a major road from Damascus to Cairo as well as principal pilgrimage route from Syria to Mecca and Medina; the position of Karak on the frontier of the southern part of the Badiya al-Shām; and the commanding position the castle enjoyed over the route around the south end of the Dead Sea into Palestine. In addition, the castle was utilised as a point of liaison with powerful bedouin tribes. Whenever any of these considerations was paramount to the policies of central government in Cairo, Damascus or Jerusalem, correspondingly political and economic activity on the site became more intense.

The discussion in chapters 2, 3, and 4 also highlighted the towns and areas outside of central and southern Jordan that were most significant in the economic and political development of Karak. The most important relations were with the south of Bilād al-Shām. To the west the Palestine coast connected Karak and the surrounding regions with the trade networks of the Mediterranean. To the north Damascus was the most important influence on Karak and probably acted as the mediator of much of the international trade in Bilād al-Shām. The political and economic life of northern Syria appears to have had little effect on the historical development of the lands south of the Wādī Zarqā in the Middle Islamic period. To the south there is little evidence to suggest any great degree of political and economic interaction between Karak and the cities of Mecca and Medina, though Karak remained important because it controlled a vital stretch of the hajj route leading to Syria. There are also occasional examples in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries of troops being sent from Karak to Arabian hajj forts such as Khaybar. What is much more significant is that Karak represented the point where the relationship of the state and the powerful bedouin tribes of southern Jordan and Arabia was mediated. The link between Cairo and Karak was most powerfully expressed in the Bahlī Mamluk period, particularly during the reigns of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn and his sons, but was of less importance for the remainder of the Middle Islamic period. At other times, Cairo’s direct interest in the region did not extend beyond the appointment of governors and other high officials. This lack of regular connection appears to be confirmed in the archaeological record;