The impact of the late Roman army in Palæstina and Arabia*

Ariel S. Lewin

The aim of the present paper is to investigate the relationship between the presence of the late Roman army in certain marginal areas of the Near East bordering the desert and the economic and demographic growth of those territories. Should we assume that the presence of the army was a prerequisite condition of their development? Or, on the contrary, must we assume that indigenous peoples in those regions were able to develop agriculture independently of Roman military presence? If so, we could be forced to admit that the introduction of the army into marginal lands was dictated by the imperial wish of exploiting those territories and that the soldiers started to undertake administrative duties in areas previously neglected by the imperial government.

The subject is an important one, but it is necessary to abandon preconceived ideas and to investigate specific situations using all available evidence. Scholars who are sceptical about the possibilities of indigenous cultures to develop an efficient agriculture underline that expansion and growth in such areas were a result of the imperial presence. A different approach invites us to take into account the capability of indigenous populations to expand the cultivation in the territories in which they were living using the most ingenious devices. Most probably, the answer to our question cannot be the same for every specific case we investigate.

In the second half of the first century the Roman army, by pacifying the desert tribe of the Garamantes, provided the necessary preconditions for the development of agrarian production in the Tripolitanian predesert area where a pastoral economy was quickly superseded by agricultural practice. The agricultural growth of the area was due to efforts made by the indigenous tribe of the Macae. Eventually, the predesert agrarian production became integrated into the imperial economy.

* I thank Tali Erickson-Gini who helped me in the preparation of this paper. Basema Hamarneh and Zbigniew Fiema offered several suggestions.
and olive oil produced in the wadis was exported in the Mediterranean. The army was not deployed in the predesert area until the end of the second century and consequently it did not directly influence the expansion of agriculture there. Moreover, there is no evidence of Roman colonization in the region.\(^1\) As has been stated:

The Roman contribution to the spread of agriculture was limited to enabling native elites in the towns and of the tribes to take advantage of their traditional position in society through the exploitation of land and labour.\(^2\)

However, Roman expansion in southern *Mauretania Caesariensis* along the so called *praetentura nova* during the time of Septimius Severus appears to be a typical case of colonization and exploitation of a region initiated by imperial authorities. An important inscription has revealed that *populi novi* were transferred there from *Africa Proconsularis*, an overcrowded province at that time. The deployment of the Roman army along the frontier protected the growth of the new settlements and the process has been described as a ‘colonisation agricole.’\(^3\)

In order to examine the impact that military units which were deployed in the marginal areas of Palestine and Arabia had on these territories I have selected two specific cases: a number of sites in the central and northern Negev and a handful of villages on the fringe of the desert in central Jordan. Recently published data enrich our knowledge of the economic and the social history of the areas under examination, and consequently we may try to understand the setting in which the army operated.

For the moment it is important to note that during the wide span of time between AD 300 and the Arab conquest there were changes in the way in which military units were deployed in the territory. Some units left their bases for other sites while others were newly introduced into the area. The patchy evidence suggests that the causes of changes in

---

