



Conference Report

Regional and Transregional Elites – Connecting the Early Islamic Empire

October 7-8, 2016, at Universität Hamburg

<https://www.islamic-empire.uni-hamburg.de/en/news-and-events/conferences/elite-conference.html>

The conference was hosted by the ERC Advanced Grant Project, “The Early Islamic Empire at Work – The View from the Regions Toward the Center,” under the direction of Stefan Heidemann.¹ It has now entered its second phase, looking at the conceptualization and functioning of transregional and regional elites. The project is the first systematic attempt to explain the operation of the empire from a regional perspective, that is, by adopting the view from the provinces. It studies how elites, in the provinces and the caliphal center alike, contributed to the organization and management of the early Islamic empire. This regional perspective represents an important alternative to histories written from the perspective of the imperial center. The conference papers examined the myriad roles that regional and transregional elites played in governing the vast early Islamic Empire (7th-10th century CE).

In his introduction, ‘Transregional and Regional Elites,’ Stefan Heidemann (Hamburg) noted the current lack of any theoretical conceptualization of elites in our field and expressed the hope that the conference might address this

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shortcoming in scholarship. Heidemann began by offering a working vocabulary: he defined 'elites' as groups of people with an elevated (political, military, judicial, religious and/or economic) status that entitled them to power, wealth, influence, and other notable benefits. The status of elites depended on conceptions of merit, performance, ethnicity, ancestry, wealth, military prowess, religion, education, social capital, and forms of privilege.

Heidemann's presentation expanded upon the project's distinction between 'regional' and 'transregional' elites. Transregional elites operated across the regions of the empire, as in the case of Arab governors during the Umayyad and early 'Abbāsid period and Khurāsāni generals at the peak of 'Abbāsid power. Transregional elites were vital for the maintenance of the empire. Regional elites largely were confined to specific provinces, and it was in these regions where their sphere of influence was most visible. Their influence often had pre-Islamic roots. However, there were occasions where regional elites evolved into transregional elites, and vice versa, as in the case of the Aghlabids, whose founder was a (transregional) Khurāsānī Arab commander, who built up a regional dynasty in North Africa/Ifrīqiya. The advantage of the use of these qualifiers over others – such as 'imperial' – is that they are measurable; prosopographical research into the careers of individuals can reveal their movements. A term such as 'imperial elites' is not synonymous with transregional elites, because it is too vague, but may refer to an entitlement by the caliphal administration.

By design, the project puts less emphasis on the important role of religion and ideology in elite formation. Summarising the current research of the group, the introduction further questioned the concept of territoriality of the provinces, except for Iraq and Egypt, and the notion of an imperial capital. Instead it hinted at a layered structure of authority within each province. Considering the projection of power from the imperial center through the appointment of a governor (usually from one of the entitled elites) and the establishment of a loyal garrison, the idea of the capital was dismissed in favour of imperial cities. Heidemann highlighted the exchange of military elites of different geographical and ethnic backgrounds after

two to three generations as a feature that set the early Islamic empire apart from the Roman and Sasanian empires, both of which were characterised by a more evolutionary development of their elite structures. Under the Umayyads, for example, the military elite consisted almost entirely of Arabs; and under the ‘Abbāsids this military elite was replaced first by Khurāsānis, who themselves were displaced by Central Asian military elites. The question of military elites in the early Islamic empire was a recurrent theme in the conference papers. This prompted many of the participants to discuss the nature of the *mamlūk* institution and question whether the terminology used to describe them (*mamlūks* as slaves) should give way to new concepts such as bonded military.

Peter Verkinderen and Simon Gundelfinger (Hamburg), “Governors of the Early Islamic Empire – A Comparative Regional Perspective,” analyzed the appointments of governors in Fārs and al-Shām on several levels. Due to the lack of a distinct hierarchical terminology in the sources, these individuals were classified using the terms governor, super-governor and sub-governor. Verkinderen and Gundelfinger identified patterns in the backgrounds of these officials that changed over time and noted that these patterns rarely applied in both provinces at the same time. They closed their paper by highlighting, therefore, the need for a regional approach to the study of elites and government structures.

Fanny Bessard (Bristol), “The Twilight of the Late Antique Clerical and Landowning Elite and the Dawn of a Civilian Bourgeoisie,” highlighted the shift from a pre-Islamic landowning elite to an urban landowning merchant elite (*tujjār*). She dates the emergence of this new elite to the beginning of the ninth century, when they began taking up government functions and developing a class consciousness. The discussion raised the question of overlapping or layered identities: were merchants also *hadīth* transmitters, land holders, etc.? A related question is whether the apparent rise of an urban merchant class might be related to the changing emphasis of the primary sources, and a shift in stress on the layers of identity.

Finally, Bessard's presentation raised questions about whether the notion of a bourgeoisie serves as a useful heuristic for locating the rise of merchant elites in early Islamic society.

Amikam Elad (Jerusalem), "Preliminary Notes on the Term and Institution of al-Shākiriyya in Early Islam," addressed the problem of terminology in Arabic sources as it relates to the case of the *shākiriyya*. In a close examination of references to the *shākiriyya* in primary sources up to the reign of al-Ma'mūn, he challenged current scholarship on the term. His view is that the term denotes different groups in varying contexts. Sometimes, '*shākiriyya*' refers to a group of people with a military character (as armed guards or as a fighting force on the battle field). In other contexts, no military connection is apparent, and the *shākiriyya* in question appeared to be simply servants or devoted followers. A certain link with Khurāsāni/Central-Asian practices seemed apparent, but Elad stressed how both an institution and the meaning of its name can change once they are transplanted to another context. The discussion raised, not for the last time during the conference, the question of military slavery and the tension between slave and elite status.

Cyrille Aillet (Lyon), "Connecting the Ibadi Network in North Africa with the Empire," focused on the Ibādī imamate of the Rustumids in Tahart and its economic and other connections with the rest of the Empire, especially Iraq. He noted how the Ibādī Rustumids drew on their alleged 'eastern' Persian heritage in an effort to create common ground with their Berber supporters against the rule of the 'Arab' 'Abbāsids.

Petra Sijpesteijn (Leiden), "Establishing Local Elite Authority in Egypt Through Arbitration and Mediation," used Egyptian papyri to draw attention to jurisprudential matters in the period from the Arab/Muslim conquests through the early 'Abbāsid period. She concluded that, on a local level, arbitration and mediation was sought from bishops, Islamic governors, and *qādīs* alike, regardless of the religion of the petitioner. Hence, it was via the authority of arbitration itself that local elite status

was created and affirmed. Arbitration thus became an important tool for elites to maintain their standing even as their formal administrative authority declined. This can be seen first and foremost with Christian elites, who were gradually pushed out of administrative functions by the Arabs, and, in turn, during the early ‘Abbāsid period, with the replacement of the Arabs by Central Asians.

Yaacov Lev (Ramat Gan, Israel), addressed “The Civilian Ruling Elite of the Tulunid-Ikhshidid Period,” in a first foray into contemporary terminology for elites. Among the most important sources he identified for ninth and tenth-century Egypt were the works by Ibn ‘Abd al-Hakam (789-871), al-Kindī (897-961), and Ibn Yūnis (894-958), as well as the significantly later writings of al-Maqrīzī. Lev dealt with such terms as *aṣnāf*, *‘awwām*, *ahl (al-dawla)* and *wujūh (al-dawla)*, and their applications.

Matthew Gordon (Oxford, OH/Beirut), “Samaran Politics and the Abbasid provinces,” set the career of Ahmad ibn Ṭūlūn in the context of what he termed ‘Samaran politics.’ Ibn Ṭūlūn conducted himself very much in the manner of his peers in the Samaran military elite, at the heart of whose efforts lay twin goals: the security of lucrative interests, including authority over appointments to Egypt, and an upper hand over the Abbasid court in Samarra. It is this combination that defined ‘Samaran politics’ as conducted at the provincial level, on the part of Ibn Ṭūlūn, but other ranking members of the Turkic/Central Asian military as well. As Gordon put Ibn Ṭūlūn “overplayed his hand” trying to balance his interest in Sāmarrā and his own powerbase in Syria and Egypt, until he became an enemy of the all-powerful al-Muwaffaq and his successors.

Philip Wood (London), “Christian Elite Networks in the Jazira, c.730-850,” opened with a definition of aristocracy by Chris Wickham as individuals and groups possessing memory of ancestry, land, office, lifestyle, mutual recognition, and proximity to royal patronage. Wood considered the bishops of the Syrian Orthodox Church (the ‘Jacobites’) in the Jazīra as aristocratic elites. His main source was the chronicle of Dionysius of Tel Maḥrē (mid-9th century CE), whom he characterized

as no less a patronage-seeking aristocrat than a cleric and patriarch. He postulated an ‘Indian summer’ of the late Roman Christian aristocracy between 580 to 720 CE, displayed among others by the building of churches and monasteries. Churchmen received diplomas for raising taxes, making them compliant in justifying the new Islamic rule as legitimate. However, the rise of the Islamic Empire also resulted in the disempowerment of Christian laymen, who were largely excluded from joining the army, and whose Syriac education was temporarily devalued by the increasing Arabization of the administration. The growing administrative apparatus and taxation in the Jazīra in the early ‘Abbāsid period curtailed some of the privileges enjoyed by wealthy Christian (ecclesiastical) elites. The period also witnessed increased caliphal involvement in church affairs and the election of bishops and patriarchs. Comments raised in the discussion compared the Jazīran bishops with the local aristocracy in other regions of the empire, including the *dihqāns* and the Bukhārān *Bukhārkhudās*.

Hannah-Lena Hagemann (Hamburg), “Muslim Elites in the Early Islamic Jazīra: The *qādīs* of Ḥarrān, al-Raqqa, and al-Mawṣil,” argued that while information about governors in Jazīran cities is rather sketchy, the *qādīs* of the province are much better documented. Clear local differences were visible in the composition and dynamics of the juridical elite of the three cities used as case studies. The judges of Ḥarrān were a local elite having a local power base and thus being significantly independent on patronage from the imperial court. The *qādīs* of al-Raqqa, on the other hand, mostly represented a transregional elite. They served in the caliphal residence city under Hārūn al-Rashīd, and later al-Raqqa became the administrative center of the western empire. The standing of judges in al-Mawṣil combined features of a regional elite with those of transregional incumbents. Affiliation with Arab tribes and involvement in *ḥadīth* transmission were the defining features of almost all *qādīs* examined in the paper.

Alison Vacca (Knoxville), “‘Abbāsid Governors of the South Caucasus and Central Asia,” utilized Armenian and Arabic sources in locating Armenia’s position within the multilayered provincial structure of the empire. She also evaluated the

movement of Khurāsāni elites in Armenian politics. A familiar pattern emerged in her presentation of a layered structure of the provincial region and the occasional projection of power from the caliphal center via garrisons. In Tbilisi, a Muslim elite emerged that was apparently not interested in royal patronage, but nevertheless was a part of the caliphal umbrella state.

Hugh Kennedy (London), “Creating an Imperial Elite: al-Manṣūr and the Formation of the Early ‘Abbāsid Ruling Class,” took up the original question of the empire’s (ex-)changing elites with a discussion of al-Manṣūr’s creation of Khurāsāni military elite. He observed that in the early ‘Abbāsid caliphate, the inner core provinces, such as ‘Irāq, the Jazīra, and Syria, were reserved for members of the ‘Abbāsid family, while the newly created class of *quwwād* went to the militarily threatened frontiers, Ifrīqiya, Armīniya, and Khurāsān. As an imperial elite, these men were geographically mobile, returning to Baghdad after their assignment, before again receiving provincial appointments. Their status was almost hereditary. Their leaders, such as Khuzayma b. Khāzim, served their retainers as conduits of royal patronage and influence. This newly created ‘Abbāsid elite of *quwwād* lasted at most three generations.

Noëmie Lucas (Paris), “Landowners in Lower-Iraq during the 8th century: Types and Interplays” analyzed social shifts in the landholding class of lower Iraq. The paper defined a number of types of landowners (local Jewish and Christian landowners alongside regional and trans-regional land-owners), and looked into the advancing concentration of land in the hands of large landowners, often members of the Baghdādi elite and ‘Abbāsid family members, at the expense of small, local landowners. In some cases, the process of transregional elites going regional can be observed. Lucas discussed the interactions between different types of landowning elites in regards to acquisition of land by purchase and protection, and conflicts over land and water. The discussion shifted to the nature of the local landowners and the maintenance of the irrigation system.

Jürgen Paul (Halle), “Who Were the *Mulūk Fārs*?,” looked into a section of the elite that is usually difficult to pin down in the available sources: local lords in Iran. Using al-İstakhrī’s discussion of the *mulūk Fārs* as a starting point, he laid out the characteristics of this class. As a case study, he presented the (Arab) family of Muḥammad ibn Wāṣil, who had moved to Fārs and had become part of the regional land-holding elite. Paul also corrected the image of Ibn Wāṣil himself in the literature: he was not an adventurer, much less a Khārijite rebel, but a regional player who only aspired political power and patronage when his interests were threatened during the period of chaos in Sāmarrā.

Ahmad Khan (Hamburg), “Elites and Empire in Khurāsān: The View From the Archives,” looked at documents from a family archive in southern Tukharistān from the time of al-Manṣūr and al-Mahdī. Khan used these documents to construct a taxonomy of elites in the province of Khurāsān (from landowning elites to state officials). Despite almost all of these state officials being absent from the literary and historical sources, Khan argued that this small cache of documentary sources sheds light on exactly who administered the early Islamic empire in the province of Khurāsān and what their precise functions were. Above all, these documentary records exhibit the smooth and successful interaction between landowning elites in Khurāsān and provincial administrative elites. Finally, Khan examined how the circulation of money (*nafaqāt*) from the province to the imperial household of the caliph represented one important instance of how local tax paying elites were connected to the fortunes of the empire’s supreme elites: the caliph and his imperial household.

Luke Treadwell (Oxford), “Muṭawwi‘ī and Mamlūk: Military Elites in Samanid Central Asia and Beyond,” treated the case of the Sāmānids, a family that emerged as a regional elite already in 205/820, when al-Ma’mūn moved to Baghdaḍ. In striking contrast to the Ṭūlūnids in Egypt, the Sāmānids never strove for caliphal patronage or positions at court. Just the opposite: when they became actual rulers of Transoxiana and Khurāsān, their geographical outlook differed tremendously from that of the ‘Abbāsid empire. They were focused north toward the steppes, and

even their commercial enterprise reached via the Volga to the Baltic Sea. One reason for their seemingly atypical behavior might be that they were content with their status, viewing themselves almost as equals of the 'Abbāsids, without challenging their position in Baghdād nor "stepping on their carpet" as clients.

The roundtable discussion that followed highlighted the importance of the conference in studying the provinces of the empire individually and within a comparative perspective. Studying a particular province in isolation carries with it the risk of neglecting how developments in one province affected other provinces, and broader patterns of imperial rule. An integrative approach promises insights into the structures and administration of the empire, especially as we deal with layered structures of authority in each province. This, in turn, brings into focus the role of elites and how their character and function varied from province to province. The roundtable closed with remarks about important research gaps in scholarship on early Islamic history. Questions of group formation and the identity of elites (as regards ethnicity, military assignments, economic patterns, landowning, and religious affiliations) have yet to be addressed comprehensively in our field.

The terminology currently employed to describe military elites and forms of service requires further deliberation. As one example, '*mamlūks*' as 'slaves' is misleading because *mamlūk* denotes a variety of forms of bonded labour and military and contractual service. The notion of elites, too, is still a poorly theorized one in the field of Islamic history, and the participants offered original perspectives on how the results of this conference could be placed in conversation with scholarship on elites in other empires and societies. We hope that the forthcoming conference volume will be an important first step towards addressing many of these questions and pioneering new research into elites in the early Islamic empire.