ANOTHER ORIENTALIST’S REMARKS
CONCERNING THE PIRENNE THESIS*)

BY

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By now fifty years have elapsed since the initial publication of Henri Pirenne’s brilliant concepts regarding the causes of the decay of the Ancient order in Western Europe 1). His provocative contributions to Medieval European history are sufficiently influential to warrant further comments today 2). In my view, however, the half-a-century old debate, stimulated by his controversial ideas, has suffered from two shortcomings. First, although the validity of Pirenne’s thesis depended decisively on a proper understanding of the Moslem Near East and its relations with Europe in the early Middle Ages, no specialists in the field of Islamic history—three isolated instances excepting—made themselves heard on the polemical subject. And second, although the impact of the dramatic changes in the Near East on the situation in Western Europe has constituted the focal issue in the Pirennean controversy, nobody has raised the question of the immediate effect of the Arab victory upon the economic conditions in the Near East itself.


The three exceptional instances involved the contributions of professional Orientalist scholars: Daniel C. Dennett, Jr., 1) Claude Cahen 2), and more recently, Elie Ashtor 3). Cahen’s article concerned itself primarily with the methodological aspects of the role of Moslem coinage in the commercial relations between the Near East and Europe 4). Furthermore, it concentrated on the advanced stage of Near Eastern economic expansion, rather than on the situation which had arisen shortly after the subjugation of the near East by the Caliphate. On the other hand, Dennett and Ashtor addressed themselves, even if not exclusively, to the central issue of the causal relationship between the expansion of Islam and the collapse of the traditional order in Western Europe.

Dennett rejected Pirenne’s interpretation of the Near Eastern role in the European decay. According to Dennett, the profound changes in early Medieval Europe should not be attributed to adverse economic trends—especially in the sphere of trans-Mediterranean commerce—which were allegedly generated by a hostile policy of the victorious Moslem regime. To quote Dennett: “There is no evidence to prove that the Arabs either desired to close, or actually did close the Mediterranean to the commerce of the West either in the seventh or eighth centuries 5)."

2) ‘Quelques problèmes concernant l’expansion économique musulmane au Haut Moyen Age,’ Settimane di Studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull’Alto Medioevo, 12, 1965, p. 391-432.
5) D. C. Dennett, Jr., art. cit., p. 189.
A different position was taken by Ashtor. Having focused his observations on the problem of the Mediterranean trade in the ninth and early tenth centuries—i.e., the period of the Carolingian state in the West, and of the domination of the 'Abbāsid Caliphate in the East—he has concluded that the volume of transit trade moving across Italy and Spain was "très réduit ou même infime". One of the main factors behind this decline was general maritime insecurity prevailing in the Mediterranean because of the almost incessant warfare involving Byzantine and Moslem fleets. In support of this argument, which is in agreement with the main thrust of Pirenne's thesis, Ashtor adduced evidence pointing to the rapid decadence of Syrian and Egyptian coastal towns in the wake of the victory of the Arabs.

But neither Dennett, nor Cahen, nor Ashtor has ever claimed that his contribution offered all that the Orientalists could and should state on the subject of the Pirennean dispute. The current increase in interest and research in the field of Medieval Near Eastern economic history seems to portend that a more comprehensive interpretation of the historical role of Moslem Near East in the formation of Medieval Europe would soon be forthcoming.

In the meantime, however, I wish to make a few observations of my own on the Pirennean thesis in the context of Medieval Near Eastern economic history. Although based on solid heuristic foundations, my remarks, like those of Pirenne and of his supporters and adversaries, are speculative in nature. Perhaps they will not add much to the quality level of the Pirennean debate, but at least they will increase by 25% the number of Orientalists actively participating in the famous controversy.

If, as postulated by Pirenne, the alleged cessation of the Mediterranean trade had been capable of ruining Europe it would have produced similar consequences, if not even more disastrous consequences,

1) E. Ashtor, 'Quelques observations . . .', p. 188; also, idem, 'Nouvelles réflexions . . .', p. 602.
2) Idem, 'Quelques observations . . .', p. 170; 'Nouvelles réflexions . . .', p. 605.
for the Near Eastern economy. International commerce in the Near East gave its society important benefits from the lucrative transit trade, as well as import and export transactions which flowed across that strategic area connecting European markets with Africa, India, and Far East and South East Asia 1). For that very reason, the economic policy of the Arabs in the conquered territories—especially their indifference to or their interference with trade—was of crucial importance to the Near East, and only secondarily to Western Europe.

Although the economic and social fate of the Near East in the Middle Ages, and by extension that of Western Europe, depended on the fundamental decisions of the Caliphate in the seventh and early eight centuries, their historical significance has not been incisively interpreted or persuasively explained. The conflicting opinions of Dennett and Ashtor may serve as an illustration. "There is no evidence to prove that the Arabs . . . desired to close . . . the Mediterranean to the commerce of the West either in the seventh or eighth centuries" stated Dennett 2). On the contrary! There exists textual evidence explicitly proving that the Arab regime insisted on freedom of maritime trade. It consists of a separate article in the solemn fiscal decree issued between A.D. 717-720 by Caliph 'Umar II, proclaiming: "As for the sea, we hold that its way is the way of the dry land. God hath said: 'God it is Who hath subdued to you the sea that the vessels may sail thereon by His command and that ye may seek of His bounty!' Therefore He hath given permission therein that who so wills may trade thereon; and I hold that we should place no obstacle between it and any one of the people. For dry land and sea belong alike to God; He hath subdued them to His servants to seek of His bounty for themselves in both of them. How then should we intervene between God's servants and their means of livelihood?"

Of course, it does not necessarily follow that the official governmental declaration in favor of the "open sea" policy constituted a

1) For a recent authoritative discussion of the significance of the Near East as transit area see J. Innes Miller, *The Spice Trade of the Roman Empire*, Oxford, 1969.
2) D. C. Dennett, Jr., loc. cit.
guarantee of healthy trade conditions. Indeed, the fact that ‘Umar made such an unequivocal statement suggests that Mediterranean trade conditions left something to be desired.

As for Ashtor’s opinion regarding the responsibility of maritime insecurity for dwindling Mediterranean commerce, one is tempted to reverse the alleged causal relationship. Could it be the maritime insecurity had resulted from a lack of interest on the part of “inter-continental” business to invest their capital in trans-Mediterranean operations? With Mediterranean trade thus becoming “très réduit ou même infime”1),” Arab authorities had little motivation to commit their resources for the maintenance of strong naval forces and burdensome coastal fortresses and shipyards in Syria and Egypt. It is this factor which may well have accounted for the spread of insecurity in the Mediterranean, and which may have precipitated a rapid decline of formerly flourishing towns along the coast of Syria and Egypt.

Is it plausible to postulate that “inter-continental” commerce operating from the Near East, or using that area as its strategic transit zone, had lost interest in the markets to the north of the Mediterranean? Very definitely so. Indeed, one of the most significant results of the Arab victory on economic history was a natural, organic redirection of commercial activities in the sensitive area of the Near East, brought about by a specific fiscal policy of the new regime, and by the ensuing emergence of lucrative markets within the borders of the Caliphate. To understand the nature of that significant evolution one has to consider the basic aspects of the economic situation arising from the Arab domination in the Near East.

Unlike their effects in the sphere of politics, religion and culture, the victories of the Arabs and the establishment of the Caliphate did not result in any drastic or revolutionary changes in the economic life of Near Eastern society. As in pre-Islamic times, agriculture, artisan production, and internal and external commerce, as well as the institution of metallic currency, continued as the basic features of the economy of the Near East. Moreover, the entire tax base survived

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1) E. Ashtor, ‘Quelques observations . . .,’ p. 188.
virtually intact in spite of the downfall of the Sasánid monarchy and the expulsion of the Byzantine hierarchy. The main reason for such developments was the non-destructive character of the great conquest. Certainly, battles were fought and some cities endured prolonged siege operations, but in general the dramatic takeover was accomplished without substantial losses by the tax-paying civilian population or by revenue-yielding establishments.

A major transformation, however, occurred in the nature of the executive power structure of Near Eastern fiscal organization. State revenue was no longer administered by two different and mutually hostile imperial treasuries, the Byzantine in Constantinople and the Sasánid in Ctesiphon. Responsibility for determining the nature of taxation, for the system of collection as well as for the allocation of the revenue, was taken over by one central and supreme financial institution, established by Caliph 'Umar I (A.D. 634-644), to serve the needs of the Caliphate 1). The way in which the new administration discharged its fiscal responsibility during the initial period of its existence proved to be instrumental in ushering in a new and dynamic era in the history of Near Eastern economy.

As regards the level of taxation and the method of tax collection, the policy of the Caliphate towards the conquered areas was characterized by conservative moderation. Except for minor local modifications Arab conquerors did not interfere initially with the system or systems of taxation inherited from their predecessors 2). It was in the matters of distribution of the accumulated wealth that the policy of the early Caliphate acquired a truly innovative character. To understand the essence and implications of the drastic fiscal innovations one has to consider a demographic change which the Near East underwent in the wake of Arab victory.

As it happened, one of the outstanding demographic problems

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of the Arab invasion was the mass immigration of the surplus population from the Arabian peninsula to the sedentarized zone of the Near East. It is true that certain segments of the Near Eastern sedentary population were displaced as a result of the Arab victory. (I refer to the Byzantine and Sāsānīd ruling elite whose members were either expelled or exterminated by the Arabs). There is no doubt, however, that the number of the newcomers exceeded by far the displaced Byzantine and Sāsānīd elements, for to accommodate the mass of Arab immigrants it was not enough to take over premises vacated by the ousted population. Indeed, entire new quarters had to be added to old towns, or completely new urban settlements had to be founded 1).

With the exception of a small minority, the mass of the Arab immigrants represented unskilled labor which under normal political and social conditions could hardly have been absorbed by or integrated with the local sedentary population of the Fertile Crescent without causing a major economic and social upheaval. As it was, that mass immigration did not impede normal economic activity. The healthy transitional integration was accomplished because of the introduction by the Caliphate of an unusual system of fiscal benefits, according to which all full-fledged members of the victorious Arab people were entitled to regular cash stipends, called 'atā, in addition to their lower taxation rates 2). Because of that ingenious system, the early Arab immigrants, far from being a liability, constituted a strongly subsidized social and ethnic group capable of growing economic roots in the new territories, with little disadvantage to the local labor or artisan force.

One may argue, of course, that the operation of the system of 'atā constituted a fiscal burden on the local population. After all, the money distributed among the members of the privileged class was normally obtained from taxes imposed on the non-Arab Near Eastern


population. But as stated above, the conquerors did not levy any taxes that the population of the Near East had not been paying for the benefit of the earlier political regimes. Like the Byzantines and the Sāsānids before, the Arab conquerors assumed responsibility for maintaining political and administrative cohesiveness in Near Eastern territories. Unlike pre-Islamic times, no center of political and administrative gravity enjoying jurisdiction over Near Eastern territories, was located outside the Near East, as had been the case of Rome and Constantinople. Consequently, none of the monies collected by the Caliphate supported an external capital and its policies, but by means of the 'atdā' system, all of them were retained, re-invested, diffused for the benefit of the local Near Eastern population.

It is obvious that the rise of a political and administrative power structure in the central regions of the Near East, in Syria under the Umayyads and in Mesopotamia under the 'Abbāsids, was accompanied by a powerful injection of ready cash into the Near Eastern economy. In pre-Islamic times economic production in the Mediterranean provinces of the Near East had been geared to meet the needs of huge consumer centers such as Rome, and later Constantinople. Hence the importance of the coastal towns in Egypt and Syria. But with the establishment of the Arab regime, new consumer centers arose in the Near Eastern regions themselves. Arab settlers, whether ruling elite or members of rank and file, constituted a potent consumer class. By establishing themselves in the sedentarized lands of the Near East they necessarily generated a substantial increase in economic productivity. The expansion of old towns and proliferation of new urban settlements created a boom in the housing industry. Ashtor refers to the decline of some coastal cities, but he forgets to mention the foundation and growth of Fusṭāt in Egypt¹), or Ramlah in Palestine²), of Baṣrah, Kūfah and Wāsīt in Mesopotamia³), and of several other inland towns which came into prominence following the victory

²) Cf., E. Reitemeyer, op. cit., p. 73 f.
³) Ibid., p. 11f; 29f; 46f.
of the Arabs. Some wealthy residents or protectors of various towns and communities encouraged refined architectural and artistic creativity. Monumental architecture or sumptuous mosaic decorations ceased to be a monopoly of the Sásānids or of the Byzantines. Byzantine craftsmen were now employed in the construction of Islamic shrines 1).

Furthermore, the growth of the urban population generated a strong demand for food supplies, thus stimulating speculative agriculture and interest in acquisition of landed property 2). Likewise, internal trade benefited from the new situation by performing economic functions between the urban and rural population 3).

All these favorable economic trends were reflected in the concurrent monetary developments. The best known event in the monetary history of the period is the great reform of Caliph 'Abd al-Malik (A.D. 685-715) who introduced trimetallic Arabic coinage (gold, silver, and copper, i.e. dīnār, dirham, and fals) to serve as the classical model for Near Eastern coinage production in the Middle Ages. Various numismatic and ideological ramifications of that reform have already received adequate scholarly attention 4), but not its internal economic implications. Maurice Lombard, who investigated the function of gold in the economic supremacy of the Moslem world, defined that particular phase of Moslem history (8th-9th centuries) as the age of administrative reforms, marked by the return to circulation of precious metals accumulated in church treasuries 5). He failed, however, to elaborate

on the economic justification behind the decision of the Arab administration to release vast quantities of gold, silver, and copper coins for the use of Near Eastern markets. Under normal conditions the volume of coinage in circulation represents the total value of economic activities a given society happens to be engaged in. In other words, the volume of coinage in use is regulated by the actual state of the economy. An expanding economy calls for an increase of coinage, a shrinking economy for its withdrawal, debasement or hoarding. And certainly, an indiscriminate release or oversupply of coinage, with its unavoidable inflationary consequences, is as disastrous for economy as ruthless over-taxation. In the case of early Islamic history, the monetary reform of 'Abd al-Malik—its alleged religious or ideological background notwithstanding—must have been undertaken in response to the expanding market conditions. Although the supply of new coins assumed tremendous proportions, and although their production kept on being expanded during the early Caliphate\(^1\), no inflationary developments were set off by such a monetary policy\(^2\). General stability of prices or\(^3\), to be more precise, lack of source references to any drastic rise in the prices of commodities—seems to suggest that the sustained intensive output of coins in the early Caliphate bore witness to the great vitality of the Near Eastern market in that period.

All these developments could not have left the position of the intercontinental commerce unaffected. In a certain sense the political consequences of the great Arab victory had contributed to a major change in this area. With the expulsion of the Byzantines and the destruction of the Sāsānids, the political barrier which had hitherto divided the Near East into two separate blocs ceased to exist. The removal of this artificial barrier, which had been at the root of many destructive wars between the pre-Islamic powers, meant that the natural trade exchange between the western and eastern regions of

the Near East could operate without harmful obstructions motivated by political considerations. Indeed, before one proceeds to consider the validity of Pirenne’s allegations that the Arabs were guilty of disrupting the unity of the Mediterranean world, one should credit them with the integration of almost entire Near Eastern subcontinent into a common market area with obvious benefits to long-distance trade investors.

“L’économie marchande du Moyen Age musulman, comme celle de l’Antiquité, était surtout une économie de spéculation et d’acquisition”, declared Cl. Cahen referring to the flexibility and economic adaptability of commerce in Islamic Middle Ages. In view of the expanding economy of the Caliphate, in view of the emergence of large consumer centers, in view of the rapid growth of local market demand, the long-distance merchants had small need for the markets of Western Europe. Instead of crossing or circumventing the Mediterranean, the Far East trade merchants, like those of the India and Africa trade, or even the distributors of the fruits of local Near Eastern production, could meet their profit requirements by directing their shipments or caravans to Damascus, Fustat, Baghdad or Qayrawan. Obviously, it was this natural economically motivated re-orientation of trans-continental commerce, which precipitated a catastrophic decline in trans-Mediterranean trade, deplored by Pirenne and his supporters.

And today, so far as the Pirennean debate is concerned, the time has come when more attention should be devoted to the nature and consequences of the Near Eastern economic developments in the early Middle Ages. Instead of debating the issue of the Mediterranean trade following the Arab conquest, the Pirennean polemicists should consider the position of commerce to the east of the former mare nostrum. Above all, they should admit the possibility that the roots of some of the issues in the Pirennean controversy may be found in the progressive and constructive economic policy of the Arab conquerors.